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FROM CHATTAS TO CHURIDARS: SYRIAN CHRISTIAN RELIGIOUS
MINORITIES IN A SECULAR INDIAN STATE

By

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ABSTRACT OF THE DISSERTATION

From Chattas to Churidars: Syrian Christian Religious Minorities

in a Secular Indian State

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This dissertation is a critical analysis of the feminist concept of intersectionality and a necessary contribution into the study of caste, class, race, religion and gender in South Asia. Rather than viewing identities as merely overlapping, I argue that there exist countless “acts” that implicate the co-constitutive, relational, and fluid nature of identities. Particularly focusing on the upper-caste Syrian Christian community in postcolonial Kerala, India, I examine “acts” in the form of embodied clothing practices, women’s mobility in public spaces and political protests.

My dissertation especially intervenes into dominant discourses within South Asian and Women’s and Gender Studies. I reassess of the concept of race in South Asia, provide a sustained ethnographic and historical analysis of the state of Kerala, India, and I place the fields of South Asian and Women’s and Gender Studies into critical dialogue with each other. To make these interventions, I use a variety of sources collected through interdisciplinary research methods. These methods include ethnography, archival methods, feminist and postcolonial theoretical analysis, and visual culture analysis.

In the first and second chapters of the dissertation, I provide an overview of the dissertation, my field site and a history of the Syrian Christian community. In the third and fourth chapters I explore the relations between class, caste, race, religion and gender

through an examination of the women's (in)ability to move freely in a changing public sphere. Following this, in chapters five and six I analyze how Syrian Christians have used their social privileges to politically mobilize, define a nation-wide minority identity, and protect their dominance in Kerala's private education sector. In the last chapter, I bridge Women's and Gender Studies with South Asian Studies and examine each of the disciplines' approach to studying differences between peoples in India. From the *chatta*, a clothing worn in colonial Kerala by Syrian Christian women alone, to the *churidar* worn today by women of all classes, castes, races and religions, I examine how "acts" of class, caste, race, religion and gender may continue previous divisions between groups, justifying forms of oppression and ultimately upholding systems of domination in India today.

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(Allo) and his family filled my days in India with laughter and cooked exceptional meals for me—including my most favorite Kerala fish curries. They became my second family and gave me a home away from home. I am grateful to have had the most amazing conversations on Kerala history with my last remaining grandparent, Mariamma Varghese Ampalathumkal. I am truly blessed to have had the opportunity to learn about her life and to speak with her every day over a cup of coffee and the morning paper.

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Chapter 1 Introduction

While conducting dissertation field research, I witnessed two protests in Thiruvananthapuram, Kerala, India that reflected the glaring inequalities between women's everyday experiences in the region. The first was a night vigil was organized by Dalit women in support of the Chengara land struggle on March 7th, 2008. For over six months, an estimated 21,000 Dalits and Adivasis had been staging a sit-in at the Harrison Malayalam Private Ltd Estate in Chengara, Kerala, India in an effort to reclaim land promised to them by the Kerala state government. The aim of the night vigil was to bring media attention to the land struggle at Chengara. Instead, the media reported on the sexual impropriety of the Dalit women participating in the night-vigil. The news channel *Kairali* recorded the Dalit women smoking cigarettes, dancing in the streets and cavorting with men. *Deshabhimani* newspaper published a report on the vigil calling it a "masala protest."¹ The very next day, a second protest was staged by the All India Democratic Women's Association (AIDWA), the women's organization of the Communist Party of India (Marxist). Non-Dalit AIDWA members arrived at the night-vigil site with brooms and symbolically swept the area clean.²

For me, the inability of the AIDWA women to speak across caste and class boundaries reflects a problematic that I address in this dissertation: caste, race, religion, class and gender are not overlapping intersectional social categories. Rather, there exist countless "acts" that implicate the co-constitutive, relational, and fluid nature of identities.

¹ Masala is the term commonly used to describe pornography in India. "Rathrisamaram Masalamayam" (Masala-Filled Night Protest). *Deshabhimani*. March 8, 2008.

² Special thanks to Navaneetha Mokkal and her paper on the night protest, "Shadows of Progress: The Kerala Woman as a Figure in Crisis," presented at the 38th Annual Conference on South Asia, Madison, Wisconsin, Oct, 2009 and emailed to the author.

These acts carry with them complex histories of caste, race, religious and class oppressions that are quite often revealed today through separate moral codes for women. The AIDWA women's act of sweeping carried with it a long and established history of depicting low-caste women as overly sexualized and upper-caste women as having a monopoly over definitions of domesticity and morality. The act of sweeping away the Dalit women's "impropriety" therefore operates from a particular history that prevents Kerala women from working across class and caste divides today.

In this dissertation, I examine multiple "acts" of caste, race, gender, class and religion. I analyze how behaviors based on perceived differences may continue previous divisions between groups, justifying acts of oppression and maintaining systems of domination. Additionally, I interrogate acts that indicate group belonging. I argue that while the concept of belonging may promise to erase differences between peoples, it often produces new inequalities and may foreclose the possibility to address these inequalities.

The focus group of my research is the Syrian Christian community of Kerala, India—an indigenous religious group known for their use of the Syriac language in their mass. Particularly focusing on the Syrian Christians in postcolonial India, I examine multiple acts in the form of embodied clothing practices, mobility in public spaces and political protests (to name a few). These acts, I argue, reveal the gender dynamics and the intersectional social identities of the religious community; a Christian religious minority identity, an Aryan racial identity, affluence, and an upper-caste identity.

My dissertation is not a corrective project aimed at amending the works of certain scholars or rectifying trends in the scholarly literature. Rather, it is an intervention.

Specifically, I make interventions concerning the concept of race in South Asia, provide sustained ethnographic and historical analysis of the Kerala state, and place the fields of South Asian and Women's and Gender Studies in critical dialogue with each other. In making these interventions, this dissertation treads upon new ground and offers a case study for an interdisciplinary methodological approach to scholarship on gender and South Asia.

Interventions

In this dissertation, I make three major interventions. The first is a detailed re-analysis of race in India, the second is an argument against the Kerala state's assumed exceptionalism, and the third critically examines the way in which the fields of Women's and Gender Studies and South Asian Studies have approached acts of differences.

In current South Asian studies, race is approached either by examining the concept of the Aryan race in North Indian communal politics, or through scholarship on skin color.³ The former has been examined by historians and political scientists interested in communalism in India. In recent years, there have been efforts by the Hindu right in India to depict Muslims as racially foreign. As Aryans are the authors of the foundational Hindu texts (the Vedas), present day promotion of the idea that Aryans are indigenous to the subcontinent has become a Hindu nationalist political project. If the Hindu Aryans were indigenous to India, then all others who arrived at later dates—

³ Both types of scholarship have been extremely influential to my own analysis on race in South Asia. For scholarship on race and communal politics see, for examples, Thapar, Romila. *The Aryan: Recasting Constructs*. (Gurgaon: Three Essays Collection, 2008) and *The Aryan Debate*, ed. Thomas Trautmann. (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2005). For scholarship on skin color, see, for example, Philips, Amali. "Gendering Colour: Identity, Femininity and Marriage in Kerala. *Anthropologica*. 46.2 (2004): 253-272 and Saldanha, Arun. *Psychedelic White: Goa Trance and the Viscosity of Race*. (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2007).

namely, Muslims—could be painted as racially different. It solidifies a religious difference between Muslims and Hindus through a racial discourse. This scholarship on race, therefore, is focused on North Indian communal politics and historical narratives of religious origins.

Another sort of scholarship on race in India focuses on the social preference for fair skin. This scholarly work is not in dialogue with historical and political research on Aryan racial identities and religious communalism. Scholarship on color relies on contemporary understandings of gender and sexuality in India as it especially interrogates the relation between skin color and feminine beauty.

In my intervention, I combine both schools of thought on race in South Asia. I untie “Aryan” from a purely Hindu religious identity by examining how in South India, “Aryan” works as a racial category that does not separate Hindus from Muslims, as in North India, but as a caste differentiation between upper- and lower- castes. As the lower castes are assumed to be from the Dravidian races, the term “Aryan” has become synonymous with a Brahmin identity in South India. I trace how Syrian Christians and their alleged Brahmin origins allow for an understanding of race that cuts across religions via caste associations. Further, I examine how assumptions concerning morality and skin color make race a social category informed by this history and entirely mediated today by entrenched class, caste, religious, and gender hierarchies. Through this analysis, I argue that race, as we currently understand it, does not function as an overlaying social category in Indian context, but rather is observable through acts of caste, class, gender and religious discrimination.

My second major intervention is an argument against the assumed exceptionalism of the state of Kerala, India. Kerala is known for its high standards of well-being, gleaned from development indicators, despite low levels of economic development. These development indicators include a 90% literacy rate, high life expectancy, access to health care, a population where women outnumber men, later marriage age for women and low infant mortality rates. ‘The Kerala Model’ has been glorified by politicians and academics alike. Scholars including Amartya Sen, Richard Franke and Barbara Chasin have lauded Kerala’s development model, land reforms and decentralization projects.⁴ The state also has a long history of religious interaction between Hindus, Muslims and Christians. Postcolonial theorists of communalism in India, including Ashis Nandy and Ashutosh Varshney have valorized Kerala’s religious harmony, cosmopolitanism and civic life.⁵ And many feminist scholars assume that women’s education and high literacy rates, low infant mortality rates, a later marriage age for women and a population ratio that favors women are indications of women’s empowerment in the state.⁶ In short,

⁴ Sen, Amartya. *Development as Freedom*. (New York: Anchor Books, 2000). Franke, Richard and Barbara Chasin. *Kerala: Radical Reform as Development in an Indian State*. (Monroe, OR: Food First, 1994). Isaac, T.M. Thomas and Richard Franke. *Local Democracy and Development: People’s Campaign for Decentralized Planning in Kerala*. (New Delhi: LeftWord Books, 2000).

⁵ See Nandy, Ashis. “Time Travel to a Possible Self: Searching for the Alternative Cosmopolitanism of Cochin.” *Japanese Journal of Political Science*. 1, no. 2 (2000). 295-327. Varshney, Ashutosh. *Ethnic Conflict and Civic Life: Hindus and Muslims in India*. (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2002).

⁶ Nearly all social science research operates on the assumption that child marriages, lack of access to health care and a lack of education are indicators of a low status for women. Therefore, the assumed high status of Kerala women is based on the statistical data that shows that Kerala women marry later, are educated and have access to health care. For specific research on the assumed high status of Kerala women, see the 1997 United Nations Development Program report which ranked Kerala as the most advanced in India on the Gender-related Development Index, and the 2006 report where Kerala was ranked 2nd. “Gendering Human Development Indices: Recasting the Gender Development Index and Gender Empowerment Measure for India, 2009 report” http://undp.org.in/sites/default/files/GDI_and_GEM_Report.pdf, 35. (accessed March 21, 2010). Hill, Polly. “Kerala Is Different.” *Modern Asian Studies*. 20, no. 4 (1986): 779-92. Weisman, Steven R. “Where Births are Kept Down and Women Aren’t.” *New York Times*. January 29, 1988. P4.

Kerala is largely viewed as exceptional, especially when compared to other Indian states and to countries in the Global South, in the existing scholarly literature.

I intervene into the prevailing discourse of the high-status of Kerala women by especially examining how notions of sexual morality prevent many educated and affluent Syrian Christian women from seeking employment, land rights, or from contesting patriarchal religious traditions. Additionally, I work against the assumption of Kerala's religious harmony. I show how the caste, racial and class privileges of Syrian Christians in the state makes the assumed interactions between "Christians," "Muslims" and "Hindus" entirely problematic. My analysis of the Syrian Christian community disrupts the notion of a unified "Christian" group, reveals the caste, racial and class stratifications among Christians, and the patriarchal religious codes for women in the religious community. In short, my analysis of both "Christians" and "Christian women" allows space for researching the heterogeneity of the subaltern subject.

Finally, I provide an intervention into feminist epistemology and knowledge production in the interdisciplinary fields of Women's and Gender Studies and South Asian Studies. I argue that despite our best efforts to approach differences between women (and between men and women) epistemologically, they often don't work out institutionally or methodologically. By placing South Asian studies scholarship in critical dialogue with Women's and Gender Studies and especially examining the limits of the Western academy, I reveal that a feminist intervention into area studies has not yet happened—either from Women's and Gender Studies nor from South Asian Studies—despite profound and important critiques of the reliance on nation-state boundaries, regionalism, and patriarchal policies and laws within South Asian nations in current

South Asian and transnational feminist scholarship. Rather, I argue that both fields continue to reproduce certain forms of nativist knowledges and assume occupyable places and colonizable bodies in both scholarly research on South Asia and in the academy's hiring practices.

The privileging of certain forms of knowledge production in the Western academy mediates against the work that I try to do in this dissertation. That is, the primacy of Western theory in the academy, the continued orientalizing of scholarship on the Non-West and the racialization of bodies of color teaching in the Western academy shapes my scholarship even as I attempt to critique these hierarchies. Therefore, I am extremely attentive to the way in which South Asian feminist research—including my own—may continue to privilege certain modes of authenticity, particular bodies, and certain bodies of knowledges over others.

In the sections that follow, I will outline the chapters of the dissertation and explain my interdisciplinary research methods. This overview will help to explain the “acts” I examine and the ways in which socially constructed differences between women shape their capacity to create feminist networks and to act towards social change.

Chapters

This dissertation is divided into seven chapters. The second chapter provides a brief overview of my field site, Kerala, India, and my focus group, the Syrian Christian community. Christians constitute only 2.3% of the Indian population. However, in Kerala, they are 19% of the population. The largest group of Christians in the state is the

Syrian Christians.⁷ The Syrian Christians have split into many denominations over the centuries, the largest of which are the Syro-Malabar Catholics. They are commonly called “Romo-Syrians” and are the focus group of my research. As mentioned, the Syrian Christians are an indigenous, upper-caste religious group. According to communal historians, St. Thomas the apostle of Jesus arrived in Kerala in the year 52 AD and converted Hindu Brahmins to Christianity. In contrast, Portuguese missionaries arriving in Kerala in the 16th century and British missionaries in the 19th century converted Hindus primarily from the lower-castes. Therefore, there are caste differences between Syrian Christians and Christians converted by Western missionaries. I trace the history of the Syrian Christians by especially examining the symbiotic relationship between upper-caste Hindus and Syrian Christians. In chapter 2, I examine how the economic success of the Syrian Christian community, especially in the education sector, is based upon their upper-caste identity. Further, I explain how the Syrian Christians became a united political base for the Congress party in the 20th century and map out their role in the current political, cultural and economic landscapes of the Indian nation-state.

Chapters 3 and 4 of this dissertation are intimately tied as I explore the relations between class, caste, race, religion and gender through an examination of the women’s (in)ability to move freely in a changing public sphere. In chapter 3, I specifically analyze how upper-caste Syrian Christian women’s wear, the *chatta*, was replaced in postcolonial India by the *sari* and then by the *churidar* worn by women today regardless of caste or religion. The visibility of women in public spaces profoundly changed as women were

⁷ Zacharia, KC. *The Syrian Christians of Kerala: Demographic and Socio-Economic Transition in the Twentieth Century*. (New Delhi: Orient Longman Private Limited, 2006), 5-9.

no longer identifiable to their caste or religion by clothing alone. In chapter 3, I examine how the link between Indian secularism and a dominant national identity is exemplified in the move to the *sari*. My analysis reveals that the secular pan-Indian identity embodied in the folds of the *sari* is actually implicitly marked as Hindu, upper-caste and upper-class and continues to influence sartorial choices in the nation-state today.

Chapter 4 deals with the mobility of fair-skinned bodies and Syrian Christian claims to Aryan racial origins. Race is commonly deflected as being foreign to South Asia. The foreignness of racism is supported by the belief that *religion* is what divides the people of South Asia and the notion that the *caste* system is the quintessential social organizing system. I explore the disconnect between race as a social organizing system and dominant understandings of caste and religion in South Asia by analyzing communal histories which champion the belief that Syrian Christians are Hindu Brahmins. In turn, the Brahmins of Kerala, India are thought to be from the Aryan race that migrated from the north and imposed the caste system upon the Dravidian raced natives of South India. The split between Dravidian and Aryan races is thus simultaneously a caste and religious division. In chapter 4, I pull together arguments from communal historians, linguists, academic historians, and critical race theoreticians to examine how these racial divisions are maintained today with (lack of) access to economic opportunities, assumptions concerning the sexual availability of low-caste/dark women and restrictions on upper-caste/fair women's mobility in the public sphere.

Chapters 5 and 6 of this dissertation are similarly intimately tied. In these chapters, I further my analysis of "acts" by examining how the Syrian Christians have used their entrenched social privileges to politically mobilize, define a nation-wide

minority identity, and protect their dominance in Kerala's private education sector. I specifically look at two political protests led by the Syrian Christian community in defense of so-called "Christian minority rights." I argue that "Christians" only seemingly became a unified political front in postcolonial India making for a very particular minority rights discourse in the nation-state today.

Chapter 5 is a detailed analysis of Syrian Christian involvement in the 1959 *vimochana samaram* or "liberation struggle" that successfully ousted the first state ministry from power. In 1959, the democratically elected communist government attempted to reform education by passing the Kerala Education Bill. The Syrian Christians organized as "Christians," contending that their minority right to establish and administer their own educational institutions—a right guaranteed by Article 30 (1) of the Indian constitution—was under attack from the Kerala state government. The resulting three month protest brought the state to a standstill and tested India's commitment to secular protections for religious minority citizens. I contend that this protest was pivotal to the development of a very particular minority rights discourse in India. As the term "minority" united all Christians, the way in which the protest unfolded reveals how the interests of the select few become associated as *the* interests of minority communities not just in Kerala, but in the entire Indian nation-state.

In chapter 6, I further this analysis of secular constitutional protections with an examination of the 7th standard textbook controversy in 2008. Led by the Syrian Christian community and called by clergymen as the second *vimochana samaram*, Christian faithful rallied against the "anti-religious" sentiments in a particular story in the textbook.

The story in the textbook depicts a boy, Jeevan, being admitted into a new school. Jeevan's parents, Lakshmi Devi and Anwar Rasheed, instruct the headmaster to mark "no caste," and "no religion" in Jeevan's paperwork. The names of the parents in the story imply that the boy, Jeevan, is the product of an interfaith marriage: "Lakshmi Devi" is a Hindu woman's name and "Anwar Rasheed" is a Muslim man's name. Like the *vimochana samaram* of 1959, the protest brought the state to stand-still and tested secular constitutional protections for religious minorities in India under Article 30 (1).

Using Jeevan's story as a case study, I specifically analyze the evolution of minority rights in India and the similarities between the first and second *vimochana samaram*. Additionally, I question the relationship between religion and moral education in India with a detailed examination of patriarchal religious rituals and the ritualization of female sexuality through endogamous (in-caste/in-faith) marriages. I use a variety of texts in Chapter 6 including religious texts and practices, television serials, textbooks, and language from recent laws and Supreme Court cases to critically examine, the terms "morality" and "minority" in India today.

In the final chapter of the dissertation, I look at the discipline of Women's and Gender Studies and South Asian Studies and attempt to bridge the two disciplines' approach to studying differences between peoples in India.

The interdiscipline of Women's and Gender Studies has long grappled with how to understand differences. The political foundation of Women's and Gender Studies has made for a specific trajectory that often assumes the centrality of the Western knowledge production in feminist thought. Critiques of this assumption, often brought by scholars of color studying the non-West, have led to the "difference revolution" in Women's and

Gender Studies today. The difference revolution seemingly places differences at the center of feminist analysis. Today, the field has changed remarkably because of the difference revolution. Undergraduate Women's Studies curricula often require at least one course on the non-West intended to destabilize white students and white teachers. However, these courses are largely taught by women of color making bodies stand in for some kind of authentic knowledge on the non-West. Further, critiques of how differences are approached often become the source and proof of the difference revolution. In other words, critiques stand in for difference which exculpates Western academics and the Western academy as a whole from truly studying the non-West. I argue that these epistemological problems of the discipline prevent Women's and Gender Studies from entering into a critical dialogue with the Area Studies.

South Asian studies has likewise grappled with the concept of difference by especially interrogating religious differences in the secular Indian nation state. However, in many ways, religiosity is fetishized as a foundational world view of the masses by the South Asian academic left. This, I argue, leads to an uncritical view of minority religions, sutures caste to Hinduism alone, displaces race as foreign in South Asia, and conventionalizes colonial understandings of religion, caste, race and gender in the sub-continent. Further, I argue that the place of South Asian scholars in the Western academy as diversity hires and language instructors continues to reproduce certain forms of nativist knowledges, relies on static conceptions of regions and national boundaries and produces an "authentic" South Asia that remains un-problematized in the academy.

In the last chapter, I critically examine the problems associated with studying differences in both interdisciplinary disciplines and provide a much needed

epistemological intervention to Western academic knowledge production. The very structure of the academy, I contend, prevents the layering of scholarship advocated for by many transnational feminist scholars and postcolonial theorists today. As my dissertation sits at the crossroads of Women's and Gender Studies and South Asian Studies, the arguments I make in the chapter places the dissertation within the existing literature, but also critiques the very modes of interdisciplinary knowledge production from which I draw.

Research Methods

Research for this dissertation was conducted in 2007-2008 in Kerala, India. I used multiple methods including ethnographic interviews and participant observation, archival methods, oral histories, historiography, discourse analysis, feminist theoretical analysis, postcolonial theoretical analysis, and visual culture analysis.

My research sites were centered in the Travancore region of Kerala—the southern half of the state with my primary research sites in the Kottayam district of Kerala, a district that is 14.4% Christian.⁸ Kottayam district has cities of major importance to Syrian Christians; the Romo-Syrian archdioceses at Changanacherry; Chungam—home to the Old Syrian Seminary; the city of Pala—populated with the largest concentration of Romo-Syrians; the city of Kanjirapalli that was, according to Syrian Christian communal history, founded by the apostle St. Thomas himself; Bharananganam—a famous pilgrimage site that holds the remains of India's first woman saint, Saint Alphonsa; and the Knayan Syrian Christian archdiocese base in Kottayam city. Some of the oldest and most visited Syrian Christian churches are in the Kottayam district of Kerala. In addition,

⁸ Zachariah, KC, 6.

many prominent Romo-Syrians including politicians and clergymen are based in the Kottayam district. I lived in a village in Kottayam district that I do not name in this dissertation. I often traveled to and conducted interviews in many villages throughout the district and the cities of Pala, Kottayam, Kanjirapalli, and Changanacherry. Research was also conducted in the capital city of Thiruvananthapuram, and the cities of Ernakulam/Kochi, Thrissur, Guruvayor, and Vandiperiyar/Kumily.

I conducted interviews primarily in the Malayalam language. The official language of the Kerala state is Malayalam, and over 90% of the population speaks, reads and writes in Malayalam.⁹ Like many Indian languages, there are vast regional differences. Kottayam, a central state, often boasts having standardized Malayalam and many news outlets and newscasters are based in the Kottayam District.

However, despite being immersed in “proper” Malayalam in my research site, the language proved to be challenging for this researcher. I am a heritage speaker—brought up with Malayalam spoken in the household. The challenges of the Malayalam language for a heritage speaker are great.

First, terms of respect were difficult for me to understand. My parents only ever used the informal to me—as I was their child, it would have been inappropriate to use any term of respect to me. While this seems like a trivial point in language and cultural difference, terms of respect and their usage profoundly affected the way in which all my interviews were conducted. These terms are used with people in prominent social positions, by women to male members of the family (including husbands), by young people to the elderly, and by lower-castes to upper-castes. In conversations, one may

⁹ Halliburton, Murphy. *Mudpacks & Prozac: Experiencing Ayurvedic, Biomedical and Religious Healing*. (Walnut Creek, CA: Left Coast Press, 2009), 26.

repeatedly say the conversation partner's first name to denote respect when age or caste status may be questionable. These terms of respect shape everyday encounters in Kerala and reify caste, class, race, religious and gender divisions. For example, one day I had the opportunity to ride an elephant. An auntie caught me calling the mahout "sir" and this story was repeated by the auntie to community members with distaste—as a way to chastise me in front of others for not complying with caste norms and trying to elevate a low-caste mahout with the respectful "sir." Often times, I ended up putting people off using the highly formal *ningl*. While *ningl* would technically always be an appropriate term of respect, it also denotes a lack of familiarity with the person. As I was often considered an "insider" by having Malayalee parents, each and every time I used the word *ningl* I ended up hurting people's feelings.

After months of trying to find the correct terms, I settled on using *amachee* for *chatta/thuni* wearers. *Amachee* was a term meaning "mother" traditionally used only by the Syrian Christians. It disappeared from use with the *chatta/thuni*. Now, it has become synonymous with "grandmother." All other women, I called "auntie" or *chachee* (older sister). Older men I called the formal "sir" or informal "uncle." If participants were close to my age, I tried to avoid calling them anything at all. I am indebted to Tanya Mary, Tina Mary and Rani Thomas for help deciphering Malayalam words I was unfamiliar with and for guidance in navigating the terms of respect during the interview and transcription process.

In this dissertation, I have translated participant responses from the Malayalam into English. A few interviews were conducted in English and/or with seamless

transitions between English and Malayalam. Therefore, I have indicated the language in which the interview was conducted through references.

A second difficulty for heritage speakers is the difference between spoken and written Malayalam. Although Malayalam was spoken in my house, I didn't learn how to read and write the language until 2006. As mentioned, the majority of Kerala people are Malayalam literate. Signs and notices are written in Malayalam, even if they are English words. Bus is the preferred mode of travel between villages and I found that bus travel quickly made me recognizable and part of the village community. There is absolutely no way to travel by bus in Kerala without learning how to read and write. Buses travel as fast as possible, and the destination is written in Malayalam on a handwritten sign at the front of the bus. A traveler has a matter of a few seconds to read the destination of the bus before hopping on. I became quite adept at reading very quickly as a result.

However, reading Malayalam literature and newspapers was quite a different matter. Written Malayalam is Sanskrit based and completely different from colloquial speech. Hours of searching through a Malayalam dictionary and only being able to understand a few sentences left me fed up with the literary language. As a result, translations of pastoral letters and news stories you will see in this dissertation were carried out by the brilliant linguists, Dr. S. Prema of Kerala University and Dr. P. Sreekumar of Dravidian University and by Dr. Thomas Mathew, an independent scholar. Mary Thomas also helped with translations at the *Malayalam Manorama* archives.

Another difficulty I had in conducting research was my unmarried status. As I will discuss in this dissertation, Kerala's public sphere is overtly marked by gender norms and sex-segregated spaces. Kerala has the highest rates of violence against women and

the threat of sexual violence is very real and palpable even during the daytime in populated areas. Upper-caste and upper-class unmarried women rarely travel alone, never at night and often travel by car or auto rickshaw. Traveling to different research sites, participant's houses, archives and libraries on my own and by bus marked me as a transgressive upper-caste Syrian Christian woman.

All of my research had to be done during the day-time, from about 10:00am-5:00pm. Many times, I had to cancel or cut short interviews so that I could rush home before dark. I never once walked into the Kerala University campus without an incident. Without the safety net of a throng of girls, the way that most college women navigate the campus, young men would surround me and shout lewd comments at me and attempt to grope me. I was harassed by a male phone-caller who somehow obtained my number and would call me at all hours of the day and night—sometimes singing, sometimes just breathing. In Changanacherry, I was followed by two men down an alley on my way to the bishop's house to interview a priest. When one grabbed my wrist, I screamed attracting the attention of another man who chased the two attackers off. Shakily, I thanked the man only to have him yell at me for being careless for walking alone (even though it was the middle of the day and the alley was the only way to enter the bishop's house). In the village, I was often stopped by members of the community asking me who I was, what house I was staying at and where I was going. One day as I was traveling to meet a historian in Pala, I met a woman from village church I attended. She asked me where I was going and who I was meeting. Innocently, I responded. After spending the entire day in Pala and then returning to the village, I was accosted by neighbors and my host family. Apparently, the woman had told them that I was meeting a strange man in

Pala. Even after I showed my family pictures of the historian, a man in his 80s, they strenuously advised me not to talk about where I was going, what I was doing and who I was seeing with anyone.

My unmarried status was a constant thorn in my side. After almost every interview, I was asked how old I was and if I was married. Some participants offered to help arrange my marriage. Others recommended getting married and then coming back and doing research so that I could be taken seriously. I resorted to lying to all my participants saying “my parents are looking for a boy for me back in America.” All these examples point to Kerala’s gender paradox. Even though women are educated and part of public life, Kerala ranks first in crimes against women, and many women only able to access certain spaces in and through marriage. It made my research difficult to say the least.

I conducted over eighty interviews—both formal (usually at the interviewee’s home) and informal interviews at political rallies, bible studies, religious retreats, *mathrajothies* meetings, prayer group meetings, family reunions, baptisms, weddings and at Syrian Christian pilgrimage sites. The majority of the participants were Romo-Syrian Christians. However, I did interview Hindus, Muslims, other Syrian Christians and other Christians as well. The use of multiple methods is apparent in the changing types of interviews I conducted. For example, informal interviews were largely conducted while I was engaged in ethnographic participant observation. Oral histories were primarily used to interview women wearing *chatta/thuni*—women in their 80s and 90s. Political interviews were conducted with prominent politicians, communal historians, and members of the clergy with specific pointed and provoking questions.

The names of participants of oral histories and informal interviews have been changed. I have used traditional Syrian Christian names for the Syrian Christian participants to indicate 1) that the participant is Syrian Christian and 2) to indicate the social privileges associated with Syrian Christianity. Syrian Christians are often baptized in these traditional names, although they now are commonly given Hindu names for everyday use. These traditional names most often are derivatives of biblical Aramaic names and thus denote upper-caste and Aryan racial origins. When the *chatta/thuni* was still in vogue, the suffix “amma” was attached to Syrian Christian women’s names as a term of endearment. This custom has disappeared, yet women’s names are often recognized as Syrian Christian names from the use of the suffix. Below are the specific Syrian Christian traditional names I use in the dissertation, along with their English equivalent:

Women’s Name	Translation
Achamma	Susan
Aleyamma	Elizabeth
Alphonsamma	Alphonsa
Annakutty	Anna
Annamma	Anna
Chinamma	Little one
Claramma	Clara
Elsiekutty	Elizabeth
Katrinamma	Katrina
Kochorotha	Rose
Kunjamma	Little one
Mariamamma	Mary
Marykutty	Mary
Penamma	Little girl
Rosamma	Rose
Saramma	Sara
Selinamma	Selina
Suzamma	Susan
Thangamma	Pure Gold
Threshamma	Teresa

Men's Name	Translation
Ausep	Joseph
Chacko	James
Devasia	Sebastian
Lukose	Luke
Markos	Mark
Mathai	Mathew
Oomen	Thomas
Paulose	Paul
Thomachen	Thomas
Varghese	George
Yohanan	John

Interviews were also conducted with Kerala politicians, priests, nuns, communal historians, and members from prominent Romo-Syrian families, including the PT Chacko family of Vazhoor, and the Powathil family of Changanasheri. These community leaders, whose opinions, names, and organizational identities are already a matter of public record, gave permission to be quoted by name.

Archival research was primarily conducted in the city of Thiruvananthapuram at the Nanthacode State Archives, the Kerala Legislative Assembly Library, The Kerala University Library's newspaper archive, and the Centre for Development Studies. I benefited immensely from an affiliation with the Centre for Development Studies and the guidance of Dr. J. Devika. Research was also conducted at the *Malayalam Manorama* archive in Kottayam and the archbishop's house in Changanacherry. I am indebted to the Chacko family for sharing the private library of the late politician, P.T. Chacko with me.

Photographic evidence was obtained through secondary sources and through private libraries. While the princely state of Travancore and the Madras presidency was photographed by British colonial officials, women and clothing styles were rarely documented. When they were photographed it was mainly for the purpose of documenting "traditional costuming," freezing the individual into some kind of timeless existence. In other words, such photography was often staged. The climate of Kerala is very humid, and old photos deteriorate quickly. Thus, photographic evidence of everyday dressing practices is extremely difficult to find. When photographic evidence did appear, they were quite specific in matter and in the form of "vernacular photography or amateur photographs of family members taken at a specific event. For Syrian Christians, the sacraments of baptism, Eucharist, matrimony, and funerals are among the

most common events documented through photographs and were extremely personal moments of joy, nostalgia, and loss for many participants. However, countless families opened up their family picture albums for me and shared oral histories through the photographic record that somehow managed to be survive. Often, the families were unsure of the dates in which the photographs were taken. Whenever possible, I have included the date. Undated black and white photos used in the dissertation were most likely taken in the 1950s and early 1960s. I am especially grateful to the Ampalathumkal family, the Powathil family, the Mooliyil family, the Theempalangad family and the Pulickal family in this regard.



Ampalathumkal family funeral photo



Pulickal family Eucharist photo



Mooliyil family wedding photo



Powathil family funeral phot

The term “Syrian Christians” was a label used by the Portuguese to distinguish native Christians from Latin Catholic converts. In Kerala, they are commonly called “St. Thomas Christians” or *Nazranis*. However, the discipline of South Asian studies commonly uses the term, “Syrian Christians.” As a result, I too reluctantly use the term “Syrian Christians” in this dissertation. In addition, while there are differences between factions of Syrians, I unproblematically lump the Syrians into one group because of believed Aryan origins and caste differences from lower-caste Hindus and Christians. Even today, marriage between Latin and Romo-Syrians is rare despite the shared Catholic faith. Thus, to understand “ritualized female sexuality” (chapter 6), the use of “Syrian Christians” as an umbrella term that encompasses a race and caste identity is appropriate.

I do use the common term for Syrian Christian Catholics “Romo-Syrians” as opposed to their official name “Syro-Malabar Catholics.” Many Romo-Syrians understand themselves first and foremost to be of the Catholic faith. Indeed, some

participants answered my interview question as to which caste Romo-Syrians belonged to as being “Roman Catholic caste.” However, differences from Latin Catholics are always stressed. Romo-Syrians most commonly understand themselves to be both “Roman Catholics” and “St. Thomas Christians.” Thus, the use of “Romo-Syrian” was understood by all to denote both Roman Catholic denomination and Syrian Christian caste and racial roots.

People of Kerala commonly refer to themselves as “Malayalees” as speakers of the Malayalam language. Seeing as how the language is so pervasive and defining of identity, “Malayalees” is definitely appropriate. Yet it is becoming popular in the academic world to use the term “Keralites” to allow for linguistic difference that does exist in the state—especially with a large population of Tamil Brahmins and Tribal populations in the Wyanad district. Therefore, I use the term “Keralites” in this dissertation.

Throughout this dissertation I refer to “women,” “minorities” and the “state.” While it is clear that I am constantly complicating the categories of “women” and “minorities,” I often use the term “state” seemingly without complication. Let me write my disclaimer here, however, that I do not understand the state as monolithic. Rather, the state is an entity that can only be defined in relation to “society”—a fluid and unstable category subject to social and historical forces. Rajeswari Sunder Rajan has argued that while the state seems separate from society, there is a link between the two that make them both oppositional *and* continuous. The state often diagnoses the social evils of society and will step in if society cannot/does not fix those evils. Since these reforms often relate to the status of women, the divide between the state and society is not only a

convenient division of responsibility, but also works as a cover to the patriarchal nature of Indian society, laws and policies, and the complicities between the two.¹⁰ The patriarchal nature and the complexities of the state's relation to society is discussed in this dissertation with regards to political organizing for and against educational reform, Kerala state laws, and through the Indian constitution (especially Article 30 (1)).

This dissertation engages a wide range of texts. I have mentioned the use of interviews and photographs as texts. Government texts such as the Kerala Legislative Assembly debates, language from laws and court cases invoking “minorities” in post-independent India, communal group and government pamphlets, and slogans concerning political issues that the Syrian Christian community organized around are specifically interrogated. Print media—articles on the Syrian Christian community and their communal organizing, articles noting perceived differences between Kerala women, advertisements that document the change in communal based to secular women's dress, television media—including serials and devotional programming, religious rituals and religious texts, and “cultural artifacts” through the practice of dress itself, are also used as texts. I engage South Asian postcolonial theory and feminist theory throughout the dissertation, but especially in discussions of how to understand the concept of differences, multiple oppressions, and the homogenization of differences through the use of “minority,” “women,” and “Christian” identities.

My dissertation can be taken as a meticulous study of material objects including clothing, racialized bodies, the Kerala state, secular policies, communal protesting and the Western academy. However, it could be also taken as a case study of an

¹⁰ Rajan, Rajeswari Sunder. *The Scandal of the State: Women, Law and Citizenship in Postcolonial India*. (Ranikhet: Permanent Black Press, 2003), 7.

interdisciplinary methodology. It is my opinion that this dissertation is both a detailed study of material objects and a case study of a methodology as I consistently blur analysis with epistemological interventions. In this regard, my dissertation is truly an interdisciplinary project as I examine the gaps and explore themes between disciplines to produce new root metaphors of analysis.

Chapter 2

Kerala's Syrian Christians: a Historical Overview

This chapter is a historical analysis of the Syrian Christian community and the state of Kerala, India. I present some of the region's complexities as background for situating the dissertation. In the first part of the chapter, I trace the history of Syrian Christianity in Kerala from the arrival of St. Thomas to the Kerala coast in 52 A.D. to the unique relationship they developed with Kerala's upper-caste Hindus, and to the subsequent schisms after Portuguese Latinization efforts in the 16th-17th centuries. In the second part, I examine how British colonialism affected Kerala's regions of Travancore, Cochin and Malabar leading to specific economic gains for Syrian Christians in Kerala. Finally, in the last section of the chapter, I examine how the Syrian Christians became a united political base for the Congress party in Kerala and explain the issues the religious minority face in the state today. This chapter draws from the existing literature on Kerala and Syrian Christian history and provides background for the dissertations' subsequent chapters.

Syrian Christian and Kerala History

On southwest coast of India is the small state of Kerala, India. Cut off from the rest of India by the densely forested Western Ghat Mountains, early inhabitants of the region turned to the sea and welcomed traders from the Middle-East, Europe and China. Kerala was and has continued to be a foremost destination for the spice trade—pepper being called Kerala's "Black Gold." The southwest Monsoon winds were ideal for bringing in ships from the West during the months of June/July. The northeast monsoon

in Oct/Nov reverses the wind directions making travel favorable back to the West. The Kerala historian, Sreedhara Menon, notes that trade in the 3rd and 2nd millennia BC brought cardamom and cinnamon to ancient Babylonia. This was followed by trade with the Egyptians, Phoenicians, Greeks and Romans. In the early centuries of the Christian era, Chinese traders came to Kerala and established a trade relationship that lasted into the 13th century.¹¹

Because of known trade routes, Kerala was a destination not only for merchants and traders, but became land for religious refugees. Jains and Buddhists settled in Kerala in the Sangam Age (300BC-500AD) from the north to escape persecution. The first Jewish immigrants are thought to be refugees escaping from Assyrians assault in 8th Century BC. After the destruction of the temple in Jerusalem 72AD, a new wave of Jewish immigrants arrived in Kerala. Adopting the language, they were further strengthened in 340AD and 499AD with the arrival of Jewish immigrants fleeing Spanish persecution in Europe¹² and in 1000AD when full rights were given to them to settle in Cranganore.¹³ The Jewish community took up as traders and merchants and became a prosperous community.¹⁴

As Islam took hold in the Middle East, many Arab traders brought the religion to the Kerala coast. Like the Jews, Islamic converts and Muslim immigrants adopted the

¹¹ Menon, Sreedhara. *A Survey of Kerala History*. (New Delhi: Sterling, 1979), 59-63.

¹² Jussay, PM. "The Jews in Kerala." in *St. Thomas Christians and Nambudiris Jews and Sangam Literature: A Historical Appraisal*, ed. Bosco Puthur (Kochi: "The Jews in Kerala" LRC Publications, 2003), 128.

¹³ Nandy, Ashis. "Time Travel to a Possible Self: Searching for the Alternative Cosmopolitanism of Cochin." *Japanese Journal of Political Science*. 1, no. 2 (2000). 313.

¹⁴ The prevalence of the Jewish community in Kerala is used to validate Syrian Christian communal history (discussed below). Some historians argue that St. Thomas would have come to an area known to Jews and preach to members of his own religion. See Xavier Koodapuzha "Response." in *The Life and Nature of the St. Thomas Christian Church in the Pre-Diamper Period*, ed. Bosco Puthur (Kochi: LRC Publications, 2000). 47-59.

language of Kerala and many native customs (including matrilineal inheritance). By 14th century, Muslims from Arabia/Persian gulf, East Africa and Iran had established themselves as traders in Kerala. Hindu rulers depended on commercial duties and thus welcomed foreign merchants. The community grew primarily through conversions, which were not forced: "...this community grew primarily through peaceful conversion which initially, at least, resulted from the interaction of a dynamic, egalitarian Islamic mercantile society with an exceptionally conservative version of Hindu caste society."¹⁵ This is very different from how the waves of migration/invasions of Muslims into North India are narrated by both official "secular" histories and by Hindu communal histories. Muslims came to North India not as traders contributing to the economy but as settlers/conquerors, migrating overland. Communal historians have picked up on this idea of Muslim invaders of North India in an effort to exacerbate differences between Hindus and Muslims. In this narrative, the Muslim invaders led to the decline of Hindu Vedic civilization (1000 B.C. 1200 A.D.)—the glorious time of Hinduism in India untainted by Muslim invasions. The periodization of Muslim migration to North India is called the "medieval" or "dark ages" of Indian history suggesting that the time prior was "golden." According to these histories, Muslim invaders destroyed Hindu temples and forced conversions. The histories also highlight the supposed rapes of Hindu women by the invading Muslim men. By the early 20th century, this communal myth became so entrenched that print literature began to "compound and conflate images of Hindu

¹⁵ Dale, Stephen. "Trade Conversion and the Growth of the Islamic community of Kerala, South India." *Studia Islamica*. No. 71 (1990), 174.

masculinity, alleged abductions of Hindu women by lustful Muslim men, and victimized and heroic Hindu women.”¹⁶

In comparison to North India’s Hindu/Muslim divides, Kerala is often upheld as the state of religious tolerance and unity largely due to this history of peaceful trade.¹⁷ Yet, the Muslims of Kerala were not in any way unified. They were stratified by nationality and class. Foreign Arab traders differed in status and occupation from the converts who made up an agricultural laboring class. The arrival of the Portuguese in the late 15th century ousted many of these Arab traders from their social position. As a result, very few Arab Muslims remained in Kerala.¹⁸ By the 19th century, the majority of Muslim converts and descendents of unions between foreign traders and native women made their living as agricultural laborers and tenants to Hindu landlords. They moved further inland from the Kerala coast and the class/religious divides would prove to stratify Muslims and Hindus in the region into the early 20th century.

Kerala’s unique religious landscape also includes a long history of Christianity. The Syrian Christians pride themselves on being one of the earliest Christians in the world and trace their conversion to the year 52 AD, when the Apostle of Jesus, St. Thomas arrived on the Kerala port city of Malankara near the bustling trade hub, Muziris.¹⁹ According to Syrian Christian communal history, after the death of Christ, the apostles went to different lands to spread the Word of God. St. Thomas went east

¹⁶ Gupta, Charu. *Sexuality, Obscenity, Community: Women, Muslims and the Hindu Public in Colonial India*. (New York: Palgrave, 2002), 29.

¹⁷ See for example, Ashutosh Varshney. *Ethnic Conflict and Civic Life: Hindus and Muslims in India*. (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2003). Kerala’s religious tolerance is, I will argue in the following chapters, more complicated than meets the eye.

¹⁸ Dale, 175.

¹⁹ There are many who question the idea that St. Thomas came to Kerala and conversions of natives to Christianity. As I shall discuss, the debate surrounds the supposed caste status of the converts. This dissertation focuses on communal history/memory that largely understands St. Thomas’s arrival and conversion of natives as factual.

through Babylon, present day Iraq and onto India.²⁰ On arriving at the Kerala coast in 52AD, St. Thomas reportedly performed a miracle in front of Brahmins taking a ritual bath. He threw the water in which the Brahmins were bathing into air and it stayed there.²¹ The Brahmins, impressed by this miracle, immediately asked to be baptized. St. Thomas established churches at Kottaickal, Kokamangalam, Paruetta, Chayal, Kurukkanikulam, and Palloor. He also established chapels and erected crosses at Niranam, Pallipooran, Vattamarri, Cranganore, Palloor and Kuthamana before he was martyred outside Chennai. During St. Thomas's tenure in Kerala, he performed miracles and acts of penance that draw pilgrims to St. Thomas sites to this day.

Syrian Christian claims to Brahmin roots helped elevate their caste status over the centuries. From the 8th century onwards, this forward caste status is documented in decrees of the Copper Plates. The Copper Plates are a series of decrees granting certain families rights by rulers of Kerala. These decrees were stamped into copper plates and thus preserved throughout the centuries. Most notably, the Syrian Copper Plates grants four Syrian families and eight Syrian males freedom from certain taxes, rights to trade and rights to own slaves and grants of land to the church—rights to which low-caste Hindus were decidedly not given.²² Today, Syrian Christian families continue to attest to their upper-caste origins by claiming *Namboodiri* Brahmin names such as Kalli, Kaliankara, Sankarapuri, Madapur, Bypmilla, Muthedal, Kottakara, Panackamattam, and Pakalomattom.²³ Still other families claim to have palm leaf documents that verify their

²⁰ The Christians of Iraq also claim to be the decedents of converts of St. Thomas.

²¹ Chittilapilly, Paul. "Keynote Address" in Puthur, ed, *The Life and Nature*, 17.

²² Narayanan, MGS. *Cultural Symbiosis in Kerala*. (Trivandrum: Kerala Historical Society, 1972), 90-4.

²³ Cheriyan, CV. *History of Christianity in Kerala: From the Mission of St. Thomas to the Arrival of Vasco de Gama AD 52-1498*. (Kottayam: CMS Press, 1973), 3.

Brahmin roots and conversion by St. Thomas.²⁴ Syrian Christians were allowed to possess slaves like upper-caste Hindus, and to have their own private armies.²⁵ Like *Namboodiri* Brahmins, the Syrians were patrilineal in a larger matrilineal society. Syrian churches were built in the fashion of Hindu temples- with a porch in front of church, compound wall with gateway, music hall built into side and a separate side building for meals.²⁶ They also had a public penitential system similar to the Brahmin custom.²⁷ The upper-caste Hindu practice of feeding newborns honey and gold and helping young ones trace letters in unhusked rice as a symbol of the start of education are still prevalent in Syrian Christian communities. The traditional white dress of Syrians runs parallel to the use of cream colored upper-caste Hindu garments of the *Nayars* and *Namboodiris* (chapter 3). In addition:

The Christians, like the Hindus, had faith in horoscope, the tying of the *thali* or marriage locket, death pollution of ten to fifteen days, vegetarianism during mourning periods, ceremonial bathing to remove death pollution (*pulakuli*), funeral rites followed by feasting (*adyantram*), celebration of *onam* and *vishu* (harvest and new year festivals), the celebration of *annaprasanam* (the first feeding of child with rice) and the non-admission of low castes into the house.²⁸

The upper-caste status of Syrian Christians, expressed in and through upper-caste Hindu ritual, continues to define Syrian Christian communal identity today.

It is believed that Brahmin migration to South India is the same as Aryan racial migration to the region. As I discuss in chapter 4, this assumption has its roots in 19th

²⁴ Mundadan, Mathias. "Sources for the History of the St. Thomas Christian Church in the Pre-Diamper Period." in Puthur, ed, *The Life and Nature*, 31.

²⁵ Kurian, Mathew V. *The Caste Class Formation: A Case Study of Kerala*. (New Delhi: BR Publishing Corporation, 1986), 15.

²⁶ Mannooranparampil, Thomas. "General Considerations on the Liturgical and Sacramental Theology." in *Bride at the Feet of the Bridegroom: Studies in East Syrian Liturgical Law*, eds. AG Kollamparampil and J Perumthottam. (Changanassery: HIRS Publications, 1997), 195.

²⁷ Anikuzhikattil, Mathew. "Reconciliation." in eds. AG Kollamparampil and J Perumthottam, *Bride*, 372.

²⁸ Viswanathan, Susan. *The Christians of Kerala: History, Belief and Ritual among the Yakoba*. (New York: Oxford University Press, 1994), 34.

century race science and the conjecture that caste was a hierarchal system based on race. Kerala Brahmins are different than other Brahmin castes of South India in that they are believed to have migrated from the North and sanskritized the region through implementation of the caste system and the consolidation of knowledge through Brahmanical patriarchy. According to the text, *Keralolpatti*, Kerala was a gift of the Arabian Sea to Parasuram. Parasuram threw his ax across the sea, and from where he threw (Gokarnam) to where the ax landed (Kanyakumari), the water receded and fertile land sprang forth. Parasuram settled the Brahmins as masters of this land in sixty-four villages—thirty-two of them in Southern Karnataka and the remaining half in Kerala. The Parasuram story is said to justify Brahmin migration from outside Kerala and the subsequent placement of the Dravidians and Tribals of Kerala into the lower rungs of the caste system.

It is difficult to tease out when Aryans migrated to Kerala. Scholars generally believe that Kerala experienced different waves of Aryan migration, but argue over those dates. It is even more unclear as to whether caste divisions existed at the time of Syrian conversion to Christianity. Despite this, church historians and leaders insist on the upper-caste and racial origins of Syrians through myth, legends, and family histories.

The origins and timeline of Aryan arrival and their later caste dominance in Kerala has become politically significant due to the highly rigid caste boundaries that arose after Aryan consolidation of power. Devaswam (temple) lands were exempted from tax and were never attacked. As a result, landowners gradually signed over their lands to temples for protection—becoming vassals to landowners. “In the course of time,

the temples became the biggest land-owners of medieval Kerala.”²⁹ By the time of the Chera/Chola wars of the 11th century, the system that tied one’s occupation to the temples had become solidified. As Devaswam lands were under control of Brahmin priests, this land was essentially amassed by the Brahmins—now known in Kerala through the caste name: *Namboodiri*. As *Namboodiris* consolidated land, local chiefs and rulers began to patron and bestow favors upon them that fueled a hierarchical caste system with *Namboodiris* at the top. According to historian George Woodcock, the *Nayars* became tenants to the *Namboodiris* who had the power to evict. The *Nayars* sublet to the lower caste *Ezhavas* and used *Pulayas* and *Parayas* as slave laborers.³⁰ While there are many subdivisions of these castes, these four, *Namboodiris*, *Nayars*, *Ezhavas* and *Pulayas* and *Parayas* are the most numerous and most visible in Kerala.

It would seem that these four castes fit into the *varnas* of castes in India. Yet in Kerala, the four caste system of Brahmin, Kshatriya, Vaisyas and Sudra does not hold. As Prema Kurien explains, “Kshatriyas were rare and Vaisyas nonexistent. The *Nayar* caste took the place of Kshatriyas, but they were regarded as Sudras by the local Brahmins. The *Ezhavas* came below the *Nayars* followed by the slave castes.”³¹ Despite being from the Sudra caste, the *Nayar* castes were considered upper-caste and entered into marriages with *Namboodiri* Brahmins (discussed below). *Ezhavas*, although performing Sudra tasks, were classified as untouchable.³² According to some historians, Syrian Christians, Muslims and Jewish merchants stood in for the vacant Vaisyas caste of

²⁹ Gangadharan, TK. *Evolution of Kerala History and Culture*. (Calicut: Calicut University Central, 2003), 185.

³⁰ Woodcock, George. *Kerala: A Portrait of the Malabar Coast*. (London: Faber and Faber, 1967), 104. *Nayar* is sometimes spelled “Nair.” In this dissertation, I use the spelling “*Nayar*.”

³¹ Kurien, Prema. *Kaleidoscopic Ethnicity: International Migration and the Reconstruction of Community Identities in India*. (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 2002), 45.

³² Kurien, 46.

Kerala.³³ Yet even if this is to be the case, Syrian Christians' caste status more closely matched that of the *Nayars* (even as they claim Brahmin origins). This unique caste arrangement that created a huge divide between what was considered “high” and “low” led to strict social dictates.

From the 7th-19th Century, *Namboodiri* Brahmin men of Kerala began to monopolize knowledge and a temple ordered society emerged that consolidated Brahmin power. The social organizing caste based society and use of Sanskrit language as sacred language characterized *Namboodiri* power. The more egalitarian society of the Sangam age was replaced by the elitism—education and priesthood was reserved to Brahmin/Aryan men alone:

The progress of Aryanisation and the increasing hold of the caste system (*Chaturvarnya*) brought about a decline in the standards of general education and literacy. The Sudras who constituted the fourth caste were denied the right to education...Female education also suffered a set-back, though the education of the Devadasis received special attention. Thus the ideal of universal education which prevailed in the early Sangam age got jettisoned under the impact of the caste system and education became the monopoly of the higher castes in the Hindu society.³⁴

The *Namboodiri* Brahmins separated themselves from other Brahmins of South India by adhering to the teachings of Sankara, an aesthetic who lived from 788-812 AD.

Namboodiris followed the strict 64 rituals given in the *Sankara Smriti* and practiced untouchability and purification rituals.

In Kerala, there were over five-hundred divisions and subdivisions of caste, causing Swami Vivekananda to describe Kerala as a “lunatic asylum.”³⁵ Not only was untouchability practiced, but unseeability. A low-caste was not allowed within sixty feet

³³ Vijayakumar, K. “The Influence of Caste in Kerala Politics: A Historical Perspective.” *Journal of Kerala Studies*. VIII, parts 1-4 (March, June, September, December 1981): 259.

³⁴ S. Menon, *Social and Cultural History*, 161-2.

³⁵ Vijayakumar, 259.

of a *Namboodiri* Brahmin. Syrian Christians also participated in these rigid mobility rituals. As narrated by participant Threshamma, an eighty-seven year old Syrian Christian woman:

When I was young, low-castes had to get out of the way of an upper-caste. They would know to get out of the way because the upper-caste would travel with a servant. Every now and again, the servant would call out “hoi.” When I was a young girl, I would hear that. “Hoi...” and then a little while later, “hoi.” If the low-caste was on the path, he would hide off the path until the upper-caste passed. They used to get out of our way too. My mother told me that us Christians would have servants to sweep the ground before us as we walked so we would not step on any bugs. We were just like upper-caste Hindus.³⁶

Regulations on mobility encompassed not only personal space, but also dictated clothing and ornamentation norms (Chapter 3). Restrictions were also placed on worship—lower castes were not permitted to worship the ‘high’ Hindu Gods (Shiva, Vishnu, and Krishna) but were relegated to demon worship. Temple entry for low-castes was denied. Low-caste Hindus and Christians were prevented from obtaining an education and excluded from public service and government positions. *Namboodiris* were exempted from land taxes while low-castes had to pay taxes and fees for even the right to use an umbrella or a palanquin. *Namboodiris* also controlled the informal judicial system. While they were exempted from the death penalty, low-castes could receive the death penalty for ordinary offenses such as theft. The sentences of low-caste criminals were brutal: death by elephant trampling, blown from mouth of cannon, hung for 3 days, and mutilations.³⁷

With the rise of the *Namboodiri* Brahmins came a feudal system. Vassalage did provide a wide range of jobs for castes associated with the temples and villages began to be organized around the temples. Yet with landed interests and knowledge, “Brahmin”

³⁶ Threshamma, interview in Malayalam by author. Sept 9, 2007.

³⁷ S. Menon, *Survey*, 390-1.

became the point of reference from which other castes fixed their social status.³⁸ The Dravidians of Kerala are thus theorized to have become the non-Brahmin Hindus of Kerala and all dependent in one way or another by occupation to the temples and the Aryan temple priests—the caste and racial divisions based in part on the division of labor (Chapter 4)

In the first couple of centuries AD, Jews, Muslims and Christians set themselves up as powerful traders, refrained from proselytizing and thus posed no threat to rulers and Kerala's most precious commodity: Land. As Robin Jeffrey explains, "Possession of land complemented ritual status and brought power."³⁹ Over the centuries, Syrian Christians became landowners themselves largely with the blessings of the temple society. The *Namboodiris* increased their landed and caste power by aligning themselves with the *Nayars* and Syrian Christians.

Namboodiri Brahmins and Syrian Christians are both patrilineal. Yet the *Nayars*, other Hindu castes and some Mappila Muslims of Malabar (north Kerala) are traditionally matrilineal—descent through the female line. By 19th century, almost 50% of state of Kerala practiced matrilineal inheritance.⁴⁰ Matrilineal families were joint and lived together on the large *tharavadu* or estate. Inheritance was determined through women of the *tharavadu*. Polyandry, women having more than one husband, was also a feature of some matrilineal *tharavadukal*. Women also had the right to receive and bequeath property. Men could have this right only when living in it and could not

³⁸ Veluthat, Kesavan. "The Nambudiri Community: A History" in Puthur, ed., *St. Thomas Christians and Nambudiris*, 122.

³⁹ Jeffrey, Robin. *The Decline of Nair Dominance: Society and Politics in Travancore 1847-1908*. (London: Chatto and Windus for Sussex University Press, 1976), 27.

⁴⁰ Arunima. G. *There Comes Papa: Colonialism and the Transformation of Matriliney in Kerala, Malabar c. 1850-1940*. (New Delhi, Orient Longman, 2003), 2.

bequeath property to offspring. It is easy to assume that matrilineal system of inheritance led to greater rights for women. Yet as G. Arunima explains in her work on matriliney in Malabar, the *tharavadu* was not characterized by women's power—especially as read by British colonial officials. Rather, the bigger the *tharavadu*, the more powerful. A family could consolidate power by marrying into other *tharavadukal*. Thus, alliances through marriages became important, and constraints most likely did exist for *Nayar* women.⁴¹

Hypergamy, or marriages between castes, became common between *Nayar* women and *Namboodiri* Brahmin second/third sons.⁴² As per custom, the oldest *Namboodiri* Brahmin son was required to marry within the caste. Historians have conjectured that regulating the oldest son to marry within the caste ensured that the *illam* (Brahmin property/residence) was kept caste pure. Over time this led to further consolidation of lands, so that vast tracts could be in the hands of only one *Namboodiri* family. As D. Rengini notes in *Nayar Women Today*, younger *Namboodiri* sons could be sexual without threatening property while the *Namboodiri* family simultaneously created connections to powerful *Nayar* families (and *Nayars* to powerful *Namboodiri* families).⁴³ Thus, hypergamous, or between caste, marriage alliances were beneficial for both castes. *Namboodiri/Nayar* relationship was sexual, economic, and political. These kinship structures shaped the face of Kerala society until it was abandoned in the early 20th century.

The early practices of Syrians and their place in this emerging hierarchy is relatively unknown except through what can be gleaned from a handful of sources. In

⁴¹ Arunima, 3.

⁴² Polygenous and hypergamous marriages were not uniform throughout Kerala.

⁴³ Rengini, D. *Nayar Women Today: Disintegration of the Matrilineal System and the Status of Nayar Women in Kerala*. (Delhi: Classical Publishing Company, 2000), 18.

345 AD, the native Christian community was strengthened by the arrival of Thomas of Cana and several Christian families, priests and students.⁴⁴ The descendents of these families today are known as Knayan Christians. Knayan Christians are considered part of the Syrian Christian fold. Despite their small numbers, Knayan Christians today still practice endogamous marriages (only marry within the community) and have a separate ecclesiastical hierarchy from the Romo-Syrians and Jakoba (below). The arrival of these families is, however, significant because it sutured the decedents of St. Thomas converts to the Chaldean churches in Mesopotamia. The Church in Kerala was considerably influenced by the Chaldean Church for hundreds of years. In fact, “tradition is unanimous that the prelates of the St. Thomas Christians came from Babylon for many centuries before the arrival of the Portuguese in India.”⁴⁵ The similarities in certain rituals and most notably in the liturgical language (Aramaic) make Syrian Christians today part of the Eastern Rites of Christianity.

One reason why Syrian Christian history is lacking is because of upheaval in the church after the arrival of the Portuguese. In 1489, the Portuguese explorer Vasco De Gama sailed around the tip of Africa and reached the Kerala Coast. This paved the way for subsequent colonization of Kerala by the Portuguese. Originally, the Syrians and Portuguese maintained friendly relations as trade partners. However, in the mid sixteenth-century, this alliance began to change as the Portuguese actively sought to Latinize the Syrian Christians:

Since the Portuguese were busy establishing commercial relations with these Princes [various ruling princes in Malabar] wherever possible, they

⁴⁴ Zacharia, Scaria. *The Acts and Decrees of the Synod of Diamper, 1599*. (Edamattam: Indian Institute of Christian Studies, 1994), 11-2.

⁴⁵ Mundadan, Mathias A. *Sixteenth Century Traditions of St. Thomas Christians*. (Bangalore: Dharmaram College, 1970), 137.

had no desire to impose religious conditions which might offend the local authorities. As for the pastoral mission to the Syrians, this was justified, in the minds of the missionaries, by the fact that their ecclesiastical organization appeared to be so lax . . . consequently they [Portuguese] were convinced that it was necessary to restore these Christians communities to orthodoxy . . . and absorb them into the Latin-rite Church.⁴⁶

The Latinization was justified by two fears; first, that the Syrian Christians would become schismatic from Roman Catholicism and second, that the Syrian Christians might concretely align themselves with the Chaldean Church of Mesopotamia. The first fear stemmed from the aftermath of the reformation in Europe. The second, from the dictates of the council of Ephesus in 413AD that deemed Chaldean traditions to be part of the Nestorian Heresy. Thus, in the line of promoting ‘true’ Catholicism, “the Portuguese considered it their duty to substitute the supremacy of the Pope of Rome over the Kerala Church for that of the Patriarch of Babylon and to replace the Syriac liturgy by the Latin liturgy of the Roman Catholic Church.”⁴⁷ The Portuguese Latinization effort, the Padroado, maintained that Latinization would subordinate the Syrian Christians to Portugal and consequently potential schisms would be controlled and contained by the Portuguese Church.

The Padroado in the late 16th Century was controlled by archbishop Alexis de Menezes. Struggling for complete control and Latinization of the Kerala Church, Menezes held a Synod at Udayamperoor in the Ernakulam district in present day Kerala on June 20th, 1599. The Synod of Diamper, as it is now known as, lasted eight days and contained approximately twenty-five decrees on the proper Latin rite the St. Thomas

⁴⁶ Houtart, Francois and Genevieve Lemercinier. *Genesis and Institutionalization of the Indian Catholicism*. Trans. Iolanda Rendel. (Louvain-la-Neuve: C.R.S.R.—Universite Catholique de Louvain, 1981), 60.

⁴⁷ Menon, Sreedhara. *A Survey of Kerala History*, revised ed. (Madras: S. Viswanathan, 2000), 238.

Christians were to therein follow.⁴⁸ The Portuguese laid out decrees and ordinances banning certain practices and condemning ways of life that seemed heretical and/or too similar to Hindu customs. At the same time, in an inquisition at Goa, “books which did not meet the prescription of the Portuguese ecclesiasts were burnt. The traditional archives of the Thomas Christians suffered great losses.”⁴⁹ As such, historians rely heavily on the Synod for clues to Syrian Christian practices prior to Portuguese arrival.

Discontent arose among the many Syrian Christians. In 1653, they gathered in Mattancherry to oppose Portuguese Church authority and passed six resolutions by which they declared that they would no longer obey the Portuguese in addition to choosing an ecclesiastical governor and indigenous priests as governing the new hierarchy.⁵⁰ This rebellion was called the *koonen kurisha* (crooked cross) because reportedly, Syrian Christians held a rope tied around a cross when reciting the resolutions. After the rebellion, many Syrian Christians began to migrate from their original strongholds on the coasts of north and central Kerala, inland to escape Portuguese ecclesiastical dictates. Yet not all Syrians took part in the *koonen kurisha*. The rebellion split the Syrian Christians into two factions that have since never united: *puthankutukar* or new Christians and *pazhaykuttukar* or old Christians. The new Christians broke away at the *koonen kurisha*, while the old Christians stayed in line with papal authority. The new Christians who took part in the *koonen kurisha* are now known as the *Jakoba*—so known because they follow the Jacobite rite of Syrian Christianity.⁵¹ The old Christians

⁴⁸ Zacharia, S, 32.

⁴⁹ Viswananthan, Susan. *The Christians of Kerala: History, Belief and Ritual Among the Yakoba*. (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1993), 16.

⁵⁰ Kollaparambil, Jacob. *The St. Thomas Christians' Revolution in 1653*. (Kottayam: Catholic Bishop's House, 1981), 140.

⁵¹ Jacobite rite comes from a man named Jacobus Zanzalus. In the 5th Century, he protested against erroneous doctrines in the Syrian church and developed his own doctrine. The Jacobite rite was declared a

remained loyal to Rome yet agitated for the right to practice according to the Eastern tradition. These Syrian Christians accepted Catholicism but fought until 1896 for indigenous bishops. Despite their requests, Syrian Catholic clergy continued to be trained in the Latin rite neglecting elements of the Eastern rite until 1962.⁵² They are officially known as the Syro-Malabar Catholics and commonly as Romo-Syrians. I will refer to them throughout this dissertation as “Romo-Syrians.” They constitute the largest group of Syrian Christians in Kerala and are the focus group of my research.

The Portuguese also converted some Syrians and a significant number of Hindus and Muslims to Catholicism. By 1537, twenty-thousand Hindu *Paravars* had been baptized by the Portuguese in exchange for protection from Muslim pirates and neighboring kings.⁵³ In 1544 and 1549, the Portuguese missionary St. Francis Xavier converted ten-thousand *Mukkuvars*—a fisher-caste—to Catholicism. As Ajantha Subramanian explains, this mass conversion was not only based on the desire to escape the oppression of caste, but also a military agreement between the King of Venad and the Portuguese that shifted the *Mukkuvars* community from royal to a church based patronage.⁵⁴ These converts and their descendents are known as “Latin Christians” are not considered to be the same caste, class, or race as Syrians despite their shared Catholic background. As the Romo-Syrian scholar Fr. Joseph Podipora explains “long before the 16th Century, descendents of the converts of St. Thomas together with their early converts and those who had become one with them came to be considered something like a caste

form of Eutychin heresy. Yet in 1665, Mar Gregorius V, a Jacobite patriarch, brought the Jacobite doctrine to Kerala where it was accepted by the Syrian Christians wholeheartedly. See Zacharia, S, 59.

⁵² Podipara, Placid J. *The Latin Rite Christians of Malabar*. (Kottayam: St. Joseph’s Press, 1986), 41.

⁵³ Subramanian, Ajantha. *Shorelines: Space and Rights in South India*. (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2009), 40-1.

⁵⁴ Subramanian, 41-2.

or separate community with high social privileges equal to those of the highest Hindu Nobility.”⁵⁵ This separate community protected its social privilege by distancing itself from the new Latin Catholics. Although trained in Latin rite, the Romo-Syrians resisted attempts to Westernize/Latinize and continued to practice their liturgy in the Aramaic language (known by the Portuguese as “Syrian/Syriac”). Because of both the caste and liturgical difference between converted Latin Christians and the St. Thomas converted Christians, the St. Thomas Christians became known as “Syrian.” We must not mistake the use of the term “Syrian” to denote a group of peoples from Syria. Rather, the Syrian Christians are understood to be “native” or “indigenous” Christians differing from Christians converted by Western missionaries during Portuguese and later British colonizations. Only converted upper-caste Hindus would be accepted as part of the Syrian Christian fold.⁵⁶ Most Latin converts were not permitted to enter Syrian churches or to wear the Syrian Christian dress. None of the upper-caste Hindu practices that define Syrian Christianity are prevalent in the Latin Catholic communities. Further, the taking on of Syrian/upper-caste practices has every indication of inciting communal opposition. As reported in the Census of Travancore, 1891:

It is often said that the Christians have no caste observances amongst them. This is not always so; on the contrary, caste-feeling influences them, I mean the Native Christian community, to a great extent. I have often noticed that these Christians maintain their caste distinctions with rigidity and even take pride in doing so. One of them, a well-informed and intelligent Native Christian, writes to me that “it is an injury to the Native Christian communities (both Catholic and Protestant) to have entered them in the returns simply as Native Christians instead of adding a separate column for Caste.” This definitely shows the unfortunate feeling that exists between the adherents of a faith whose cardinal tenant is “the brotherhood of all men and their perfect equality.” He goes to the length

⁵⁵ Podipara, 2.

⁵⁶ Palakunnel, John. “Christianity is Truly Indigenous” in Puthur, ed., *St. Thomas Christians and Nambudiris*, 221.

of saying that “changes which are no improvements are to be deprecated, and the practice of denationalizing Native Christian converts in dress, mode of life, and manners, is not worthy of encouragement...”⁵⁷

Thus, there are often more similarities between Romo-Syrians and Hindu upper-castes than between Romo-Syrian and Latin Catholics.

The Jakoba Syrian Christians have, since the time of the *koonen kurisha*, endured further factions. British missionaries attempted to reform the Jakoba—most notably in forms of worship (importance of prayer), use of the vernacular Malayalam as opposed to Aramaic and rejection of idolatry. Yet the Jakoba as a group rejected the *mavelikara sunhados* proposal of reform. Protestant missionaries did, however, introduce a spiritual awakening within the Jakoba fold. A minority of Jakoba began to revise the liturgy, rigorously train the clergy, and initiate evangelism. In 1868, this minority formed the *Marthoma* church with selected Jacobite Syrian liturgy.⁵⁸ Although originally viewed with contempt and with no formal churches or funds, the Marthoma church has grown and has become a respected and affluent community in Kerala. The community is especially noted for their excellence in educational institutions.

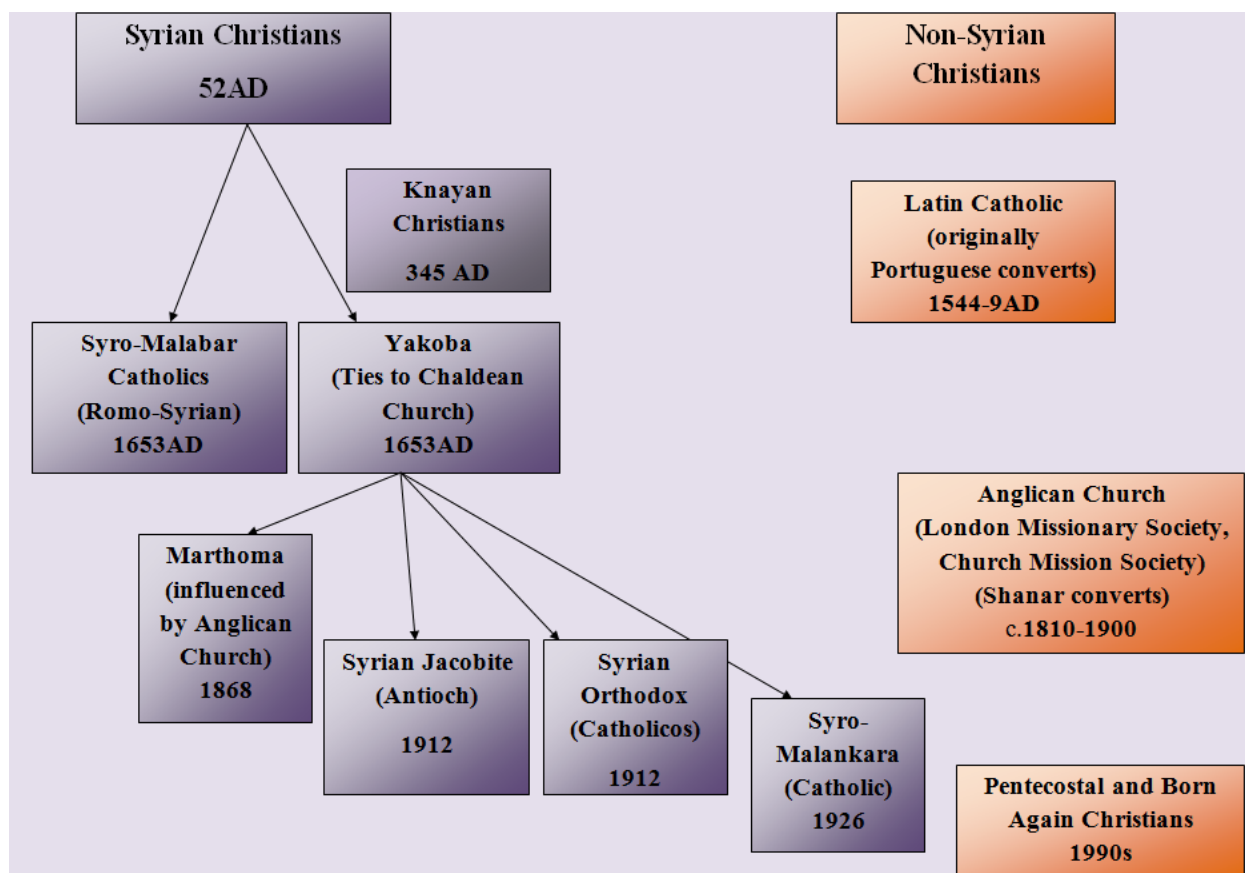
In the early 20th Century, the Jakoba divided into two factions with differing hierarchal structure: those loyal to the patriarch or Antioch, and those loyal to the Indian Catholicos. Each has own set of bishops yet customs and worship of the factions are identical and intermarriage is common. The most glaring difference is in property and wealth. As this division has happened recently in Jakoba history, the problems of property have been playing itself out over families. It is not uncommon to see fights break out during funerals, when members from one faction block access to family burial

⁵⁷ *Census of Travancore*, 1891. Centre for Development Studies Library, Thiruvananthapuram.

⁵⁸ Zachariah, KC. *The Syrian Christians of Kerala: Demographic and Socio-Economic Transition in the Twentieth Century*. (New Delhi: Orient Longman Private Limited, 2006), 66.

grounds based on which ecclesiastical governance the family is under vs. which governance the particular church is under. There have been many efforts to unite the Jakoba but to this date, unification has been unsuccessful.

In 1926, a minority of Jakoba attempted to reunite with Rome. A separate Catholic faction was created that is Roman in doctrine and jurisdiction yet is Jakoba in rites and liturgy. This small minority is known as the Malankara Catholics and is within the fold of “Syrian Christians.” Finally, the 1990s has seen a rise in independent churches in Kerala. They are Baptist, Pentecostal, Church of God, Believers Church and Born Again Christians. They are largely supported with funds from the United States and are not considered Syrian Christian.⁵⁹



⁵⁹ Zachariah, KC, 71.

Christians are 2.3% of the population of India. 19% of the Kerala population is Christian—2.7 million of whom are Roman Catholics, 1.35 million Jakoba, 1.01 million Latins and 500,000 are Marthoma.⁶⁰ Christians are distributed throughout Kerala at always between 10-50% of the population in every district.⁶¹ 70% of Christians, however, live in the central part of Kerala in the Ernakulam and Kottayam Districts.⁶² My research sites are centered in the Kottayam district.

British Colonialism, Reform Movements and Communal Consciousness

Kerala is divided by the regions of *Thiruvithaamkoor* (Travancore), *Kochi* (Cochin) and *Malabar*. Cochin and Travancore operated as princely states under British colonial rule. Cochin encompasses the modern day districts of Ernakulam and Allapuzha. Travancore covers the modern day districts of Kottayam, Idukki, Pathanamthitta, Kollam and Thiruvananthapuram. The northern districts all come under Malabar. Under Raja Marthanda Varma (1729-58), Travancore expanded its territory and conquered Cochin. He held successful campaigns against the Dutch. His successor, Dharma Raja continued the administration of the expanded state. However, the kingdom was threatened from the north by Haider and Tipu Sultan of Mysore who conquered Malabar and attacked Travancore. Many *Namboodiri* and *Nayar* landowners from the Malabar region fled south to Cochin and Travancore. Dharma Raja appealed to the British East India company and through a number of treaties from 1791-1805, Travancore become a protectorate of the East India Company—ruled indirectly by the

⁶⁰ Zachariah, KC, 5-9.

⁶¹ Narayanan, K. *Administrative Atlas*. 1976, Centre for Development Studies Library, Thiruvananthapuram.

⁶² Zachariah, KC, 96.

British. In 1795, Travancore signed a treaty with British East India Company giving them a monopoly on the pepper trade. With the help of the Travancore state and the *Nayar* Brigade, the British forced Tipu Sultan back to Mysore and out of Malabar.⁶³

Malabar came under British East India Company in 1801-02, and later was under direct rule from the Madras Presidency. Malabar's history is thus vastly different than the princely states of Travancore and Cochin. Under the administration of Tipu Sultan, Muslims in Malabar benefited through land redistribution as upper-caste landlords fled the area. After the British and Travancore drove back and defeated Tipu Sultan, the British interpreted the system of land ownership differently than it actually was practiced. For the British and the powerful landed aristocratic *Namboodiris*, "soon it became an accepted "fact" in official circles that the Malabar jenmis [Hindu landlords] possessed "full property of the soil.""⁶⁴ 95% of the landlords after Tipu Sultan's defeat were Hindu—and the Mappila Muslims were severely exploited.⁶⁵ Mappila Muslims began to rebel against Hindu landlords in the late 19th and early 20th centuries. Although the conflicts over tenancy get painted as communal (Hindu vs. Muslim), the Mappilla revolts stem from this exploitation of tenants (Muslims) against *jenmis* (Hindus) and a system in which upper-castes (Hindus and Christians) were benefiting from the exclusion and regulation of lower-castes. In other words, it was much more of a class and caste conflict than purely religious.

In Travancore, property underwent a massive change in the 19th Century. In 1865, under the Pattom Proclamation, full ownership rights were given to tenants allowing unrestricted transfer of their properties. This move 1) commercialized agriculture and let

⁶³ S. Menon, *Survey*, 326.

⁶⁴ Arunima, 46.

⁶⁵ Gangadharan, 259.

to a flurry of land sales/transfers and 2) led to the reclamation of waste land and an increase in cultivated area. Kottayam district experienced a 50% increase in the early 20th century.⁶⁶ Individual ownership of land increasingly became the norm.

The British introduced cash crops to Kerala in the 19th Century: coffee in the 1830s, tea in the 1880s, and rubber in the 1890s.⁶⁷ The boom in world prices of pepper and coconut in the 1920s led to the conversion of many paddy fields to cash crops. Previous landowners, however, were not able to take advantage of these abrupt changes. The rigid caste divisions of Kerala that once served *Namboodiri* Brahmins were undergoing massive upheaval that adversely affected the *Namboodiri* community (discussed below). *Nayar* joint family breakups (also discussed below) led to the selling of land, rather than the buying and conversion of crops. Syrian Christians (primarily merchants) and Ezhavas (coconut harvesters) become a new force in agriculture. As V. Balakrishnan sorely notes in his history of Syrian Christianity, the Syrian Christians were schooled in rubber cultivation by the British and benefitted from a 50 year head start on the industry over other communities.⁶⁸ In essence, “caste was no longer the sole determinant of land ownership.”⁶⁹

The whole agricultural system based on caste roles that thrived for centuries was bursting at the seams as Kerala moved from a feudal to capitalist society. The world economic depression of the 1930s witnessed the dramatic fall in prices for cash crops. An increase in the Kerala population, the exploitation of landlords and the sudden move

⁶⁶ Menon, Dilip M. *Caste, Nationalism and Communism in South India: Malabar 1900-1948*. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994), 23.

⁶⁷ Jeffrey, Robin, *Politics Women and Well-Being: How Kerala Became 'A Model.'* (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1992), 39.

⁶⁸ Balakrishnan, V. *History of the Syrian Christians of Kerala: A Critical Study*. (Thrissur: Kerala Publications, 1999), 70.

⁶⁹ Desai, Manali. “Indirect British Rule, State Formation and Welfarism in Kerala.” *Social Science History*. 29.3. (Fall 2005): 466.

to cash crops and their drop in world price led to a sudden economic depression in the end of the 19th and early 20th century. A new wave of reform—both social and economic—took hold in Kerala.

It has been argued unjust caste practices and women's rights in India were taken up by the bourgeois upper-caste elite under the united goals of “modernization” and “nationalism.” For example, feminist historiographers Kumkum Sangari and Sudesh Vaid argue that, “middle class reforms undertaken on behalf of women are tied up with the self-definition of the class, with a new division of the public from the private sphere and of course with a cultural nationalism.”⁷⁰ However, this model did not encompass all of India. While gender reforms were initiated by bourgeois elite males in North India and especially in Bengal, in Kerala, much of the reform was agitated for from the bottom rungs of society. The right for lower-caste women to cover the upper-half of their bodies known as the “Breast Cloth controversy” (chapter 3), was fought for by the oppressed castes/women, and did not come from privileged elites initiating social reform. One of the most influential reform leaders of Kerala, Sri Narayana Guru, fought for social justice in and through his Ezhava status. As an Ezhava, Narayana was barred from entering temples. Narayana built the Shiva temple near Varkala and shrines throughout Kerala allowing Ezhava and other low-castes to worship. Priests of his temples/shrines were Ezhavas themselves. When questioned about the right to consecrate temples, he famously responded that he was consecrating the “Ezhava Shiva” and not the “Brahmin Shiva.” His writings and teachings inspired millions throughout Kerala. Sri Narayana

⁷⁰ Sangari, Kumkum, Sudesh Vaid. “Recasting Women: An Introduction.” in *Recasting Women: Essays in Indian Colonial History*. (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 1990), 9.

Guru's influence, along with other low-caste social reformers, were behind the large push for caste and class reform in Kerala.

These reforms were fully supported by British Christian missionaries and met, albeit sometimes reluctantly, by the Travancore monarch. In 1859, the Travancore Raja issued a proclamation allowing Nadar (low-caste converted Christians) women to cover their bosoms and in 1936, Raja Sri Chitra Tirunal Balarama Varma issued the famous temple entry proclamation.⁷¹ Yet as Manali Desai notes, the acquiescence to low-caste demands were met not necessarily from enlightened rulers, but to avoid Travancore's annexation by the British. Travancore was able to gain political protection from the British by subscribing to social reform.⁷²

The *Namboodiri* Brahmins resisted many of the changes by appealing to the British and the Travancore Raja to keep caste boundaries, tearing breast clothes off of low-caste women, refusing temple entry to low-castes and rejecting western education. However, the *Namboodiri* community itself came under attack from British missionaries and other castes/religions. Instead of initiating reform in the larger Kerala society, the upper castes of Kerala imploded and were forced to focus on reforming practices within their own castes. The plight of *Namboodiri* women became a particular object of social concern and critique. *Namboodiri* women were known as *anterjanams*: those who live inside. When *anterjanams* reached puberty they were therein to follow strict rules of seclusion and were known as *asuryampasyakal*: those who should never see the sun. Inside the *Namboodiri illam*, their movements were further restricted to women's quarters and women were completely separated from the family when menstruating. "If

⁷¹ S. Menon, *Survey*, 405.

⁷² Desai, 460.

they had to go out, they were required to shield their faces with palm leaf umbrellas, cover themselves entirely with a shawl of unbleached cloth, and leave in the company of a female chaperone.”⁷³ Unmarried *antherjanams* were to remain virgins. The custom of only marrying the oldest *Namboodiri* male within the caste led families to deal with many unmarried women, child marriages, and polygamous marriages. Young *Namboodiri* women were married as 2nd and 3rd wives to older *Namboodiri* first sons. They often became early widows and were forced to follow strict purification rituals and an austere and often lonely life. “Bitter and resentful, some broke down completely and were dismissed as mad or hysterical.”⁷⁴ During the late 19th and early 20th centuries, some male *Namboodiris* began to push for reform within the community. As a result, other reforms happening in Kerala society, including tenant reforms, land redistribution and low-caste agitation against untouchability and unapproachability, seemed to take the *Namboodiri* community unawares.⁷⁵

The matrilineal system of the *Nayars* also came under attack from British Christian missionaries condemning the idea of “visiting husbands” and polyandrous marriages. European anthropologists conjecturing that matrilineal systems of inheritance was primitive and gave way to patrilineality in most parts of the world coupled with moral accusations against the system served to make Kerala men feel inferior: “The alien observation that it was scandalous for men not to fix their love and attachment to wife and children and care for the family as heads, hurt the Malayali men’s masculinity.”⁷⁶ A

⁷³ Krishnankutty, Gita. “Introduction.” in *Cast Me Out if You Will: Stories and Memoir by Lalithambika Antherjanam*. (New York: The Feminist Press at CUNY, 1997), xiv.

⁷⁴ Krishnankutty, xxii.

⁷⁵ Jeffrey, *Politics Women*, 175.

⁷⁶ Saradhamoni, K. *Matriliny Transformed: Family, Law and Ideology in Twentieth Century Travancore*. (New Delhi: Sage Publications, 2001), 65.

British Commission 1890-91 set up to research *Nayar* marriages concluded that Malabar suffered from “barbarism” and had no notion of monogamous relationships. The British concluded that all *Nayar* marriages required registration. This redefining of marriage served to help the move toward the individualization of property: “Rights over female sexuality through marriage, and those over female fertility through the legal guardianship of the offspring, would provide leverage for an alteration of matrilineal inheritance and corporate rights over property.”⁷⁷

In the 1810s, the British disarmed the *Nayars*, and in less than 50 years, the *Nayar* population doubled as the “visiting husbands” came “home.”⁷⁸ Although Christian missionaries condemned the matrilineal system and pressured the colonial government to intervene, reform was actually made due to pressure from the *Nayar* community itself. According to British understanding of the inheritance of *tharavadu* property, the eldest male member of the *tharavadu* was considered to be the head (the *Karanavan*). Younger members of the *tharavadu* in this reading were tenants. British codification of *Nayar* customs were based on *Namboodiri* Brahmin (patrilineal community) interpretation as opposed to *Nayar* (matrilineal community).⁷⁹ Disputes from younger male members of *Nayar* families and misunderstandings of the matrilineal system led to a flurry of court cases and legislation to curb exploitative actions of *karanavans* and disputes over rights to land. A series of laws initiated by young men and women from the *Nayar* caste reformed the matrilineal system of inheritance and increased the normalization of individualized property. In 1912, polyandry was declared illegal. The 1925 *Nayar* Act gave any member of a *tharavadu* the right to demand share of family assets. There were

⁷⁷ Arunima, 134.

⁷⁸ Jeffrey, *Politics Women and Well-Being*, 37.

⁷⁹ Arunima, 16.

one-hundred twenty-thousand partitions in the next 5 years.⁸⁰ Eventually, matriliney in Kerala was completely abolished by law. Many rights of *Nayar* women were curtailed through the redefinition of marriage and individualization of property. “The legislative interventions that were intended to ‘reform’ matriliney pushed women into a dependent, ‘protected’ position.”⁸¹

A large part of the 180 degree turn in society was the increasing cultural importance of education to all castes and religions. Prior to British colonization, only Brahmin men received an education. But British missionaries brought a whole new idea to society—the British education system. Although Kerala already had many Christians (Syrian), there were more British missionaries in Travancore than any other part of India. They came to Kerala in an attempt to reform the Syrian Christians. As Jeffrey explains, “Travancore’s Syrian Christians had...eluded the efforts of the Portuguese to bring them into communion with Rome: at the beginning of the nineteenth century, they appeared to be Christians souls ripe for the Protestant picking.”⁸² But the missionaries fared much better on initiating caste based social movements and in implementing education than converting Syrians to Protestant Christianity. The London Missionary Society (LMS) and Church Mission Society (CMS) made Western education a foremost goal. They promoted use of the vernacular language, Malayalam, and began printing Christian books in the language that were hugely popular. The CMS founded the first college and seminary in the Syrian Christian stronghold, Kottayam, in 1813.⁸³

⁸⁰ Jeffrey, *Politics Women*, 45.

⁸¹ Saradmoni, 116.

⁸² Jeffrey, *Politics Women*, 31.

⁸³ Gangadharan, 280.

In a time when the other forward castes of Kerala were undergoing internal reform, The Syrian Christians managed to capitalize on the benefits of a Western education. Long before the *Namboodiris* and *Nayars*, the Syrians embraced Western education. By the second half of the 19th century, *pallikudams* or schools that accompanied churches were to be seen in every village. To this day, almost every Romo-Syrian church has a private school as well. The Syrian Christians were also very quick to allow women in their community to receive an education in comparison to other communities. The British colonial administration aided in promoting education by accepting any caste with education into government service. Syrian Christians began to take advantage as the opportunities for employment became correlated to the amount of Western education.

During the early part of the 20th century, the state began to adopt more caste egalitarian policies due to the increased demand for education from the lower sections of society: the 1909-10 education code gave backward castes full fee concessions and other poor, half concessions. In 1922, Travancore closed all schools set aside for low-castes and allowed them to attend schools side-by-side upper-castes and religions. Free and compulsory education was introduced in Kottayam district. Later, the upper castes pressured the government for more schools. As a result, Kerala monarchs, the British, and all castes and religions of Kerala lobbied for education.⁸⁴ Literacy skyrocketed.

⁸⁴ Desai, M, 472.

1901				
	<u>Literate</u>		<u>Percentage in population</u>	
	<u>MALES</u>	<u>FEMALES</u>	<u>MALES</u>	<u>FEMALES</u>
Chirakkal	28347	4463	18.3	2.7
Kottayam	23605	4644	23.0	4.3
Kurumbranad	33852	5267	20.0	3.2
1931				
	<u>Literate</u>		<u>Percentage in population</u>	
	<u>MALES</u>	<u>FEMALES</u>	<u>MALES</u>	<u>FEMALES</u>
Chirakkal	55882	16447	29.4	7.9
Kottayam	43387	15196	34.8	10.9
Kurumbranad	50780	9987	25.2	4.8

Literacy Table⁸⁵

The legacy of this has been well documented with the glorification of Kerala's literacy stats for men, women, all religions and all castes—the Kottayam district boasting 100% literacy.

Rising literacy rates led to the founding of communal and political papers and an interest in politics. Kerala has but 3.5% of India's population and yet 8.5% of daily newspapers in India are written in Malayalam.⁸⁶ At the turn of the century, reading rooms became popular serving tea, providing newspapers, and a meeting point for members of the community to discuss politics. As Dilip Menon notes, "Through the reading rooms, newspapers and tea shops a whole new world was imagined, and discussions built up a collective memory of organization, hours, more wages and less

⁸⁵ Menon, D, 145.

⁸⁶ Jeffrey, *Politics Women*, 3.

rent...an instrumental edge was given to these efforts as literacy was linked with political awareness.”⁸⁷

Awareness of caste practices was used both to reform problems from within (such as the plight of *anterjanams* and breakups of the *Nayar tharavadukal*) and to provide a transcendent identity that deserved to be protected (an “Ezhava Shiva” as opposed to a “Brahmin Shiva”). Thus, the period of social reform is marked by the founding of communal groups in all religions and castes of Kerala. As Arunima explains, “the newly reborn caste identity was to give its members a unity and sense of purpose in combating the injustice of the old order.”⁸⁸ Ezhavas organized the Sri Narayana Dharma Paripalana Yogam (SNDP) in 1903 and dedicated the organization for the advancement of Ezhavas and the promotion of Sri Narayana Guru’s teachings. The *Nayar* Service Society was created in 1914 and was key in bringing about the *Nayar* Act of 1925 reforming matrilineal inheritance. Christian and Muslim groups also flourished. The Keraliya Catholic Mahajana Sabha (KCMS) formed in 1918 and centered its activities on the *Deepika* Newspaper, which remains the daily for Romo-Syrians in Kerala. The organization changed its name to All Kerala Catholic Congress (AKCC) in 1930 and has become the mouthpiece of Romo-Syrian community. Caste consciousness also provided a base for class organizing and unions. Kerala is famous for becoming the first government in the world to democratically elect a Communist government in 1957. The appeal of communism to roughly half of the Kerala population has its roots in Kerala’s unique caste and religious history, the cultural norm of education, and class/land struggles.

⁸⁷ Menon, D., 147.

⁸⁸ Arunima, 164.

Syrian Christians had an advantage in organizing both socially and politically compared to other religions because of the extensive network of churches and the hierarchical organizing structure: parish, diocese, and archdiocese. For example, before British colonization, Syrian Christians had wealth and status but lacked executive power or representation in government. In response, Syrian Christians founded the Travancore and Cochin Christian Association and were quickly successful in gaining representation.⁸⁹ Archbishops used circulars to promote a unified Christian political platform, churches become rally organizing sites, and village priests use the pulpit to consolidate vote banks.

While it is true that “community” became an important rallying point to groups of Keralites, “women” did not. As J. Devika argues, Kerala’s social reform era coincided with the emergence of the gendered Individual. Instead of caste reform invoking an East/spiritual and West/material comparison as Partha Chatterjee argues occurred in Bengal, caste reform in Kerala provoked a self evaluation—a redoing of patriarchy informed by a modern ideology of gender.⁹⁰ I will take up J. Devika’s argument further in the next chapter. What is important to understand now is that during this period of social reform and the building of caste/political consciousness: “women’s helplessness and subservience were increasing among all; but there did not grow up solidarity amongst women divided by both class and caste. Neither social reform movements nor radical politics addressed these questions.”⁹¹

⁸⁹ Jeffrey, *Decline*, 196.

⁹⁰ Devika “Negotiating Women’s Social Space: Public Debates on Gender in Early Modern Kerala, India” *Inter-Asia Cultural Studies*. 7, 1. (2006): 46.

⁹¹ Saradamoni, 158.

The Syrian Christian Community since Independence

Following the years of social reform in Kerala, politics and public life became a staple of everyday life within the Syrian Christian community. The formation of the Kerala state on November 1st, 1956 was made on linguistic lines. Malabar, Cochin and Travancore were united into one territory, while the southern Tamil speaking district, Kanyakumari, was ceded to Tamil Nadu and the Malayalam speaking Kasaragod district, formerly part of Karnataka, was given to Kerala. Thanks to education and Malayalam print culture, a united linguistic identity was created and able to live beside notions of religious and caste based community. Religion and a Malayalee ethnicity did not erase each other.⁹² Increasingly, it was class identities that seemingly became the social organizing system of Kerala. However, one of the overarching themes of this dissertation is that these class identities have a caste and racial basis in Kerala's past and communal public consciousness.

Voter turnout is historically extremely high in Kerala. Yet dismissals of ministries and the inability for parties to maintain majorities plagued early Kerala ministries. Between 1948-52, Travancore elected five ministries and Cochin elected four. From 1952 to 1957, no one party could hold a majority. Kerala was to wait until the 1970s under C. Achutha Menon to finally experience a ministry that completed the full five year term. The first majority elected state government was EMS Namboodiripad's 1957 Communist ministry. The ministry initiated agricultural, tenant, and education reform. The Communist coalition government drafted and introduced the Kerala Education Bill in July 1957. The bill provoked widespread protests from the Syrian Christian community. As the Syrian Christians controlled private education in the state,

⁹² Arunima, G. "Imagining Communities" *Indian Economic Social History Review*, 43, no 63 (2006): 13.

education reform would adversely affect their class status. Led by clergy members, the Christian community organized to keep control within the hands of minority school management. Educational reform was painted as an attack on a minority way of life. Article 30 (1) of the Indian constitution protects minority run educational institutions and this right has become a rallying point against government reforms concerning the colleges and requirements in schools. I argue in this dissertation that this particular minority right has set up a division between secular religious schools that allow students of all religions to obtain a moral education, and secular state schools that are seen as devoid of moral teachings. I take up the issue of minority rights under article 30 (1) and simultaneous privileges of the Romo-Syrian community in detail in chapters 5 and 6.

The Communist ministry also introduced the Agrarian Relations bill which was opposed by the NSS and the landed elite. Since the late 19th Century, Kerala had been moving from a feudal to capitalist agricultural economy. The Communist party was, at the same time, very successful in organizing tenants and agricultural laborers. The Land Policy Committee of 1950 fixed the ceiling one could own at thirty acres of paddy. The 1956 Agrarian Relations bill halved that amount to fifteen acres of paddy or coconut. It also provided security to tenants and made evictions illegal. In essence, the land reform bills sought to curb the power amassed by forward castes through the centuries. Opposition to the both bills brought the state to a standstill in the summer of 1959 during the *vimochana samaram*, or liberation struggle. The *vimochana samaram* was so successful that it eventually ushered in President's Rule in Kerala and dismissal of the

communist ministry (chapter 5).⁹³ However, it also set the stage for subsequent political battles between the “Christian Congress Party” and the atheist Communist Party.

Today, Syrian Christians still dominate private education and the clergy remain outspoken opponents to Communist education reform. Since the majority of Kerala private institutions are under Christian management, the Christian community is often times advised on issues concerning education through pastoral letters from Archbishops and called upon by church hierarchy to participate in meetings, protests, marches, and rallies to advance education and community interests.

Although very advanced in social welfare, the state of Kerala is rife with paradoxes. Kerala has a very high literacy rate, low infant mortality rate, excellent health care and education system, an average later marrying age for women, and a population where females outnumber males. It also is a state that widely practices birth control. Education of females in Kerala became a precedent for India. Kerala women (almost all classes) are educated and have entered the workforce. In fact, the amount of education has become correlated to a girl’s marriagability with offers being made/rejected based on how educated the girl is. The table below records some of the most often quoted

⁹³ It is suspected that the CIA aided the protests and subsequent dismissal of the communist ministry. See Pillai, Govindan P. “Historical Significance of the First Kerala Ministry.” http://www.firstministry.kerala.gov.in/pg_article.htm

statistics boasting Kerala women's high status:

Table 1: Development Indicators: Kerala and India

Indicator	Sex	Period	Kerala	India
1. Expectation of Life at Birth	F	1995-96	72.4	61.7
	M		67.2	60.6
2. Birth Rate		1998	18.2	26.4
3. Death Ratio		1998	6.4	9.0
4. Sex Ratio		2001	1058	933
5. Infant Mortality Rate (per 1000 live birth)		1998	16	72
6. Maternal Mortality Rate (per 1000 live births)		1990	1.3	5.7
7. Literacy Rate as % of total adults	F	2001	87.9	54.2
	M		94.2	75.8
Scheduled Caste	F	1991	74.0	24.0
	M		85.2	50.0
Scheduled Tribe	F	1991	51.0	18.0
	M		63.4	40.7
8. Total Fertility Rate		1991	1.8	3.6
9. Female Age at marriage		1994	22.3	19.4
10. M/F Age Specific Death Rates (age 0-4)		1990-91	1.2	0.9

Kerala Statistics⁹⁴

Yet at the same time, Kerala's suicide rate far outranks every other state in India—three times the national average and 50% more than the second highest state, Karnataka.⁹⁵ Unemployment rates are also very high despite (or maybe because of) an educated population. Alcohol abuse is rampant and a social problem that many have blamed for continued unemployment and suicides. Despite the believed high status of

⁹⁴ Eapen, Mridul and Praveena Kodoth. "Family Structure, Women's Education and Work: Re-Examining the High Status of Women in Kerala." *Centre for Development Studies, Working Paper Series 341*, 33.

⁹⁵ Halliburton, Murphy. "Suicide: A Paradox of Development in Kerala." *Economic and Political Weekly*. (Sept 1998): 2341.

women in Kerala, many women do not feel empowered/exercise autonomy. Aleyamma Vijayan of *Sakhi Women's Resource Center* has argued that while many women are educated, few take part in household decision making.⁹⁶ Kerala ranks first in India in crimes against women including rape, molestation, and domestic violence (Chapter 3).⁹⁷ Family planning and birth control is largely done through hysterectomies, not through education or contraception. Women and men function in the public space in a highly structured way—sex segregated spaces dictate women's mobility and regulate morality by controlling women's bodies and perpetuating rigid definitions of feminine norms (chapters 3 and 4). Since the major indicators of women's well being are and have been well above the rest of India, the dominant understanding of status of women in Kerala has become entrenched in popular perception. Any contrary evidence can be ignored as an aberration. Crime against women in Kerala is often attributed to reporting bias—that is, there is the assumption that Kerala's high literacy rates cause literate women to report violence at a higher rate than in other states. Yet there is nothing to suggest that the education of women has led to empowerment. Therefore, Kerala's "gender paradox" has been the object of new feminist studies. In my discussion of the everyday lived experiences of race, caste, class, gender and religion, I too will contextualize Kerala's gender paradox.

Kerala's welfare state has been in crisis over the years and many educated citizens face unemployment in the state. In recent years, economic development has stagnated and many households depend on the remittances from overseas workers. Because of a lack of white collar jobs, many Keralites have migrated to Gulf countries, to Malaysia,

⁹⁶ Aleyamma Vijayan. Lecture in English. June 12, 2007.

⁹⁷ "Alarming Rise in Crime Against Women." *India Express*. March 9, 2008.

Europe, Australia and the United States. A staggering 3.75 million Keralites are overseas workers.⁹⁸ Today, it is not uncommon to see these Non-resident Indian (NRI) dollars funneled back into Kerala in the Kottayam district—NRI dollars sent home from migrated families have funded the construction of new mansions in Kottayam district villages and added to burgeoning construction companies delivering anything from marble flooring to handmade furniture. The fracturing of families, older members of families being sent to nursing homes (once unknown, but now expanding in Kerala), new restrictions on migration, and class expectations of returning migrants has gradually been changing the face of Kerala society.⁹⁹ Alcoholism and pressure to meet financial expectations have been correlated to the rising rate of suicide in the state—the impacts of which are only just being researched by scholars.

Syrian Christians today are largely self employed and only ¼ of Syrians work as laborers. In other words, they are a very affluent community in Kerala. They are businessmen and entrepreneurs—many involved in banking and small business. They lead all other communities in land ownership and are known for cultivating cash crops: tea, rubber, and coconut. Syrian Christians constitute the largest community of migrants from Kerala to the US.¹⁰⁰ According to one source, 85% of Keralites in US are Christian.¹⁰¹ Scholars attribute the disproportionate presence of Christians among the Keralites in the United States to the nursing professionals who tend to be from the Christian community. Syrian Christian women are encouraged to go for higher education

⁹⁸ Zachariah, KC, ET Mathew and S. Irudaya Rajan. “Impact of Migration on Kerala’s Economy and Society” *Center for Development Studies Working Paper Series*. 297 (October, 1999): 8.

⁹⁹ See Kurien, Prema. *Kaleidoscopic Ethnicity: International Migration and the Reconstruction of Community Identities in India*. New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 2002.

¹⁰⁰ Zachariah, KC, 26-9.

¹⁰¹ George, Sheeba. *When Women Come First: Gender and Class in Transnational Migration*. (Berkeley: California University Press, 2005, 39.

and are known for entering into the fields of nursing and teaching. Syrian Christians have a lower infant mortality than other communities and 86% of all deliveries are in hospitals (compared to Muslims 49%, Ezhavas 69%, *and Nayars* 59%).¹⁰² Syrian Christians also manage 95% of old age homes which have mushroomed over Kerala in the past 2 decades. Of one-hundred twenty-six old age homes in the state, thirty-six are in Kottayam district.¹⁰³

Syrian Christian's presence in Kerala as social welfare providers—from educational institutions, orphanages, women's homes, and elderly care—are appreciated and lauded by many sections of society. Syrian Christians are a well respected religious minority highly integrated into the social fabric of Kerala society. However, it is their affluence, engendered and maintained through their caste and racial privileges, that what makes their commitment to social welfare possible.

In the chapters that follow, I will contextualize these complexities with a sustained analysis and critique of Syrian Christian upper-caste-, Aryan racial-, religious minority- and upper-class based identities. This intersectional analysis of the Syrian Christian community will provide a nuanced understanding of the way in which historically and culturally constructed social identities are constituted through a variety of acts that can both oppress and empower subjects.

¹⁰² Zachariah, KC, 18.

¹⁰³ Zachariah, KC, 37.

Chapter 3

From Chattas to Churidars: Women's Dress, Secularism and Sex-Segregated Public Spaces

In this chapter, I examine how the “act” of wearing clothes is an intersectional social process. Additionally, I reveal the way in which sartorial choices project caste, class, gender, race and religious affiliations, simultaneously. Women's dress and ornamentation are distinctly tied to notions of community identity. Donning a particular dress indicates a distinction from other communities and identification with one's own community. In this way, dress binds us to particular communal norms. It also makes us identifiable to those norms. Dress is therefore an effective means of non-verbal communication that manifests cultural values and exercises social control through a projection of identity.¹⁰⁴

I begin this chapter with a discussion of how women in Kerala India once wore very particular garments depicting their race, class, caste and religious affiliations. Social divisions, in other words, were manifested through certain clothing mandates for women. One of these mandates prohibited lower-caste women from covering the upper-half of their bodies. In the 19th century, lower-caste Hindu and Christian women challenged these clothing regulations and adopted the communal clothing of upper-caste Hindus. The Breast Cloth Movement, as it became known as, eventually led to sweeping social change and spearheaded reform movements into the 20th century.

Despite the success of the movement, communal dress was suddenly abandoned in favor of the pan-Indian *sari* by the time of Indian independence in 1947. I argue that

¹⁰⁴ Arthur, Linda B. “Introduction” in *Religion, Dress and the Body*. Linda B. Arthur, ed. (New York: Berg, 1999). 3.

the way in which secularism served the nation-building and modernizing project of upper-caste elites is central to understanding this sartorial change. Therefore, in the second part of this chapter, I examine the relation between secularism and the *sari*.

With the adoption of the *sari*, the visible division between castes, races and religions in the public sphere became a gendered division alone. That is, while communal clothing divided Hindus, Muslims, Christians, castes and races, the *sari* only divided men from women. Therefore, particular notions of female respectability—drawing from past understandings of sexual morality—shaped Kerala’s changing public sphere. While women were visibly homogenized in the *sari*, I argue that caste, religious, and racial divisions of the past did not disappear. Rather, they were reworked and redeployed through the ideal “good woman” embodied in the secular modern and *sari*-clad citizen.

I conclude this chapter with a discussion of the recent sartorial change from the *sari* to the *churidar*, a drawstring pant, kurta and shawl popular today with young Kerala women. Despite the *churidar*’s popularity, I explain how notions of “respectable women’s wear” remain embedded in the folds of the *sari*. For this reason, I argue that the *churidar* will not and cannot replace the *sari* in the way that the *sari* once replaced women’s communal clothing in Kerala, India.

Part I: Clothing and the Projection of Identities

Anthropologist Emma Tarlo argues that clothing matters especially because of the role it plays in perceptions of identities. Clothes are often perceived as expressions and extensions of the wearer. The proximity to the body gives clothing a special potential for

such elaboration.¹⁰⁵ However, this elaboration is rarely ever about belonging to one social category alone, but to many different social categories simultaneously. Clothing thus represents the intersections of the multiple social identities enacted by and constituting individuals in their daily-life practices. This phenomenon is perhaps most aptly illustrated in women's religious dress. As feminist scholars on religion and dress have correctly noted, clothing regulations for women are often tied to patriarchal religious moves to control women's sexuality.¹⁰⁶ Thus, for women, proper feminine behavior is enacted through the donning of religious clothing. A "good" woman wearing the dress of her religion would be easily recognizable. Conversely, a "bad" woman could be easily placed in her religious community and reflect badly upon it. In order to remain in adherence with religious *and* gender norms defined by (male members of) the community, clothing dictates often become something that women subscribe to. Arguably, nowhere is the relation between intersectional identities and dress as fittingly illustrated as in the state of Kerala, India.

Prior to social reforms of the 20th century, Kerala practiced forms of untouchability unseen in other Indian states. Low castes were not to come within sixty feet of upper-castes. Separate temples, schools, roads, and prohibitions on inter-caste eating completed the segregation of castes. These regulations helped to maintain social divisions between castes. As J. Devika explains

Each group had specific codes of conduct, systems of alliances and regulations for everyday life. Eating, dressing, talking—just about

¹⁰⁵ Tarlo, Emma. *Clothing Matters: Dress and Identity in India*. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1996), 16.

¹⁰⁶ See Arthur, Linda "Introduction" in *Undressing Religion: Commitment and Conversion from a Cross-Cultural Perspective*. Linda B. Arthur, ed. (New York: Berg, 2000) and Graybirt, Beth and Linda B Arthur. "The Social Control of Women's Bodies in Two Mennonite Communities" in *Religion, Dress and the Body*. Linda B. Arthur, ed. (New York: Berg, 1999).

everything signified one's position in the social hierarchy, and one's difference from others.¹⁰⁷

The Mappila Muslim women wore a dark blue *mundu*, a long cloth covering the legs, wrapped and tucked at the waist. In addition, they wore long blouse and a black scarf to cover, and five-eight gold earrings in helix of ears.¹⁰⁸ White dress was a mandate for Brahmins of Kerala according to dictates written in Sankara's sixty-four *Anaacharams*.¹⁰⁹ As the custom evolved, other upper-caste women in Kerala society also began to wear white because of their relation to the *Namboodiri* Brahmins of Kerala (chapter 4). *Namboodiri* Brahmin women traditionally wore a white/cream colored garment known as *rouka*—a cloth tied below the arms and the breasts. Gold ornaments were permitted. *Namboodiri* women were restricted from leaving the house without a chaperone and a palm umbrella to cover their faces from others. These umbrellas were also part of the dress code, reserved for *Namboodiri* Brahmins.

¹⁰⁷ Devika, J. *Engendering Individuals: The Language of Re-Forming in Early Twentieth Century Keralam*. (Delhi: Orient Longman, 2007), 1-2.

¹⁰⁸ Kurien, Prema. *Kaleidoscopic Ethnicity: International Migration and the Reconstruction of Community Identities in India*. (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 2002), 77.

¹⁰⁹ Menachery, George. "Social Life and Customs of the St. Thomas Christians in the Pre-Diamper Period." *The Life and Nature of the St. Thomas Christian Church in the Pre-Diamper Period*. (Kochi: Liturgical Research Centre Publications, 2000), 197.



“A Nambudiri Lady and a Bride”¹¹⁰

¹¹⁰ “A Nambudiri Lady and a Bride” (image). *Travancore Pictorial Souvenir*, 1931. Kerala University Library.



“A Group of Nambuthiri Girls With Ornaments”¹¹¹

Nayar women, also upper-caste, wore the same cream colored *mundu*. The dress of the *Nayar* caste was somewhat similar to the *Namboodiri* Brahmin dress. The origins of this similarity can be traced to the inter-caste marriages between *Namboodiri* first sons and *Nayar* women.

¹¹¹ “A Group of Nambuthiri Girls With Ornaments” (image). in Iyer, Anantha Krishna LK, *Tribes and Castes of Cochin. Vol III.* (Delhi: Cosmo Publications, 1912).



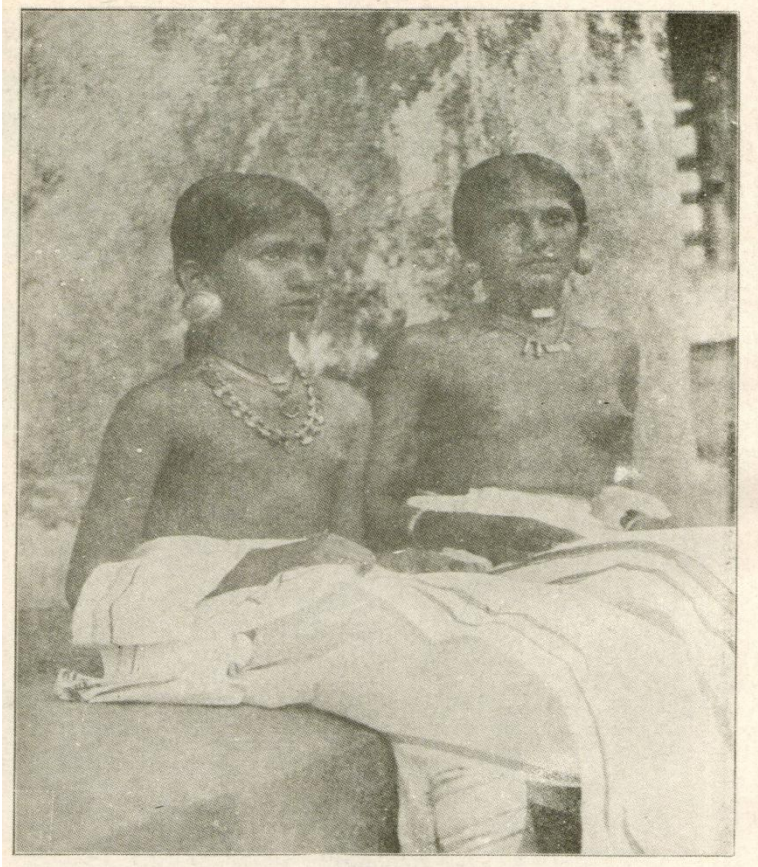
“A Group of Nair High School Girls, Trivandrum.”¹¹²



“Nair girls Pounding Paddy”¹¹³

¹¹² “A Group of Nair High School Girls, Trivandrum.” *Travancore Pictorial Souvenir, 1931*. Kerala University Library.

¹¹³ “Nair girls Pounding Paddy” *Kerala Council for Historical Research*. Online archives. <http://www.keralahistory.ac.in/>



“Two Nayar Girls with Ornaments”¹¹⁴

As seen from these pictures, *Nayar* women were also allowed to wear a breast cloth, a long broad cloth that was worn across the breast and over the shoulder.

Syrian Christians were documented by the Portuguese in the early 17th century as dressing similarly to upper-caste Hindus.¹¹⁵ As the Syrians were viewed as forward caste, they too were socially allowed to wear white. Their intermediary status as purifiers to the defiling low caste touch also gave them a role in society that placed them closer to the purity of Brahmins than to the pollution of the untouchables (chapter 4). Syrian Christian women used the white *munda* or *thuni* similar to the *Nayars*, however, it was tied

¹¹⁴ “Two Nayar Girls with Ornaments” (image). in Iyer, Anantha Krishna LK, *Tribes and Castes of Cochin. Vol II.* (Delhi: Cosmo Publications, 1912).

¹¹⁵ Devika, 254.

differently than the *Nayars* with a fanned tail.¹¹⁶ In the early 19th century, Syrian Christian women wore a jacket known as the *kuppayam*.¹¹⁷ However, women's jackets gave way to the use a white *chatta*, a stitched v-neck shirt. Over generations, the length of the sleeve has changed, but since the late 19th century, the combination of the *chatta* and the *munda* became the norm. This combination is known as the *chatta/thuni*.



Romo-Syrian women pilgrims at Mylayatoor.¹¹⁸

¹¹⁶ *thuni* translates to “cloth.”

¹¹⁷ Syrian Christian priests' vestments are to this day called a *kuppayam*.

¹¹⁸ “Romo-Syrian Women Pilgrims at Mylayatoor.” Thomas, Sonja, 2008



Chatta/thuni with kavani.¹¹⁹

Elongated lobes and piercing the top of the ear for large gold hooped earrings called *kunnika* worn after marriage were also specific to Syrian Christians.

¹¹⁹ “Alleyamma Nagaroor in chatta/thuni with kavani” (image.). Picture courtesy of Theempalangad family.



Elongated lobes and kunnika of a Romo-Syrian woman.¹²⁰



Detail of kunnika.¹²¹

Like the *Nayar* breast cloth, Syrian Christian women also wore a cloth covering over the breast known as the *kavani*. During a brief stint in the early 1930s, colored and patterned *kavanis* were available. Yet as eighty-seven year old Threshamma explained, “nobody

¹²⁰ “Elongated lobes and kunnika of a Romo-Syrian woman” (image). Picture courtesy of Moolayil family.

¹²¹ “Detail of Kunnika” (image). Picture courtesy of Thekkekuttu family, 2008.

wanted those colored *kavanis* because the set [cream with gold border] was always fashionable. It was our tradition to have white.”¹²²

The fact that the *Namboodiri rouka*, *Nayar munda*/breast cloth and the Syrian Christian *thuni* and *kavani* were all garments made from a seamless cloth had another relation to upper-caste Hinduism. Unstitched and draped clothing represented auspiciousness and purity in that it was considered to hold fewer pollutants than stitched clothing.¹²³ In contrast, Muslim dress was seen as impure in that the *salwar kamize* or *churidar* was stitched. In her ethnography on dress in North India, Emma Tarlo explains that the division between stitched/Muslim and draped/Hindu clothing was never clear cut as Hindus wore stitched clothing centuries before Muslim migration to North India. The religious division between stitched and unstitched clothing rigidified only in the 19th century when it became “traditional” to use unstitched clothing during Hindu ritual performances.¹²⁴ Because of so-called “religious tradition,” the adoption of unstitched white clothing by Syrian Christians prior to the social reform movements denoted an association to a upper-caste Hindu identity and a privileging of religions associated with upper-caste Hinduism separated from low-caste Christian converts and Muslim communities.

In addition, as differentiation of groups by dress was a gendered practice, wearing of *chatta/thuni* was a passage to womanhood. After marriage, Romo-Syrian women donned the *chatta/thuni*. In the early 20th century, most Romo-Syrian women were

¹²² Threshamma. Interview by author in Malayalam. Sept 7, 2007.

¹²³ Cohn, Bernard. *Colonialism and its Forms of Knowledge: The British in India*. (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1996), 130. See also Bayly, C.A. “The Origins of Swadeshi (home industry): Cloth and Indian Society, 1700-1930” in *The Social Life of Things: Commodities in Cultural Perspective*. Arjun Appadurai, ed. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1986), 285-322.

¹²⁴ Tarlo 29.

The Muslim women’s dress in Kerala was not the *churidar* as in North India. Rather, they wore a dark blue *munda*, a black scarf and a long sleeved blouse/jacket stitched with red thread.

educated up until the fourth standard. After fourth standard, women were to stay at home, learn domestic duties, and to marry soon after. At this time, young women switched from wearing a small towel to the chatta/thuni. Many participants described this shift as a rite of passage from girlhood to womanhood, to new domestic responsibility, and to sanctioned sexuality through marriage:

When I started the 4th standard, I wore chatta/thuni. Before that I wore a towel. That's how it was back then, we didn't have much. Both males and females wore a towel until the age [of puberty].¹²⁵

I never wore a pavada (skirt) and blouse, it was only 4 chakram for a chatta/thuni.¹²⁶ There were chatta for children but they were different and made of only one cloth. At 12 years old, I had to put the curry on and sweep before going to school. Right after I finished with school, I got married in chatta/thuni. I was the only one here so my days were filled with housework and housework is done in chatta/thuni.¹²⁷

Back in the day, all we had was chatta/thuni. Before that, they just wore munda with nothing on top. We all [boys and girls] went to school with towel. It was quite a sight because everyone was the same. Then, sometimes as young as 13 years old, women would get married and wear the chatta and munda.¹²⁸

Indeed, the chatta/thuni was given at marriage as part of a girl's dowry.

¹²⁵ Claramma. Interview by author in Malayalam. Dec 14, 2007.

¹²⁶ Chakram was currency of Travancore State prior to Indian Independence and uniform Indian currency.

¹²⁷ Chinamma, Interview by author in Malayalam. Jan 15, 2008.

¹²⁸ Achamma. Interview by author in Malayalam. Dec 17, 2007.



*"Syrian Christian Bride in Ancient Wedding Apparel and Ornaments"*¹²⁹

¹²⁹ "Syrian Christian Bride in Ancient Wedding Apparel and Ornaments (image) in *Kerala District Gazetteers*. Sreedhara Menon, ed. (Trivandrum: The Government Press, 1965), 291.



*"A Romo-Syrian Bride"*¹³⁰

¹³⁰ "A Romo-Syrian Bride" (image). in Iyer, Anantha Krishna LK, *Tribes and Castes of Cochin. Vol II.* (Delhi: Cosmo Publications, 1912).



*Young woman in chatta/thuni after marriage.*¹³¹

After marriage, it was traditional for the youngest son to live in the family house with the aging parents. Older sons were settled by the father onto nearby plots of land either bought by the family or inherited and partitioned between sons. While not necessarily joint families as the *Nayar* caste practiced through large estates (the *tharavadu*), this situation did make the Romo-Syrian family network extremely close so that it functioned similar to the joint family—hierarchies included. Once married, daughters were no longer considered part of the family but belonged to the husband's family. Married women were the lowest on the family social hierarchy. Romo-Syrian married women were separated from all contact outside of their new family unless permitted by the in-laws. As related by a 93 year old Romo-Syrian woman who married

¹³¹ "Young Woman in Chatta/thuni After Marriage" (image). Courtesy of Moolyil family.

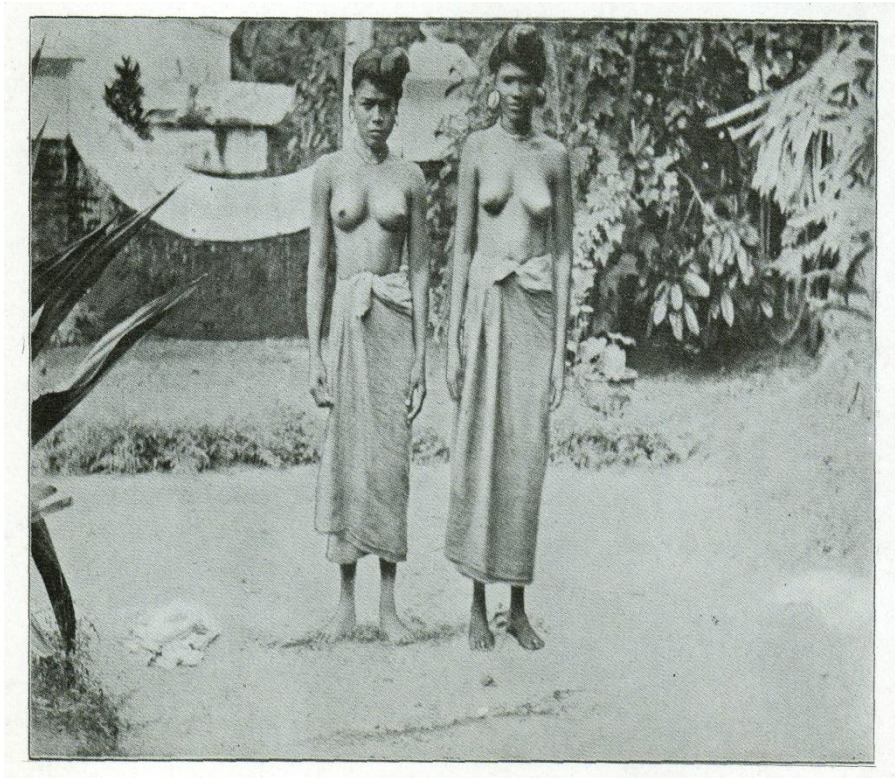
in 1934, “They wouldn’t let me go anywhere, not even to my younger sisters’ marriages...Every Sunday I could go to church, but my husband would say ‘you can only go if you ask me for permission.’ The minute you tell them [in-laws] you’re going, they will say ‘the second mass ends, you should be home.’”¹³² A Romo-Syrian woman in the public space during times other than mass or religious functions would be easily recognizable. Dress bound women to cultural, caste based and community norms. It also made women identifiable to those norms. A Romo-Syrian woman betraying social custom was easily placed by family and the community to her caste and religion. Caste and religious identities for Kerala women were embodied in the clothing that they wore. Thus, dress became something that women actively subscribed to because it provided both an individual gender identity and religious and caste belonging.

The *chatta/thuni* also signaled a racial identity. As I will discuss in chapter 4, there is a slippage between race and caste in South India. The upper-castes are considered to be Aryan, while the lower castes are Dravidian. In this racial hierarchy, Aryans are assumed to have fair skin. White garments became an embodiment of racial purity and set differences between “polluting” women. In comparison, low-caste women were not allowed the same grade of white cloth as *Namboodiris*, *Nayars* and Syrian Christians. Low-caste women including *Ezhavas*, *Pulayas* and *Parayas* traditionally wore the *calla malla* or stone necklace to denote subservience and eventually became a symbol of slavery.¹³³ Further, low-caste women were forbidden to cover their breasts with

¹³² Mariamma. Interview by author in Malayalam. Feb 22, 2008.

¹³³ Gangadharan, TK. *Evolution of Kerala History and Culture*. (Calicut: Calicut University Central, 2003), 293

clothing and in some cases, were required to wear only soiled clothing and prohibited from washing their clothes.¹³⁴



“The Izhuva Women”¹³⁵

As upper-caste Syrians traditionally had their clothes washed by low-caste Hindu and Christian women, the whiteness of clothing (and skin) was considered a privilege. In this way, clothing and ornamentation quite literally signaled difference by color.

White/cream and gold jewelry signifying purity and civilization while dirty clothes and stones symbolized pollution and closeness to the earth.

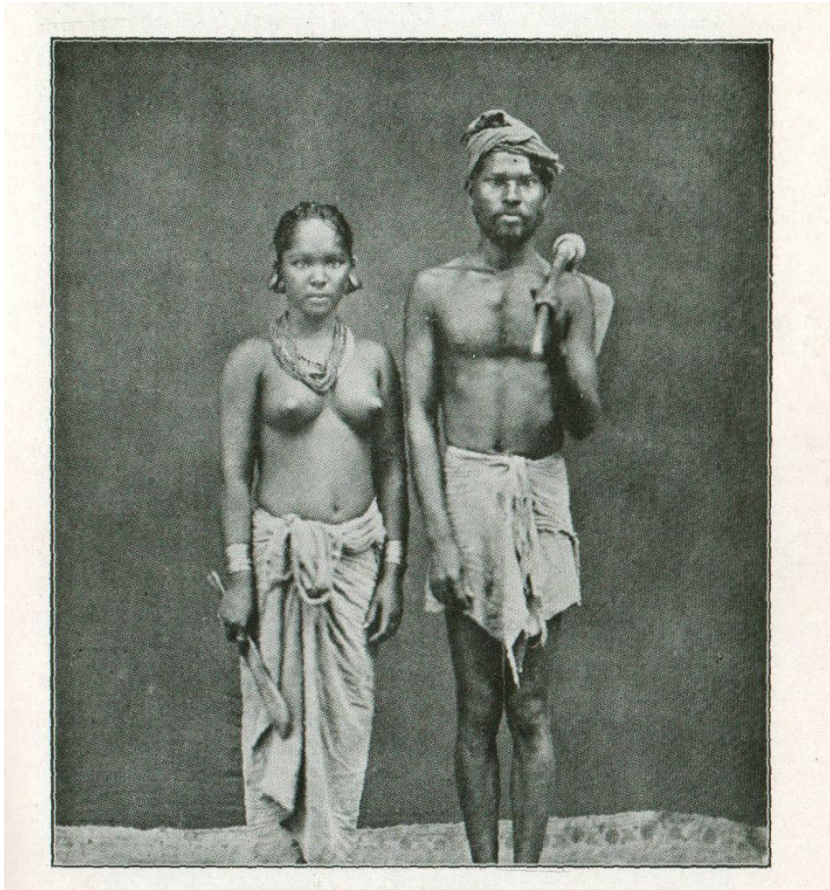
¹³⁴ Kurian, Mathew V. *The Caste Class Formation: A Case Study of Kerala*. (Delhi: BR Publishing Corporation, 1986), 13.

¹³⁵ “The Izhuva Women” (image). in Iyer, Anantha Krishna LK, *Tribes and Castes of Cochin. Vol I*. (Delhi: Cosmo Publications, 1912).



“The Paraya Women” ¹³⁶

¹³⁶ “The Paraya Women” (image). in Iyer, Anantha Krishna LK, *Tribes and Castes of Cochin. Vol I.* (Delhi: Cosmo Publications, 1912).



“The Pulayan and his Wife Going for Field Work”¹³⁷

Not only were caste distinctions embodied in clothing/ornamentation then, but also the “natural” division of labor that could justify the enslavement of certain peoples (*Pulayas* and *Parayas*) at the behest of the landlords (*Namboodiris*, *Nayars*, and Syrian Christians). The Syrian Christians were accepted as upper-castes because their use of white garments and gold ornaments was not considered mimicking upper-castes, but accepted by the Hindu upper-castes to be part of their tradition. That is, Syrian Christians use of upper-caste garments were accepted by Hindu upper-castes as their birthright. This was not the case with low-caste Hindus attempting to wear cream/white clothing of the *Nayars* and *Namboodiris* and came to head with the 19th century breast cloth controversy.

¹³⁷ “The Pulayan and his Wife Going for Field Work” (image). in Iyer, Anantha Krishna LK, *Tribes and Castes of Cochin*. Vol I. (Delhi: Cosmo Publications, 1912).

The Breast Cloth Controversy

In the 19th century, British missionaries were appalled by the bare-breasted custom. Bare-breastedness in Kerala was documented by the Portuguese upon their arrival to the Kerala coast in the 16th Century.¹³⁸ Bare-breastedness was thought to be a sign of subservience to God. In the presence of the royal family, uncovered breasts a token of obeisance.¹³⁹ Not only did women uncover their upper half, but men as well. Many castes also practiced bare-breastedness—Syrian Christian women included.



“A rural *Nayar* girl in simple attire.”¹⁴⁰

¹³⁸ Devika, *Engendering*, 254.

¹³⁹ Yesudas, RN. *A People's Revolt in Travancore: A Backward Class Movement for Social Freedom*. (Trivandrum: Kerala Historical Society, 1975), 15.

¹⁴⁰ “A rural *Nayar* girl in simple attire. Radical changes in costume have taken place in recent years” (image). Iyer, Krishna LA. *Social History of Kerala, Vol II—The Dravidians*. (Madras: Book Center Publications, 1970), 18.



Bare breasted Romo-Syrian woman.¹⁴¹

Much was written on naked women/sexuality during the British colonial period. Bernard Cohn argues in *Colonialism and Its Forms of Knowledge*, that clothing was one means of defining proper behavior of the colonized. While something such as the non-wearing of shoes was a rule that Europeans did not have to conform to, Indians often had to conform to European ideas of behavior through dress.¹⁴² In *Engendering Individuals*, J. Devika further argues that dress had become a tangible way to “correctly train” the population into modern individuals. She explains that covering the body not only transforms the community, but it transforms the individual by control over sexual

¹⁴¹ “Bare-breasted Romo-Syrian Woman” (image). Picture courtesy of Theempalangad family.

¹⁴² Cohn, Bernard. *Colonialism and Its Forms of Knowledge: The British in India*. (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1996), 134.

desire.¹⁴³ Surveillance over the sexual behavior of populations and the explosion of information on sexuality was a focus of imperial Europe as chronicled by Michel Foucault in *The History of Sexuality*. Discourse on sex became essential in order to regulate populations through the surveillance of “improper” sexuality of groups of peoples. Further, as Ann Stoler argues, 19th century Western European bourgeois sexuality was situated in the imperial landscape and thus the discourse of sexuality was articulated in and through the politics of race.¹⁴⁴ Studies on nakedness in the colonies were not only focused on perceived improper sexuality of native women, but also served to make the colonized knowable and quantifiable in relation to the colonizing. Emma Tarlo thus rightly explains in her book, *Clothing Matters*, that early (male) ethnographers scholarly interest in dress in India was either an interest in nakedness or an understanding of dress as cultural costuming.¹⁴⁵ “Traditional costumes” of cultures fixes identity in time and space and thus makes it easy to understand the colonized as a primitive race. Further, as Bernard Cohn argues, studies in nakedness only supported the colonial rhetoric linking colonized people to savagery. The British were justified in colonizing in order to teach correct social modesty through dress. During British colonialism, to improve the female through dress was to improve civilization.¹⁴⁶ Women and their relation to clothing/unclothing became the referent around which discussions of social morality revolved.

¹⁴³ Devika, 264.

¹⁴⁴ Stoler, Ann Laura. *Race and the Education of Desire: Foucault's History of Sexuality and the Colonial Order of Things*. Durham: Duke University Press, 1995.

¹⁴⁵ Tarlo, Emma. *Clothing Matters: Dress and Identity in India*. (Chicago: University Of Chicago Press, 1996).

¹⁴⁶ Cohn, 138.

The breast-cloth agitation in Kerala, India exemplified the way in which clothing/nakedness functioned as a marker of civility and sexual morality during the British colonial period. The agitation originated largely from the Nadar community of Kerala. In the 19th Century, British missionaries converted thousands of Nadars to Protestant Christianity. Like the *Ezhuvas*, *Pulayas* and *Parayas*, the Nadar women were forbidden from covering their breasts and if in the public space, were bare-breasted. In the late 19th and early 20th centuries, Nadar Christian converts, influenced by British missionaries, began to agitate for the right to cover their breasts. British Resident Col. Monroe, also known as the father of Christian missions of Travancore, was a supporter of missionary social involvement and thus supported the breast cloth movement. During his tenure that began in 1810, British Resident Col. Monroe issued a circular order allowing converted Christian women to cover with the Syrian Christian jacket, lifted poll taxes on Christians, and supported the education of converts. Based on this order, British missionaries sewed loose jackets for converted women. In a letter to the British Resident in 1859, Rev. F. Baylis stated

I have also always told the Christian converts to be content with wearing the jacket, the use of which we have tried by every means to encourage, and I am happy to say that during last year about 600 of these jackets (which are not at all like the Rowkey worn by the Brahmin women) were made chiefly by the girls in our schools, and bought at the full cost of material by the women in our congregations.¹⁴⁷

The Nadar women did not don the Syrian Christian *kuppayam* (jacket) as ordered in Monroe's circular, or missionary jackets. They instead preferred the breast cloth worn by *Nayar* Hindu women. To upper-caste Hindus, this was considered a challenge to the entire social system. Indeed, upper-caste Hindus appealed to the Maharani by arguing

¹⁴⁷ Yesudas, 182.

that if low-caste women used the upper-caste cloth, no distinction could be made between castes.¹⁴⁸ In other words, the mimicry of upper-caste customs would not be tolerated by the landed aristocratic upper-castes of Kerala.

In response to growing pressure from powerful upper-caste Hindus, the Maharani of Travancore on February 3rd, 1829 issued a proclamation prohibiting lower castes from wearing the *Nayar* breast cloth. On December 27th 1858, another proclamation was made by the Maharani again warning low-castes not to wear the cloth. However, the Maharani was in a tight position. Through treaties, the princely state of Travancore had become economically dependent on the British. As missionary pressure on the colonial and royal government increased, the Maharani was forced to declare on July 26th, 1859 that women could cover themselves, but not with the upper-caste cloth.¹⁴⁹ The reluctance to allow all women the right to cover with upper-caste garments reflected the growing public outrage on the blurring of caste distinctions and pressure on the state to keep those visible distinctions alive.

Upper-caste Hindus rebelled against the British dictates and the Maharani's acquiescence to missionary pressure. Lynchings, the public stripping of women wearing the breast cloth, and looting/burning of converted Christian homes made the breast cloth issue one of the most visible caste movements in India. From 1858-9 the violence reached its peak. The Diwan reported that three Nadar chapels and three schools were burned to the ground.¹⁵⁰ After many incidents of violence at the hands of upper-caste men, the Nadars revolted. Three-hundred and fifty Nadar men looted shops in the city of Kottar. On January 7th 1859, upper-caste Hindus retaliated and the violence spread

¹⁴⁸ Yesudas, 73.

¹⁴⁹ Yesudas, 118.

¹⁵⁰ Yesudas, 118.

through Travancore in a matter of days.¹⁵¹ The outrage and violence did not die down until in 1865 when the Maharani issued a proclamation allowing all castes to cover.

The core issue was not religion, but social privilege and exclusion as it related to *caste, religion* and *gender*. The agitation coincided with changing ideas of female modesty—one in which the body of a woman was able to be read as modest through covering. J. Devika suggests in her work that in a previous era, *covering* was considered immodest. Covering was an erotizing technique used to enhance the appeal of the female body and practiced by the sexualized temple dancers, the *devadasis*. Yet the social reform movements of Kerala gave way to new understandings of modesty and the female body. In this new social era, “covering the body is perceived as a way of ending the display of the body and therefore figured importantly in efforts to transform oneself by developing firmer control over sexual desire.”¹⁵²

The changing public space and the intersections of caste, religion and sexuality at the dawn of the 20th century introduced a discourse where organizing under a group/caste identity could galvanize a government toward social change. That is, the converted Nadars were able to use their caste identity to point out a social injustice based on caste. And this eventually led to social change ensured through proclamations from the Rani. By 1910, “dress began to signify new social hierarchies, and actuated a self-gaze that revealed to oneself one's inferiority.”¹⁵³ Such a gaze could unite the Nadars against caste abuses. It also simultaneously united upper-castes in their caste identity as well. British

¹⁵¹ Yesudas, 120.

¹⁵² Devika, 260. Additionally, high-caste hindu males stripping Nadar women's breast clothes signifies firmer control over their supposed sexual rights over low-caste women. See Kent, Eliza. *Converting Women: gender and Protestant Christianity in Colonial South India*. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005), 220.

¹⁵³ Devika, 257.

missionaries specifically set up schools for low-caste converts, and the British colonial government granted jobs to converted Christians. As a result “the mechanism designed to help low-caste students not only forced on them a heightened awareness of a particular kind of identity, but also made upper-caste students, who were not entitled to benefits, aware that such distinction could have concrete value.”¹⁵⁴ In other words, castes and religions across Kerala society were beginning to benefit politically from a heightened sense of caste identity. Such identities could be used to critique existing social inequalities (Nadar Breast Cloth Agitation). It could also critique practices within castes (*Namboodiri* widowhood/early marriages). And critiques could lead to an assurance of social change through new proclamations/laws. Thus, communal groups began to organize politically with the intent of social change in and through their communal identities.

In her research on Mappila Muslims, Ezhava Hindus and Syrian Christians, Prema Kurien describes how the period of social reform led to the “ethnicization” of the three groups. For the Mappila Muslims of North Kerala, Tipu Sultan’s regime engendered a new religious consciousness whereby religion became the fulcrum of group identity. Economic gains in the new capitalist economy and the social reform work of Sri Narayana Guru led to greater caste freedom for Ezhavas and a greater sense of caste and religious identity. And Syrian Christians under the British began to participate in modern institutions such as schools, setting themselves apart from other communities.¹⁵⁵ The breast-cloth movement was absolutely based on existing caste and religious identities that had solidified during this same era identified by Kurien. Being denied the right to cover

¹⁵⁴ Jeffrey, Robin. *Women, Politics and Well-Being: How Kerala Became a ‘Model.’* (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1992), 62.

¹⁵⁵ Kurien, 57-8.

as low-caste Christians actually solidified and unified peoples under a caste and religious identity. It is clear, then, that the “ethnicization” of peoples had significant political power.

However, after such a struggle to maintain/dismantle bodily difference from other castes, women of all castes and religions suddenly abandoned caste/religious clothing and opted for the *sari*. In less than a generation, the *chatta*, *rouka* and the *Nayar* breast cloth vanished from the public space. The arrival of roads to Kerala villages previously cut off from major cities and the new popularity of Malayalam films led to an increased demand for consumer goods that included demands for different types of clothing, material and for sewing machines. In the mid 20th century, textiles flooded the market and *thuni kadas* (textile shops) sprang up. One such shop in a village near Kanjarapalli was opened in 1952. The owner discussed how when the shop was first opened, *mundas/thuni* made from Japanese cloth or thin cotton JK cloth were the only items for sale. In a few years, however, wholesale shops in Bombay could transport cloth by boat all the way to Kottayam (city). From there, buses were able to travel to villages in the region. While it may have taken 2-3 days to get material, the demand was great enough to justify the cost. Further, the arrival of sewing machines to the village made sewing *sari* blouses part and parcel of the store’s services. Women once unfamiliar with the *sari* began to buy cloth by the hundreds. In fact, even after a 1957 flood damaged all the store’s material, the store owner was able to rebuild a larger store to cater to the growing demand for different fabrics/patterns.¹⁵⁶

Today, the *chatta/thuni* and *kunnika* are only seen on Romo-Syrian women in their eighties and nineties. It has literally become a dying tradition. The shift from the

¹⁵⁶ Amir. Interview by author in Malayalam. Feb 22, 2008.

chatta/thuni to the *sari* happened quickly and completely. That is women of *all* castes and *all* religions changed from their distinctive dresses to the *sari* and women throughout Kerala homogenized their religious/caste identities into one identity alone: their gender identity. Within families, older sisters and mothers were seen in *chatta/thuni* with younger sisters educated and wearing the *sari*.



“Chatta/thuni to the Sari”¹⁵⁷

¹⁵⁷ “Chatta/thuni to the Sari” (image) Used with permission courtesy of Chacko family.



“Generational changes” ¹⁵⁸

As such, the visibility of women profoundly changed. One could no longer say, “she is a Romo-Syrian woman,” “she is a Brahmin woman,” or “she is a low-caste woman.” But only, “She is a woman.” Why did this sudden shift take place? Further, what happened to Kerala’s communalism as expressed through dress? In other words, why was it seemingly abandoned when it historically proved to be such a powerful marker of unity and a political platform in which to fight for rights through a unified community identity?

Part II: The Secular Subject

Due to caste and social reform movements, Kerala society changed 180 degrees in only a few short decades. Take, for example, Syrian Catholic women’s involvement in public life. During the caste reform movements, handfuls of women began to participate

¹⁵⁸ “Generational changes” (image). Used with permission courtesy of Powathil family.

in public life setting the stage for the normalization of a new public sphere by the mid 1950s. Yet these women were social anomalies as it was not considered respectable or proper (especially in villages). As Akkamma Cheriyan, a prominent 1930s Syrian Christian politician remarked ‘In those days most men, especially Syrian Catholics, were reluctant to marry young women with college education.’¹⁵⁹ Yet by the second half of the 20th century, the education of females was the norm. Romo-Syrians, dominating the management of private educational institutions in the state (chapter 4), began sending their girls to school in large numbers. In only a few decades, many Romo-Syrian women began to delay marriage and motherhood in order to complete degrees. The change is reflected in the often referenced statistical data. Kerala became a model for women’s status despite low levels of economic development. Kerala has promising “development indicators,” or population statistics believed to indicate women’s status in society. According to Census data today, the birth rate in Kerala is 18.2% compared to the all India percentage of 26.4%. Kerala women outnumber men 1058 to every 1000—the all India sex ratio being 933 women to every 1000 men. Education of women is encouraged, and the state has a high rate of women’s literacy—87.9% compared to 54.2% in India. Education is attributed to a later marriage age for Kerala women (average of 22.3 as compared to 19.4 in all India), a proclivity for women to seek health care (including pre-natal care) and an inclination for women to seek jobs outside that state.¹⁶⁰

These abrupt changes coincide with emerging secular ideals promoted by the central government in postcolonial India. Scholars of secularism in India and its

¹⁵⁹ quoted in Devika, 221.

¹⁶⁰ Eapen, Mridul and Praveena Kodoth. “Family Structure, Women’s Education and Work: Re-Examining the High Status of Women in Kerala.” *Centre For Development Studies Working Paper Series*. (Nov 2002): 33.

particular formation have rightly noted the link between secularism and nationalism/modernity. As Sunder Rajan and Needham argue in *The Crisis of Secularism in India*, the dominant understanding of secularism separates the world into secular modern West and religious non-west mired in tradition (read as Islamic).¹⁶¹ Talal Asad explains in *Formations of the Secular* although “the West” as a cohesive entity has been critiqued, the fact that Europe operates as having a geographical outside presupposes the idea of space. For Asad, modernity as a political-economic project constructs categories of “secular” and “religious” with this presupposition. Non-modern peoples (Non-Western colonized peoples) are “invited to assess their adequacy” in relation to Europe and native identities remain mediated through the constructed categories of “secular” and “religious.”¹⁶² Thus, Rajan and Needham’s discussion of the division between the West and Non-West in and through secularism is not as simplified as it may appear. Indeed, colonialism depended on a tradition/modern dichotomy where “British” was equated to a group of people from a cohesive nation-state and was in opposition to “Indians” from non-unified princely states. This split between a unified nation and a group of princely states was exacerbated with the notion that Indian peoples were defined in relation to each other through religion—Indians were either Hindu or Muslims. Separate personal laws codified by the British on the basis of religion and cultural gender practices attributed to religion (sati, child marriages, widow remarriage prohibitions, harems, purdah) further sutured “Indian” to tradition through religiosity as opposed to British modernity. Thus, Rajan and Needham explain that when nations of non-west make

¹⁶¹ Rajan, Rajeswari Sundar and A.D. Needham. “Introduction.” in *The Crisis of Secularism in India*. Rajand, Rajeswari Sundar and A.D. Needham, eds. (Ranikhet: Permanent Black, 2007), 3.

¹⁶² Asad, 14.

claims to secular modernity they are also trying to produce national identity based in a specific imported colonial history.¹⁶³

Indian secularism operates on a linear time-frame whereby the pre-secular subject is confined by “religious tradition” and communalism. The post-secular subject, on the other hand, seems to be makers of their own history and split temporally from the religious identities that came before. “Seems” here is the most important part—for modern secularism actually builds on a particular conception of the world and the problems generated by that world that mediate how it is applied and enacted.¹⁶⁴ Personal laws are based on religion in India and thus, religion is seen to divide the peoples of India (chapter 3) making for a particular conception of the world that influences how secularism functions. In that regard, secularism in India means much more than just the separation of Church and state. It also includes equal respect for all religions and protection for minority religions. In the name of equal protections for citizens belonging to the secular nation-state, the state chooses whether or not to intervene in the religious matters of its citizens. On the one hand, the state actively reforms and regulates religions. Partha Chatterjee notes that immediately following independence and the formation of the secular nation-state, there was a flurry of state legislation on reforming religion including the 1947 The Madras Temple Entry Authorization Act which was followed by similar state legislation in the central provinces, Bihar, and Bombay and then implemented into the Constitution of India.¹⁶⁵ Further, legislation on the administration of temples, religious endowments and on Hindu marriages (1955 Hindu Code Bill) points

¹⁶³ Rajan and Needham, 3- 4.

¹⁶⁴ Asad, Talal. *Formations of the Secular: Christianity, Islam, Modernity*. (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2003), 191-2.

¹⁶⁵ Chatterjee, Partha. “Secularism and Tolerance.” in *Secularism and its Critics*. ed. Rajeev Bhargava (Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1998), 353.

to attempts by the state to define/manage religions. For Chatterjee, the nationalist-modernist project that reformed and regulated religion sought to both “rationalize the domain of religious discourse and to secularize the public domain of personal law.”¹⁶⁶

On the other hand, the state can chose to not involve itself in religious matters in the name of protecting a minority religion. Religious minorities are to be free from state control and only regulated by the minority religious institutions set up by the minority community itself. Involvement by the state is interpreted as infringing on individual rights of citizens belonging and wanting to practice a minority religion. Thus, in Kerala, Syrian Christians have been very successful in overturning cases/laws aimed at regulating their minority managed private schools (chapters 4 and 5). Further, as Rajeswari Sunder Rajan argues in *The Scandal of the State* “protections” through state intervention may not exist in practice. In regards to protection for women citizens of the secular nation-state, despite having a plethora of laws intended to curb and punish violence against women, there is an absence of court convictions, number of institutions to help victims, and instances of custodial rape.¹⁶⁷ As women are often seen as being subject to religious dictates, state protections in the name of secularism are quite often mediated by existing sexist acts upheld by patriarchal religious institutions. Thus, non-involvement by the state for reasons other than protecting religious minority freedom could trump reforming/regulating religions in the name of secularism.

This history and peculiar working of secularism in India has led Ashis Nandy to argue that imported secularism has increasingly become incompatible with the fluid

¹⁶⁶ Chatterjee, 357.

¹⁶⁷ Rajan, Rajeswari Sundar. *The Scandal of the State: Women, Law, and Citizenship in Postcolonial India*. (Ranikhet: Permanent Black Press, 2008), 26.

definitions of self that proliferate South Asian cultures.¹⁶⁸ Nevertheless, Indian independence politics held onto this view of secular/modern in order to create a unified state. Nowhere is this reflected more than in social science textbooks for the young (Chapter 5). Krishna Kumar explains in *Prejudice and Pride: School Histories of the Freedom Struggle in India and Pakistan*, that the National Council Educational Research and Training (NCERT) created the national curriculum that divided India into communal (pre-independence) and secular (post-independence) time periods.¹⁶⁹ This was a departure from previous understandings of Indian history promoted by British colonial historians that divided India into the Hindu Vedic period, the Muslim medieval period, and the modern period. While this new historical narrative of communal to secular India (in opposition to religious Pakistan) united Indians under a new nation, it also privileged secular ideals as the founding ideals of an Indian citizen. It is as if the embracing of secularism is a pre-condition to become a unified democratic modern nation-state founded on citizens juridically belonging to the nation as opposed to belonging to a religion. Thus, secularism in India was a nation-building and citizen-building project that attempted to unify peoples within the boundaries of the modern nation-state. Protecting minorities through specific constitutional articles and intervention into/detachment from religions matters became extremely important to legitimizing the new nation-state of India. In addition, this legitimization led to specific formation of what exactly constituted an “Indian citizen.” New ideals of morality seemingly separate from the past, yet simultaneously drawing from historical constructions of differences between women

¹⁶⁸ Nandy, Ashis. “The Politics of Secularism and the Recovery of Religious Tolerance.” In *Secularism and its Critics*. ed. Rajeev Bhargava (Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1998), 324-5.

¹⁶⁹ Kumar, Krishna. *Prejudice and Pride: School Histories of the Freedom Struggle in India and Pakistan*. (New Delhi: Penguin Books, 2001), 50-54.

and between men and women took hold and manifested itself again through the embodied practice of clothing. It is therefore significant that the massive shift in Kerala public spaces that I have been discussing through the change from the *chatta/thuni* to the *sari* coincides with the implementation of secular policies and constitutional protection of minorities in the newly created Indian nation-state (chapter 4 and 5).

It was essential that this change came not from within Kerala, but from without as Kerala's caste and religious practices of old tainted the region as backward and communal. The fabric for *saris* needed to be brought to Kerala from Bombay, traveling by sea, backwaters and then by transport bus to Kerala villages. The cloth's arrival to Kerala was preceded by women who had left the state for employment. As discussed in the first chapter, Kerala's education culture led to an increase in white-collar professionals. As Kerala lacks industry and remains to this day an agricultural society, many educated Keralites sought jobs out-of-state exposing them to the fashions of different parts of India. As Threshamma related:

The first person to wear the *sari* in my village was a woman named Chinamma. She married and then her husband got a job in Bangalore. A few years later, she returned, and she wore the *sari* to church. After she returned, she wore nothing but the *sari*. Never again the *chatta* because she had seen the city life. The *sari* was so beautiful in comparison to the *chatta*. It was such a striking difference to see her in church, next to all of us in our white *chattas*. We all wished we could wear *sari* too.¹⁷⁰

As Kerala was steeped in ritualistic religious and caste practices, the *sari* represented secular change brought from the outside and a representative of modern life. As such, modern secular life was seemingly untainted by Kerala's dark communal and caste divided past.

¹⁷⁰Threshamma. Interview by author in Malayalam. Sept 7, 2007.

Feminist scholar Nivedita Menon further explains the way in which secularism and modernity go hand-in-hand in “State/Gender/Community: Citizenship in Contemporary India.” Menon argues that secularism in India served; a) bourgeois democracy; b) capitalist transformation of economy through the creation of an unmarked citizen and; c) social justice in the liberal equality sense.¹⁷¹ This second point, the creation of an unmarked citizen, is exemplified in the change from Kerala’s caste, religious, and gender differentiation through dress to the secular *sari*—which only differentiated men from women. In Kerala, the secular bourgeois educated professional became the norm to which all else was judged and both the unmarked male citizen and the unmarked female citizen could achieve this professional ideal. This imagery succeeded because secularism was held up as something progressive and modern, something that was fashionable, and something that related to a national/state identity as opposed to a community identity. Kochathreshamma, a seventy-nine year old Syrian Christian woman who wears the *chatta/thuni* but rejected the *kunnika* related this “fashionable” shift to me as such:

My mother wore *kunnika* and *chatta/thuni*. And my grandmother too. But that fashion has all gone. It is long gone. I had a sister that had *kunnika*. But she took it off and hid it from our father because it wasn’t in fashion. Now, you cannot strictly tell if woman is Syrian Christian because she wears either full *sari* or *churidar* [salwar kamise] and no more *chatta/thuni*. It won’t come back, it has gone. Now will anyone use it? No, they won’t. It won’t ever come back... We shouldn’t know another’s *jati* [caste] through clothing anyway. We should only be secular.¹⁷²

The capitalist transformation of the economy through the creation of an unmarked citizen.

¹⁷¹ Menon, Nivedita. “State/Gender/Community: Citizenship in Contemporary India.” *Economic and Political Weekly*. 33, No 5. (January 31, 1998): PE-5.

¹⁷² Kochathreshamma. Interview by author. Jan 2, 2008.

By the 1950s, villages in the Christian stronghold Kottayam district of Kerala underwent a profound change in agriculture that shifted society from a feudal to capitalist society. Small subsistence farming of beans, tapioca, paddy, ginger, coconut, and yams was largely replaced by the cash crop of rubber. In contrast to small farming which depended on female labor, the cultivation of rubber was done by men alone. In addition, rubber cultivation did not necessitate large families and hence, the need for extended/joint families also disappeared. The nuclear family, separate from both the parents and older brothers, became common. During this shift in agriculture, the *panikarans* (manual laborers) began to disappear by the hundreds. Education and reservations, communist organizing of laborers and the later land redistribution laws of the 1950s, raised the number of land owning educated/literate white collar job seekers. There was, in other words, a developed awareness in the possibility of social mobility through class mobility.¹⁷³ Romo-Syrian landowners were forced to accommodate these changes. As related by a participant “There were no *panikarans* [agricultural laborers] to do paddy work, because paddy work was harder labor for less money.”¹⁷⁴ As related by another, “[prior to the 1950s], If you had 1 rupee, you can get a *panikaran* for a day. When price of labor went up, there was no profit in rice cultivation, so we [our family] switched to rubber cultivation.”¹⁷⁵ Despite this nostalgia for cheap labor, the loss of the *panikarans* to Romo-Syrian farmers and the switch to rubber cultivation in the Kottayam district did not affect the community adversely. Rubber cultivation proved to be

¹⁷³ This did not occur in a vacuum, but with growing power of unions and communist party ideology though the reading of papers in the 1930s: “Through reading rooms, newspapers, and tea shops a whole new world was imagined, and discussions built up on collective memory of organization, strikes and campaigns against landlords as well as victories of reduced working hours, more wages and less rent” (Menon, Dilip. *Caste, Nationalism and Communism in South India Malabar 1900-1948*. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994), 47.

¹⁷⁴ Oomen. Interview by author in Malayalam. Dec 14, 2007.

¹⁷⁵ Lukose. Interview by author in Malayalam. Mar 12, 2008.

extremely profitable for Romo-Syrian land owners. Romo-Syrians also solidified their stronghold over the private education sector (chapters 4 and 5), and became known as entrepreneurs in the banking industry. A popular joke in Kerala emerged: *Kamizhnu veenal, kalpanam* or “even when a Romo-Syrian falls, he’ll stand up holding a quarter.” By the advent of secular changes, the Syrian Christians had solidified themselves as upper-class economic force.

According to Nivedita Menon, the unmarked secular citizen is in fact implicitly marked as Hindu upper-caste/classed. Indeed, the switch to the *sari* can be seen as not only a secular move, but as a move to idealizing an upper-class Hindu norm. Hindu clothing was differentiated from Muslim clothing because it was draped and unstitched. The evolution of this difference in women’s clothing manifests itself in the Hindu *sari* and the Muslim *salwar kamize*. If we are to understand that the *sari* is Hindu, then the acceptance of the *sari* by Romo-Syrian women reveals the adoption of a custom marked as Hindu. Not only was the *sari* accepted, but Romo-Syrian women begin wearing the *pottu* or *bindi*, previously only worn by Hindus.

With the *sari*, changing fashions in patterns and textures of cloth—from silk to later synthetic fabrics—highlighted only class differences between women. That is, the expensive fabrics and change in fashions were only available to those families with the means to buy therefore creating a consumer demand leveled at the possibility of entering a higher class/maintaining class status. Even today, keeping up with the fashion—cut of the blouse neckline, shoulder style, sleeve length, *sari* patterns/embellishments, and cloth type stands in for an ability to keep up with an upper-class ideal. With the *chatta/thuni*, all Syrian Catholic women were united and similar. Differences in class standing were

not the differences that were stressed as *chatta/thuni* was all made from relatively the same grade of white cloth. It was *religious*, *gender* and *caste* difference that was marked. With the switch to the *sari*, class differences between women and gender differences between men and women seemed to be the most pronounced forms of difference at work.

In Kerala, the secular bourgeois educated professional became the norm to which all else was judged. This succeeded because secularism was held up as something progressive and modern, something that was fashionable, and something that related to a national/state identity as opposed to a community identity. Old Kerala society was depicted as backward and steeped in unjust and pointless ritual and separation, while the modern was exalted as mobile, fluid and pleasurable. The *chatta/thuni* became a thing associated with backwardness and static tradition, while the *sari* represented new ideals. With these new ideals came a public acceptance of channeled female sexuality in the public sphere. The uniform yet functioning *chatta* was abandoned in favor of the binding and sexually seductive *sari*. Take, for example, the depiction of women in Malayalam daily newspapers. In the 1930s and 40s, Malayalam dailies had few pictures of women—save advertisements featuring European women.



Jones Sewing Machine Ad¹⁷⁶

¹⁷⁶ “Jones Sewing Machine Ad” (image). *Malayalam Manorama*. February 28th, 1930. Page 8.



Sunlight Soap Ad¹⁷⁷



Beauty Product Ad¹⁷⁸

Yet starting in the 1950s, newspaper ads featuring women in *saris* become frequent. By the time of the *vimochana samaram* in 1959 (chapter 4), the *sari* had become the norm in advertising.

¹⁷⁷ “Sunlight Soap Ad” (image). *Malayalam Manorama*. May 21, 1936. Page 7.

¹⁷⁸ “Beauty Product Ad” (image). *Malayalam Manorama*. June 23rd, 1948.

Handloom Fabrics Ad¹⁷⁹Det Soap Ad¹⁸¹Gluco Biscuits Ad¹⁸⁰Rayon Saris Ad¹⁸²

¹⁷⁹ "Handloom Fabrics Ad" (image). *The Hindu* June 4th, 1959. Page 7.

¹⁸⁰ "Gluco Biscuits Ad" (image). *The Hindu*. May 12th, 1959. Page 6.

¹⁸¹ "Det Soap Ad" (image). *The Hindu*. May 28th 1959

¹⁸² "Rayon Saris Ad" (image). *Malayalam Manorama*. October 8, 1957.

Finlay Mills Ad¹⁸³Kissan Squash Ad¹⁸⁵Surajmals Jewelry Ad¹⁸⁴Binny's Fabric Ad¹⁸⁶

¹⁸³ "Finlay Mills Ad" (image). *The Hindu*. May 30th 1959.

¹⁸⁴ "Surajmals Jewelry Ad" (image). *The Hindu*. May 25th, 1959.

¹⁸⁵ "Kissan Squash Ad" (image). *Malayalam Manorama*. Sept 15, 1957.

¹⁸⁶ "Binny's Fabric Ad" (image). *Malayalam Manorama*. May 27th, 1959.

The sensual nature of the *sari* and domestic bliss with husbands in a nuclear family are highlighted as the ideal in ads for soap, material, jewelry, and even beverages. J. Devika explains that these ideals arose in the 1930s. In this decade, demands were made upon the government on behalf of “women” as a group. The matrilineal and joint family system of the past was dissolved by law and new ideas regarding a moral family life began to be circulated.¹⁸⁷ By the 1950s and into the 60s, this ideal had solidified and normalized. It became exemplified in the *sari*. Female sexuality was possible in the limited scope of the home, family and marriage where women were expected to have individual control over their bodies. The *sari* kept ideas of the past alive in that women were bound to the home. Yet while the domain remained the same, the elements were entirely new.¹⁸⁸ Dress in conjunction with other issues had correctly trained one into channeled sexuality.

Sex Segregation, Masculinity and Gendered Violence

As soon as demarcations of religions were pushed underground with the advent of the *sari*, a re-vamped form of social organizing became prevalent: women/men only spaces. The sharing of public space was only possible if female sexuality could be channeled through endogamous (within the caste) marriages and chastity until marriage (chapter 4 and 6). The channeling of female sexuality was nothing new to Kerala society. As discussed, women were separated from men and guarded in the public sphere before post-independence Indian secularism. Yet the separation of men from women did not become outmoded in the way caste and religious divisions did because of an accepted and

¹⁸⁷ Devika, 6.

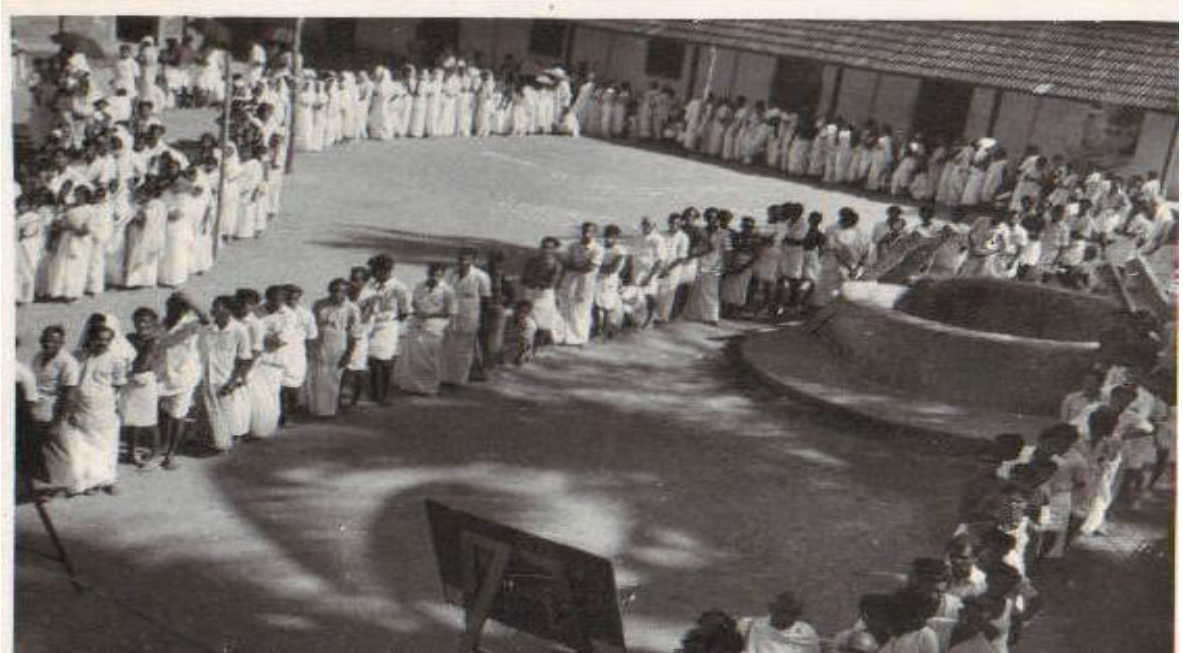
¹⁸⁸ Devika, 96-7.

constructed dichotomy between men and women that persisted in the social imaginary. As the feminist historian J. Devika explains, gender provided the alternative to the caste/religious based social ordering. Writing on the emergence of Kerala women's magazines in the early modern period, Devika argues that the shift from religious/caste structured social spaces to sex segregated spaces was predicated on understanding gender difference as *the* irreducible difference:

Often, the challenge to the older order was made in terms of an image of society in which gender-difference figured as the fundamental principle of ordering human beings, as the alternative to the established social order that privileged birth and inherited status.¹⁸⁹

Gender norms in Kerala are now largely dictated and policed by sex segregated public spaces. With the normalization of women of all castes and religions sharing a space with men, the population began to delineate separate spaces for men and women—keeping alive the overt gender demarcations even as overt demarcations between castes and religions faded out of style. The shift I am discussing is not necessary that spatial ordering of bodies changed from marking a caste and religious difference to a gender difference, but that gender became the primary difference to which social space was ordered. Kerala society today is quite striking in its adherence to sex segregation. It is common to see the words *sthreekal/purushanmar* (women/men) written in buses and bus stops, demarcating where men and women should sit/stand. If signs are not present, pairs of waiting sheds and benches will be separated from each other by some sort of divider. Men- and women- only colleges are customary. Separate lines for men and women in banks, ticket lines, and political marches are typical. In short, while women and men share a public space, that public space is divided by gender.

¹⁸⁹ Devika, J. "Negotiating Women's Social Space: Public Debates on Gender in Early Modern Kerala, India. *Inter-Asia Cultural Studies*. 7 no. 1 (2006): 45.



Separate voting queues for men (right 2 lines) and women (far left line).¹⁹⁰



Women's voting line 1950s.¹⁹¹

¹⁹⁰ "Separate Voting Queues for Men (right 2 lines) and women (far left line)" (image). Picture courtesy of PC Thomas/PT Chacko family, 1959.

¹⁹¹ "Women's Voting Line" (image). Picture courtesy of PC Thomas/PT Chacko family, 1950s.



Concrete divider at bus stop separating men from women.¹⁹²



Private Bus in Kerala: women front, men back with signs on bus indicating gendered seating, 2008. Sonja Thomas photo.¹⁹³

Also very striking is the self imposed sex segregation in Kerala. At public events and in public spaces women and men will choose to sit or stand with strangers of their

¹⁹² “Concrete Divider at Bus Stop Separating Men and Women” (image). Sonja Thomas photo, 2008.

¹⁹³ “Private Bus in Kerala: Women front, men back with signs on bus indicating gendered seating” (image). Sonja Thomas photo, 2008.

respective genders. It is most often the case that husbands and wives will sit separate from each other as will daughters and fathers, sons and mothers.



Syrian Christian procession, self imposed sex segregation. Left line men, right line, women.¹⁹⁴



SFI Protest, self imposed sex segregation. Girls in front, boys behind.¹⁹⁵

¹⁹⁴ “Syrian Christian Procession, Self Imposed Sex Segregation. Left Line Men, Right Line, Women” (image). Sonja Thomas photo, 2007.

¹⁹⁵ “SFI Protest, Self Imposed Sex Segregation. Girls in front, boys behind” (image). Sonja Thomas photo, 2008.

In addition, the public space is male dominated at night. Middle-class/upper caste women rarely travel long distances alone and are devoid from public life after sunset. Thus, in cities one can readily see working women flooding public bus transportation between 5:00-7:00pm in an effort to make it home before sunset.¹⁹⁶

In these sex segregated spaces, definitions of masculine and feminine behavior are defined. For masculinity scholar Michael Kimmel, masculinity is described through what it is not: femininity. This repudiation of the feminine or “flight from femininity,” as opposed to an affirmation of masculinity leaves masculine gender identity in a fragile position. Masculinity must be proven not by women, but by other men in sex segregated spaces. Thus, masculinity is a homosocial enactment.¹⁹⁷ Kimmel’s influential work on masculinity centers on the Western world. Although Kimmel stresses that the cultural specificity of his research, I use his definition of masculinity as a homosocial enactment to discuss sex-segregated spaces and masculinity in Kerala. Kimmel explains that manhood is demonstrated to other men through specific behaviors for their approval and that violence is the single most evident marker of manhood.¹⁹⁸ This marker starts early in life as one is born into the existing gender schema. In his book on men between the ages of 16-26, Kimmel explains that,

Violence, or the threat of violence, is a main element of the Guy Code: its use, legitimacy, and effectiveness are all well understood by most

¹⁹⁶ On the other hand, many lower-class/lower caste women travel long distances alone and are alone in the public space after dark. For example, fisher-folk women travel (largely by foot) to places far away from their homes to sell fish door-to-door. In urban spaces, fisher-folk women set up roadside fish displays late in the day for returning home middle-class and upper-caste working women. Many fisher-folk women return to their own homes well after dark. Yet we must not confuse mobility with greater freedom as studies suggest that gender based violence cuts across class/caste boundaries (chapter 3).

¹⁹⁷ Kimmel, Michael S. “Masculinity as Homophobia: Fear, Shame, and Silence in the Construction of Gender Identity” in *Women, Culture, Society: A Reader*. ed. Barbara J. Balliet (Dubuque, Iowa: Kendall/Hunt Publishing Company), 61.

¹⁹⁸ Kimmel, “Masculinity,” 68.

adolescent guys. They use violence when necessary to test and prove their manhood, and when others don't measure up, they make them pay.¹⁹⁹

Enacting violence, then, is one way in which to flee from femininity and stabilize the precarious category of "masculine." Violence as the source and proof of masculinity can then be used to justify sexual violence against women. Ruth Seifert, a feminist scholar researching gendered violence and ethnic conflict, explains that when trying to understand sexual violence, there are many myths and ideologies at play because of existing assumptions over the "violent nature" of men. The most popular myth is that sexual violence has to do with an uncontrollable male drive. Seifert states:

According to this idea men are finally not the lords of their own manor. They are seen as involuntary victims of their violent and instinctive nature. The advantage of this theory is that it relieves the individual of responsibility for his actions and exculpates him for the use of sexual violence....[sexual violence] are acts of extreme violence implemented, of course, by sexual means.²⁰⁰

In other words, the taken-for-granted division between masculine traits and feminine traits is often made by suturing masculinity to violent behavior. Once it is so sutured, violence serves to substantiate the difference between males and females. When violence is so sutured to masculinity, sexual violence is often legitimized as the uncontrollable expression of male violence instinctive to their nature. As Seifert explains, "in the perpetrator's psyche [sexual violence] serves no sexual purpose but is the expression of rage, violence, and dominance over a woman."²⁰¹

Sex segregated spaces and restrictions on women's mobility in Kerala are achieved through an accepted dichotomy between men and women in Kerala society

¹⁹⁹ Kimmel, Michael S. *Guyland: The Perilous World Where Boys Become Men*. (New York: Harper Collins, 2008), 57.

²⁰⁰ Seifert, Ruth. "War and Rape: A Preliminary Analysis." in *Mass Rape: The War Against Women in Bosnia-Herzegovina*. Ed. Alexandra Stiglmayer. (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1994), 55.

²⁰¹ Seifert, 55.

where violence defines manhood. In this accepted ideology, men are inherently and uncontrollably sexual while women are vulnerable victims. In an extensive survey of Kerala women in both rural and urban areas of the Thiruvananthapuram district, Pradeep Kumar Panda found that 58% of women experienced a combination of two violent acts from their husbands in the last 12 months and 75% experienced at least four types of physical assault at least once during their marriage. 44% of those surveyed experienced a combination of two psychological forms of abuse in the last 12 months and 64.9% of women experienced psychological abuse at least once in their marriage.²⁰² 44% of survey participants believed that domestic violence was normal.²⁰³

Kerala ranks first in India in crimes against women—(rape, domestic violence, molestation, cruelty).²⁰⁴ In the past 15 years, violence against women in Kerala has increased by 338%.²⁰⁵ Attacked women are often blamed for not being in the company of other women, or being out at night. Anthropologists Osella and Osella investigate how sex-segregation actually encourages the harassment and threats against women in Kerala: “Single-sex colleges and segregated buses are common throughout Kerala; in mixed areas of public space, groups of young men make a sport of verbal and physical harassment of girls and women.”²⁰⁶ Sexual violence is then normalized through sex-segregation. If a woman is in the company of other women, the chances for gender based

²⁰² Violent acts were described in the survey as slaps, hits, kicks, beatings, threats of weapons and/or forced sex. Psychological abuse as insults, belittling, demeaning, threats against loved ones, threats of abandonment, threats of husband’s infidelity. Panda, Pradeep Kumar. “Domestic Violence Against Women in Kerala.” in *Confronting Violence Against Women: Engendering Kerala’s Development Experience..* Ed. KN Nair and Vineetha Menon. (New Delhi: Daanish Publishers, 2008), 29-30.

²⁰³ Panda, 41.

²⁰⁴ Rajan, S. Irudaya and Sreerupa, “Gender Disparity in Kerala: A Critical Reinterpretation.” in *The Enigma of Kerala Women: A Failed Promise of Literacy.* ed. Swapna Mukhopadhyay (Delhi: Social Science Press, 2007), 61.

²⁰⁵ “Alarming Rise in Crime Against Women.” *India Express.* March 9, 2008.

²⁰⁶ Osella, Caroline and Filippo Osella. “Friendship and Flirting: Micro-Politics in Kerala, South India.” *The Journal of the Royal Anthropological Institute*, Vol. 4, No. 2. (Jun, 1998), 192.

violence is (supposedly) decreased. If a woman is in the (supposed) safety of the house after dark, she will not invite violence into her life.

Insistence on sex segregation does nothing to interrogate gender based violence—it takes the sexual predation of men as a norm and provides the safety from such violence. Thus, sex-segregation has become normalized because, as participants in my research explained, segregation is seen by both men and women as a necessary good in Kerala public life. According to Fr. Karikaturparambil, “On the bus, some seats are reserved for ladies. Otherwise the gents will sit there and they won’t respect the space...in other countries, in North India, if a seat is free a boy can sit there, but here it is not...here someone come, they will be harassing.”²⁰⁷ Both men and women understand the public space of Kerala as important to the social ordering of Kerala itself as related by Thangamma: “Here, having separation is nice. Because [pause] without [long pause]...it wouldn’t be right.”²⁰⁸ Many participants of my research described the mixing of genders with the word *nadikilla* translating to both “an impossibility” and “not permitted.”

In *The Enigma of the Kerala Woman*, Swapna Mukhopadhyay argues that credible threats of violence keep Kerala women in their place, and ensures that they do not cross the boundaries of good womanhood.²⁰⁹ Fear encourages segregated spaces preventing the majority of women (middle-class especially) from traveling alone/walking without other women, or venturing out past dark in Kerala. Until recently, violence and its relation to masculinity has not been studied *especially* in Kerala. In South Asian Studies, there is an assumption that Kerala women are emancipated/agentive in

²⁰⁷ Fr. Karikaturparambil. Interview by author in English and Malayalam, Jan 2, 2008.

²⁰⁸ Thangamma. Interview by author in Malayalam, Dec 28, 2007.

²⁰⁹ Mukhopadhyay, Swapna. “Understanding the Enigma of Women’s Status in Kerala: Does High Literacy Necessarily Translate into High Status?” in *The Enigma of the Kerala Woman: A Failed Promise of Literacy*. Mukhopadhyay, Swapna, ed. (New Delhi: Social Science Press, 2007), 9.

comparison to women from other Indian states due to education. Education of women is encouraged, and the state has a high rate of women's literacy. Education is attributed to a later marriage age for Kerala women, a proclivity for women to seek health care (including pre-natal care) and an inclination for women to seek jobs outside that state. Since the major indicators of women's well being are and have been well above the rest of India, the assumption that Kerala's women enjoy a high status in society has become entrenched in popular perception. Further, crime against women in Kerala is often attributed to reporting bias—there is the assumption that Kerala's high literacy rates cause literate women to report violence at a higher rate than in other states. However, there is no evidence to support reporting bias. Rather, the evidence actually states the opposite. As Aleyamma Vijayan, from *Sakhi women's resource center* stated, while women may be working in socially sanctioned and prestigious fields such as teaching or nursing, many women have no say in how that money is spent, work the second shift, and have little say in household matters even as they are the primary caregivers.²¹⁰ Historian Dr. J. Devika has further argued that social agitation for women's education was framed as a good for the family, society and state, and not necessarily for the individual woman herself.²¹¹ Thus, as Eapen and Kodoth reveal in their groundbreaking work, “Re-examining the High Status of Women in Kerala,” there is nothing to suggest that a correlation can be made between the education of women and levels of empowerment/agency. In fact, this recent scholarship reveals that violence and its relation to masculinity can possibly undermine any gains made by education.

²¹⁰ Aleyamma Vijayan. Lecture in English. June 12, 2007.

²¹¹ Eapen, Mridul and Praveena Kodoth, 6.

The arrival of the *sari* coincided with the normalization of sex-segregated spaces on Kerala's public sphere. Although the *sari* was adopted by all women, it is, in fact, coded as Hindu, upper-class, and upper-caste. Additionally, the patriarchal codes of the past which restricted women's mobility were re-tooled in the secular public space. Secular changes only proved to bury these social divisions in the very folds of the *sari*. Unfortunately, it has become increasingly difficult for women's groups in Kerala to work across caste, religious, and/or racial divides.²¹²

Conclusion: The Churidar

If the *sari* is a representation of the bourgeois secular subject which masks the Hindu upper caste/class subject, what about the recent move to the *churidar*? The *salwar kamize* as it is commonly known in other parts of South Asia has really taken hold in the 1990s and today is fast replacing the *sari* on the streets of Kerala.

The *churidar* has become the preferred everyday wear of Kerala women today. Similar to the change from the *chatta/thuni* to the *sari*, the *churidar* is replacing the *sari* in one generation. This change is happening throughout India, as a recent *Time Magazine* story reported. Even in South India where women tend to wear *saris* in greater numbers than North Indians, *sari* weavers are having trouble finding buyers. In 2004, \$40 million worth of Kanjeevaram *saris* made near the city of Chennai were sold. In 2008, that figure had dropped to \$12 million.²¹³ In addition, the art of wrapping the *sari* on the

²¹² For example, Dalit women involved in the Chengara land struggle staged an overnight protest on March 7th, 2008. When the media attacked the Dalit women as "immoral," Kerala's All India Democratic Women's Association (AIDWA), largely comprised of members from the upper-castes and classes, came with brooms and symbolically swept the site where the Dalit women protested.

²¹³ Pudduserry, Jessica. "The Dying Art of the Sari." *Time Magazine*. June 25, 2009. <http://www.time.com/time/world/article/0,8599,1906693,00.html>

body is fast becoming a lost art for women who prefer the *churidar*. Many younger women have no idea how to tuck and fold a *sari* properly leading to the emergence of “ready made *saris*”—*saris* with pleats and folds stitched into an elastic waistband of the *pavadu* (skirt) so one only has to slip on the skirt and throw the remaining fabric over the shoulder.

Yet there are distinct differences between the change to the *sari* vs. the change to the *churidar*. One of the main justifications for wearing the *churidar* is the convenience. Instead of a length of unstitched cloth that must be tucked, pleated, folded and pinned with precision, the *churidar* takes relatively little skill to wear—tying the drawstring pants, slipping the top over the head and arranging a shawl. Convenience has led many young people to the *churidar* and for occasions where ease of wear trumps all other virtues of *sari* fashion. Many participants cited the difficulty of traveling in a *sari* and the simplicity of the *churidar* in comparison:

Now, everyone is wearing *churidar*. In our neighborhood, young people are choosing to wear the *churidar* for ease and comfort on trips. The *sari* can get ripped out of place—if you pull it this way, it will fall apart. With *churidars*, there is a bit more substance. For the sake of convenience, women will use it for journeys.²¹⁴

In “Salwar Kameez at the Age of 81,” reporter Radha Padmanabhan related her use of the *churidar* on a trip to Israel. Reluctant at first, Padmanabhan relates “I climbed up to Gethsemane without having to tuck my saree in. I stood on the plateau of Masad, the ancient Fort and did not have to worry about the breeze that kept blowing. A saree would have been a disaster.”²¹⁵ Yet despite being convenient, the *churidar* seems to be a break from tradition that many are shunning. In the following narrative, a participant who lives

²¹⁴ Pennamma, interview by author in Malayalam. Dec 30, 2007.

²¹⁵ Padmanabhan, Radha. “Salwar Kameez at 81.” *Indian Express*. Jan. 27, 2008.

in the village discusses the convenience of the *churidar*, and yet her reluctance to wear the garment in the neighborhood:

I wear the *sari*, it's my generation that started wearing the *sari*...The next generation will be full *churidar* because that is what is convenient. In the house, to wear *churidar* is convenient and the nicest. When going on trips, even I switch to *churidar*—going to Bangalore and places. But not around here in our village. If other people saw, they would laugh at/humiliate me for wearing *churidar*.²¹⁶

Many Syrian Christian participants wore *churidar* daily, but to church or to religious functions would switch to the *sari* further indicating the reluctance to switch completely to the *churidar*.

Hindu temples throughout Kerala have banned the use of the *churidar* within the temple premises. If women come to a temple in Kerala wearing the *churidar*, they are usually asked to cover the bottom half with a *mundu*. Yet there is no official state policy on which dress is appropriate to wear at places of worship. At the popular Guruvayur temple outside the city of Thrissur, the official decision to allow women to wear the *churidar* into the temple led to public outrage. Guruvayur temple is a pilgrimage site for Hindus and largely attracts out-of-state devotees because of the five-thousand year old idol within the temple. Due in part for the large number of North Indian devotees unfamiliar with Kerala's unstated *churidar* ban, a resolution passed by the Guruvayur Devaswom Managing Committee in 2007 to allow women to wear the *churidar* while worshiping. According to the temple administrator, the Committee conducted discussions with almost all the Hindu community organization in Kerala with only two

²¹⁶ Aleyamma, interview by author in Malayalm. Dec 27, 2007.

organizations opposing the resolution.²¹⁷ As a result, the resolution passed on July 26th, 2007 and went into effect the very next day.



“Convenient, dignified”²¹⁸

At first the move seemed like a change that was supported by most in the community. No doubt, out-of-state visitors unfamiliar with Kerala’s *churidar* ban until they reached the temple entrance, welcomed the change as well. Yet soon after the resolution, a writ petition was brought by K. Mohandas of Chelari against the change. The petitioner argued that the Guruvayur Devaswom Act and Rules did not permit any other dress in the temple other than a *sari* for women. Manoj V. George, K. Mohandas’ attorney, argued that the *sari* was a five-thousand year old tradition and that the temple committee had no power to impose a restriction on that custom.²¹⁹ Indirectly then, the petitioners were stating that the *churidar* was not part of Kerala custom as they directly stated that the *sari* was.

²¹⁷ Ratheesh, V, letter to author in English, August 19, 2008.

²¹⁸ Santhosh, K. “Convenient, Dignified: Women in Churidar Kurta Visiting the Guruvayur Sree Krishna Temple on Friday” (image). *The Hindu*. July 28, 2007.

²¹⁹ “Temples Decision upheld.” *The Hindu*. Nov 28th, 2007.

According to temple administrator V. Ratheesh, *saris* were preceded by the use of two *mundu* as acceptable wear for women—one tied around the waist, and the other covering the breasts. Further, “no definition can be given [by the Guruvayur temple] to traditional dress or custom of dress.”²²⁰ The Kerala High Court agreed and late November of 2007, the case was dismissed and the temples’ decision upheld. According to V. Ratheesh, the petitioner was not able to furnish any material to establish the *sari* as a traditional dress.²²¹ Justice Balakrishnan added that the issue at hand was not tradition, but modesty. Questioning the petitioner’s attorney, Balakrishnan asked “Do you know that women were not allowed to cover the upper part of their body [in Kerala]? It was only after a revolution that they were allowed to cover the upper part of their body, so should we go back to that practice?”²²²

While this dispute over traditional dress took place, on November 5th, 2007, Guruvayur temple astrologers deemed that the use of the *churidar* in the temple was “inauspicious.” During the *acharyavaranam* ritual, astrologers indicated the deity’s unhappiness in the change in dress code. The astrologers said that traditional dress, according to the custom of the temple, had to be maintained. Based on this, another writ petition was brought by Gokul Prasad of Palakkad. Although not explicitly mentioning “traditional dress,” the petition did invoke the idea of correct worship based on tradition. If the deity did not approve of the new dress inside the temple, then women devotees were breaking from a religious tradition where following the readings of the temple astrologers was paramount. The Kerala High Court dismissed the petition on November 21st. However, damage had been done.

²²⁰ Ratheesh, V, letter to author in English, August 19, 2008.

²²¹ Ratheesh, V, letter to author in English, August 19, 2008.

²²² “Temples Decision upheld.” *The Hindu*. Nov 28th, 2007.



“Pray What’s This?”²²³

Women devotees reported seeing a drastic decline in *churidar* clad women at Guruvayur after the astrologers reading. And an aid to the head priest stated “These days one can hardly find a woman in a *churidar* in the temple. This seems a voluntary change and no one can alter the centuries old temple rules.”²²⁴

It is not only in temples that the move to the *churidar* is being contested and rejected. In February of 2008, the state government issued an order allowing teachers in the state to wear *churidars*. This came after sections of the public lobbied the government for the change. According to education minister MA Baby, the state never had a uniform dress code for teachers. Yet many private schools do stipulate that teachers should be dressed in *sari*. Therefore, the state felt justified in issuing the order. For the education minister, it was a move towards modesty.

[Ladies] feel so comfortable and confident with *churidars*. And *sari* I like, cause *sari* is a very good dress. But at the same time, *sari* can reveal also many parts of the body. So lady teachers would feel very comfortable in

²²³ Mohan, SK. “Pray What’s This: Young Worshiper at Guruvayur” (image). *Tehelka Magazine*. 4. No 50 (Dec 29, 2007), http://www.tehelka.com/story_main36.asp?filename=Ne291207Old_Folds.asp

²²⁴ Shaji, KA. “Old Folds and a Wrap-Around.” *Tehelka Magazine*. 4. No 50 (Dec 29, 2007), http://www.tehelka.com/story_main36.asp?filename=Ne291207Old_Folds.asp

the classroom with grown up boys they would be very confident if they are allowed to wear *churidars* also.²²⁵

The order itself painted the issue as one of gender justice. As male teachers are allowed to wear shirts and pants, women should be able to wear *churidar*.²²⁶ The order to allow teachers the right to wear the *churidar* followed a similar order for female government employees to wear *churidars* to work.

Yet private schools continued to issue the *sari* as the dress code for women. And many women in Kerala see the *sari* as essential to professional wear. A former teacher explained that “teachers must wear *saris* because it is not permitted to wear *churidars*. In some offices, you can but for teachers its *saris* we want. Colleges or school teachers—*sari*.”²²⁷ Another teacher related that teachers shouldn’t wear *churidars* because of their professional status. For her, the *churidar* is not professional and commands little respect. The *sari*, on the other hand, is denotes maturity.²²⁸ One participant told me that she makes it a point only to wear the *sari*—for the *sari* always commands respect from others.²²⁹

The *sari* as respectable wear was part of a changing landscape of post-independent India. There was relatively no resistance to the *sari* in places of worship and/or teaching positions when the *sari* replaced the *chatta/thuni* in the 1940s and 50s. I have found no comparable writ petitions filed by men against the change from the *chatta* to the *sari* nor any government orders “allowing” *saris* to be worn by women. The administrator of the Guruvayur temple, V. Ratheesh, could not provide any information

²²⁵ Baby, MA. Interview by author in English. April 12, 2008.

²²⁶ Interestingly, Guruvayur temple requires men to wear traditional *mundu* to worship. Men opposing the temple’s decision to allow women to wear the *churidar* also invoked a gender justice rhetoric. If women could wear pants into the temple in the form of *churidar*, why not men?

²²⁷ Rosamma Teacher. Interview by author in Malayalam. December 3, 2007.

²²⁸ Thangamma Teacher. Interview by author in Malayalam. December 13, 2007.

²²⁹ Annakutty. Interview by author in Malayalam. December 15, 2007.

on whether or not the temple made a formal resolution to allow women to wear *saris* into the temple, or whether there was any opposition to women wearing the *saris* instead of *mundu*. Rather, it appears that the *sari* was welcomed and considered respectable almost immediately.

During dissertation research, I attempted to find any narrative of rejection of the *sari* and the secular ideals the dress represented. When interviewing three *chatta/thuni* wearers, I was finally told in exasperation: “No, no, no! There was no anger. Everyone liked the new dress [*sari*]. We all liked it, anyway. We were actually praying not to have to wear the *chatta/thuni*. [laughter]. Well, because the *chatta/thuni* was white, wasn’t it sweetheart? To wash, it was so hard. *Saris* on the other hand—there was polyester fabrics and lots of different colors available. It was very eyecatching/beautiful! Not just plain white. That’s why for us women, we liked the *sari*.”²³⁰ Two grandmothers reminisced about the *sari*’s arrival in their village stating: “For us, there was nothing but the *chatta/thuni* and *kavani*. We didn’t know *sari* because it didn’t exist. But when we saw it, we liked it when it came. Unfortunately, we were too old to wear the *sari* anymore. Most people all around us liked the *sari* and our daughters wore the *sari*. We were not mad at them for it, we were happy they had such a beautiful dress.”²³¹ In the Romo-Syrian Church, the *sari* may have been a bit strange and different at first, but the Church soon accepted the dress. In 1937 when Sister Katrinamma entered a Carmelite convent near Kottayam, she wore *chatta/thuni*. Yet several years later after training as a postulate, she and her cohort “married” the church by taking her vows in a *sari*. In fact,

²³⁰ Kunjamamma, Elsiekutty and Kochorotha. Interview by author in Malayalam. Dec 17, 2007.

²³¹ Chinamma and Threshamma. Interview by author in Malayalam. Jan 15, 2008.

only one participant I interviewed in *chatta/thuni* discussed her father-in-law's opposition to women wearing *saris* and insisted that his daughter-in-laws wore the *chatta/thuni*.²³²

The change to the *churidar*, on the other hand, does not command that same professional quality or instant acceptance in comparison to the change to the *sari*. This is despite covering the body more fully than the *sari*, despite its popularity, and despite 'allowances' to wear the *churidar* as a professional dress. The *churidar* is painted as the antithesis to the "traditional" *sari*. Deeper analysis as to what exactly constitutes "tradition" reveals quite clearly that the *sari* was part of the modern secular citizen emerging after independence—implicitly marked as upper-class, Hindu and upper-caste. This modern secular gendered citizen, a *sari* clad citizen, was accepted in and through a new version of gender, domesticity and sexual norms where women's sexuality must be protected by women themselves against men's aggressive sexual behavior. The ties between the *churidar* and Islam vs. the ties between the *sari* and upper-caste Hinduism only further separates perceived differences between women. It is upper-caste Hindu chastity to be protected, while all other female identities can be painted as sexually deviant/Other (chapter 4 and 6).

Newly educated women in the mid-twentieth century were shoved onto the social scene and the public space delineated not between castes/religions, but between genders in sex segregated spaces. Sexuality became tightly controlled and sexual taboos dictated every movement—where men and women can be and at what times was strictly enforced and adhered to. As a result, the relation between masculinity and violence largely goes unquestioned—as does the equating of femininity to vulnerability. It is no wonder, then, that descriptions of the *sari* abound with images of feminine virtue: "a saree is a graceful

²³² Mariamma. Interview by author in Malayalam. Feb 22, 2008.

garment. It drapes along the body hiding its faults and emphasizing its grace. Let anyone wear a saree and see what a transformation takes place. It is essentially feminine and brings out the qualities of gentleness and grace.”²³³ The difference between how the *churidar* is rejected by Kerala society and the instant success of the *sari* is a testament to how powerful the change from religious, caste and race based embodied difference to gender based difference and sex-segregated spaces impacted Kerala society. That is, the staying power of the *sari* is embedded into the very fabric of what secularism does to differences between peoples in Kerala today and the ideas engendered as to “modest womanhood.” As I have illustrated, as a modernizing project of the nation state, secularism created an unmarked citizen as an ideal. Yet peaceful co-existence between religions and peoples and the promise of dealing with difference is only achieved in theory. In the Indian nation-state especially where personal laws are divided by religion, where minority in number is correlated to subordinate in power and in need of secular protections from the center (chapter 5 and 6), and where the state both intervenes into and separates itself from religious matters in an effort to protect religious minorities in and through secularism, the “unmarked citizen” of the secular state is revealed to have a distinct identity: Hindu, upper caste and upper-class. As the secular subject engenders this as norm to which all other subjectivities exist in relation to, casted, raced and classed Others are regulated through sexual norms that most clearly manifests itself in differences between women and mobility in the public sphere. As we shall see in the next chapters, this invisibility—this effacing of difference through the secular subject—comes unraveled when sexual morality is examined in greater detail within an analysis of race, caste and class.

²³³ Padmanabhan, Radha. “Salwar Kameez at 81.” *Indian Express*. Jan. 27, 2008.

Chapter 4

Bodies of Difference: Aryan Racial Origins and Sexual Morality

This chapter examines the concept of race in South Asia. I argue that “race” as a social category lacks a clear definition in South Asian studies. Race is deflected as a Western and, quite often, purely American social organizing system. However, calls for “fair skinned brides/grooms” in matrimonials, the skyrocketing sales for skin whitening products, and class based discrimination based on skin color continues to shape realities of daily life in South Asia. In this chapter, I explore how race is defined through caste, religion, gender and class in South Asia, and therefore must be discussed in and through an intersectional analysis of these differences.

I begin by asking “What is Race in South Asia?” Using the works of historians and political scientists interrogating Hindu fundamentalism and religious communalism, I explain how the “Aryan” race has become an issue of social debate especially in North India. Historians of ancient India have argued that it was the “Aryans” who authored the Vedas—the sacred Hindu texts. Therefore, the racial category has been used by Hindu nationalists to foreign-ize Muslims as racial others belonging to the “Semite” races.

In South India, however, the division was not between Aryans and Semites, (Hindus and Muslims), but between Aryans and Dravidians. In the second part of this chapter, I explain how linguistic differences between Aryan and Dravidian languages were overlooked by British colonial officials codifying Hindu and Muslim religious personal laws. Hindus in both North and South India were united through the codification of Sanskrit texts—texts supposedly authored by the Aryans. However, South Indian languages are based not on the Indo-Aryan Sanskrit language, but on

Dravidian languages. I explain that speakers of Dravidian languages were subordinated to the dominance of Aryans in South India not by religion, but by caste. Therefore, in South India, “Aryan” and “Dravidian” racial categories operate as caste-based identities.

In the next section, I discuss “the Aryanization of Kerala’s Christians” to explain how Syrian Christians legitimize their caste superiority through their supposed Aryan roots and phenotypic differences from low-caste Dravidian Hindus and Christians.

Kerala provides a particularly interesting case study on race because religions are divided from each other based on caste. That is, not only do Hindus follow the caste system, but Christians as well. Thus, an analysis of race within the Syrian Christian community unravels both caste and race from the Hindu religion and allows us to understand how race can operate through caste and between religions.

In the final section of this chapter, I discuss how race is determined by one’s caste and class status. From assumptions concerning which bodies are suited for manual labor, to class based marriage ties determined by one’s perceived caste and racial “purity” in the color of one’s skin, in this section, I specifically touch on issues of femininity, beauty and desire for fair skin. I draw together arguments from linguistics, ancient history, communal histories and feminist scholarship to piece together how the vocally denied category of race functions within caste, religious, class and gender differences in South Asia today.

What is Race in South Asia?

Feminists understand racial differences between peoples as manifested in socially constructed hierarchies. By socially constructed, we mean that there only exists a

meaning to race because it is created through social processes. Skin color/facial features have no meaning outside these social processes. If one can explore the constructed nature of race, then the power differentials between racial categories can be uncovered. Thus, studies on race focus on the social processes behind race, and how race interacts with other categories of difference including gender.²³⁴ Race and gender are not distinct from one another, but emerge in relation to each other. These relational constructions are deployed and re-deployed differently depending on the social context. Concrete definitions of what race actually *is* often escapes articulation. Instead, the category works from “common knowledge” dependent on perceived differences in behaviors as well as phenotypes and informed by a history of discrimination. Ian Hanley Lopez discusses the inability to define the taken-for-granted notion of race through US court rulings on race discrimination cases. According to Lopez, race is neither an essence nor an illusion, but a process subject to social forces.²³⁵ Lopez’s work especially notes ways in which nationality, femininity and masculinity are dependent on race and vice versa adding to the difficulty in pinning down definitions. He traces US relations with Mexico and how racial images of Latino men and women justified colonial policies. Latina women’s sexual desirability and availability for white American men was offset by the effeminization of Latino males in their supposed inability to correctly care for their women and lazy work ethic. Through such examples, Lopez argues that despite the difficulty in pinning down a definition for race, the category continues to mediate aspects

²³⁴ See for example, Lorde, Audre. *Sister Outsider: Essays and Speeches*. Berkeley: Crossing Press, 1984. Lopez, Ian Haney. “The Social Construction of Race: Some Observations on Illusion, Fabrication, and Choice.” *Harvard Civil Rights-Civil Liberties Law Review*. 29. (1994): 1-62. Collins, Patricia Hill. *Black Feminist Thought: Knowledge, Consciousness, and the Politics of Empowerment*. New York: Routledge, 2000. Frankenberg, Ruth. *White Women, Race Matters: The Social Construction of Whiteness*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1993.

²³⁵ Lopez, Ian Haney. “The Social Construction of Race: Some Observations on Illusion, Fabrication, and Choice.” *Harvard Civil Rights-Civil Liberties Law Review*. 29. (1994): 7.

of popular culture, economic prospects, politics, gender roles and city planning as if it were a static and definable category. Lopez describes this manifestation of race as “racial etiquette”—a way of comprehending, explaining and acting in the world based on racial divisions. In this chapter, I take race to be a relational social construction that shapes hierarchies between peoples and contributes to specific racial etiquette based on perceived difference.

The United States is unique in the construction of perceived racial differences. Slavery, Jim Crow, westward expansion, colonization, and immigration have all contributed to specific racial etiquettes and make race relations a unique feature of American culture and politics. A difficulty in discussing race in South Asia is that because of the specificity and uniqueness of race in the U.S., racism is seen as foreign to South Asia. The foreignness of racism supported by the belief that the *caste* system is the quintessential social organizing system of South Asia and *religion* is what divides the peoples of South Asia—not race. However, that does not mean that racial etiquette isn’t practiced.

It has largely been assumed that in South Asia the race of peoples known as the Aryans are differentiated from a second group, the Dravidians, in and through their superior culture and phenotypic difference from Dravidians. What exactly constitutes “superior culture,” as I will discuss, has never truly been clear. Assumed phenotypic difference is defined through skin color (fair Aryans, dark Dravidians), shape of facial features including brow (sloped brow of Aryans, brow ridge of Dravidians), noses (prominent in Aryans, flat in Dravidians), and hair (straight for Aryans, woolly/curly for Dravidians), and abilities associated with bodies (white color desk jobs/temple jobs for

Aryans, manual labor for Dravidians). This chapter is not concerned with the origins of these perceived differences. However, I do question why and how these divisions function in the way they do.

Recent racist incidents in South Asia in the arena of its national pastime, cricket, have turned world-wide attention to South Asia's racial discrimination.²³⁶ Social preference for fair skin has made skin whitening products a booming industry in South Asia. Despite being attempts by feminist groups to ban skin whitening products in India, they are widely used by both men and women. In fact, a recent study reported that sales for skin whitening products for men have increased more than 100% in rural areas.²³⁷ Matrimonial ads unabashedly ask for responses from "fair skinned brides/grooms." Yet this desire for fair skin/discrimination based on dark skin color is rarely discussed by South Asian historians, scholars, politicians, and the public.

Part of this reluctance to discuss race has to do with how colonial rule was justified on the basis of binary divisions between white populations and colored. The popular "race science" of the nineteenth-century largely informed practices of the modern world including colonial rule in South Asia and slavery in the United States. Race science was not a unified discipline of study. Rather, it consisted of a range of fields, some that do not exist today including phrenology—the measuring of skulls, eugenics—improving the genetic composition of "desirable" populations, and anthropometry—measuring of facial and bodily characteristics. Race science operated on the hypothesis

²³⁶ In January, 2008, offspinner Harbhajan Singh of India was suspended for racially abusing Andrew Symonds, an Australian Aboriginal, by calling him a monkey. In May 2008, two black cheerleaders from Britain were barred from performing at the India Premier League's (IPL) inaugural match in Chandigarh allegedly because of the color of their skin. And in October, 2008 a crowd in Mumbai taunted Symonds with monkey gestures and noises.

²³⁷ Sidner "Skin whitener advertisements labeled racist. *CNN*.
<http://edition.cnn.com/2009/WORLD/asiapcf/09/09/india.skin/?img=1> (accessed March 17, 2009).

that the Aryan race was superior to all other races in the world. Western Europeans were from the Aryan stock and all other peoples could be classified in relation to Europe. Based on this hierarchy, European imperialism and African slavery only proved Aryan domination to be a fact.

Crispin Bates documents the major Western scholars that influenced anthropometry studies in South Asia in his article, “Race, Caste, and Tribe in Central India.” In India, the censuses of 1865, 1872, and 1881 were based on caste. Yet phrenology, the study of skulls and cranium capacity, was extremely popular science in Europe, and Indian craniums were also studied. Bates’ article discusses how the work of Carolus Linnaeus broke away from the common way in which race had previously been understood. Previous to Linnaeus, Western scholarship divided the races from a biblical classification—the decedents of Noah’s sons, Ham, Shem and Japhet became Africans, Semites and European Aryans respectively. Linnaeus instead theorized four races; *Homo Americanus*, *Homo Europaeus*, *Homo Asiaticus*, and *Homo Afer*. Each had moral and behavioral traits attached to the label. Soon, a new theory emerged to further account for differences; the polygenic theory. Biblical classifications assumed that races descended from one species. Polygenesists theorized that Linnaeus’ four races were separate species and emerging anatomical studies comparing human skulls were used to support this view.

American physician Samuel George Morton published a series of articles from 1839-49 supporting polygenesis that essentially justified slavery in the United States. Based on a study of skulls, Morton also classified Hindus as a less intelligent race than

whites.²³⁸ Emerging studies of Indian tribes seemed to confirm a racial division between Indian peoples.²³⁹ Castes and tribes, therefore, were understood to be categories defined from one another by race. However, the way in which to measure these differences relied on religious terms:

Although notions of racial difference and of the distinctive characteristics of so-called ‘castes’ and ‘tribes’ were becoming established, no-one had yet attempted actually to measure, codify and standardise these differences in anything other than anecdotal or religious terms.²⁴⁰

Thus, caste, tribes and religions began to be melded together and defined in and through racial divisions, making it difficult to understand the concept of race unless in conjunction with other social categories.

In post World War II, race science was abruptly discarded by both the hard and social sciences. Eugenics, phrenology, and anthropometry were sciences used by Nazi Germany to justify the holocaust. “Race science” went from being a social and scientific object of study to a pseudoscience. This disassociation of academia from race science has led to a silencing concerning race in South Asia, and the disavowal of the impact of race science on other social categories in South Asia including religion, caste and gender. Even as academic scholarship turned to the social construction of race as a more viable theory of racial difference, the ideas engendered by race science remain popular in South Asia. This is largely because of the supposed superiority of the Aryan race, the Aryan origins of the Hindu religion and communal politics.

The hegemony of regional scholarship on South Asia has led to little questioning of how racial divisions actually function. What I mean by “hegemony of regional

²³⁸ Bates, Crispin. “Race, Caste and Tribe in Central India: The Early Origins of Indian Anthropometry.” *The Concept of Race in South Asia*. ed. Peter Robb. (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1995), 222-226.

²³⁹ Bates, 231-7.

²⁴⁰ Bates, 238.

scholarship on South Asia” is the way in which “South Asia” is dominated by studies on India and “India” dominated by studies on North India. Hindu/Muslim divisions in North India separate Aryan not from Dravidian, but Aryan from Semite. Especially because the Partition has come to play such an important role in political, cultural and communal memory, Hindu and Muslim ethnic conflicts have dominated any study on race in South Asia. Meanwhile, Aryan difference from Dravidian races through the idea of superiority and phenotypical difference are largely played out in South India. For many South Indian scholars today, the suturing of “Aryan” to both “fairness” and “superiority” is taken to be fact and is largely unquestioned. I tread upon new ground, then, with a discussion of how perceived racial differences in Kerala are mediated by religion, caste and sexual norms which separate Aryan from Dravidian women.

The notion of “belonging” to the nation-state in post-independent India has made communal claims to Aryan superiority and Aryan racial origins a highly volatile political issue. Thomas Trautmann’s edited volume *The Aryan Debate*, explores the two competing ideas of the origins of Aryans in India that have taken political center stage today. The first idea promoted by Hindu nationalists is that Aryans are indigenous to South Asia. The second supported by secular academics is that Aryans migrated to South Asia from the region of present-day Iran. As Aryans are the authors of the foundational Hindu texts (the Vedas) and speakers of the Hindu sacred language (Sanskrit), present day promotion of the idea that Aryans are indigenous to the subcontinent has become a communal political project. If the Hindu Aryans were indigenous to India, then all others who arrived at later dates could be painted as racially different and foreign. It solidifies an ethnic difference between Semite and Aryan *and* a religious difference between

Muslims and Hindus. Touting that a superior Aryan race is native to India further distances “civilized” Hindus from “barbarous” Muslims. This supposed superiority of the Aryans are revealed by the terminology used to describe Aryans in India: “migration,” “aryanization” and “sanskritization” that ushered in the Hindu Vedic Age. These terms are peaceful as opposed to the violent Muslim “invasions” and “conversions” that led to “medieval” India.

In 2002, the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP), a Hindu nationalist political party, attempted to change history textbooks so that the Indus Valley civilization, the first documented civilization in India, was renamed the “Saraswati River Civilization” thus linking the peoples of the first Indian civilization to a Vedic culture/Aryan race. The new history essentially claimed that the peoples of the ancient Indian civilization and the authors of the Vedas were one and the same. Despite numerous challenges from the secular left, these histories were hugely popular and met little opposition from the Hindu majority in India. As Partha Chatterjee explains in “History and the Domain of the Popular,” academic Indian histories began to institutionally emerge in the early 20th century and operated in the English language. Before this, Indian histories were comprised of the histories of religious sects, castes, kinship networks, regions, localities, languages, literature, art, and music—often written in the vernacular languages. Chatterjee calls these histories “old social histories” with ties to colonial India:

They [old social histories] aspired to mobilize arguments and deploy evidence in the same modern and rational forms that were approved by the colonial institutions of government and education. In this sense they were modern histories. But they were also deeply entangled in the ideological web of regional, sectarian, caste and ethnic politics of the 19th and 20th centuries.²⁴¹

²⁴¹ Chatterjee, Partha. “History and the Domain of the Popular.” *Seminar: Rewriting History*. 522 (February 2003). <http://www.india-seminar.com/semframe.html>

Chatterjee further argues that academic histories did not replace old social histories, but only displaced them to outside the academy where they continue to flourish without peer review. Hindu nationalist histories draw from these “old social histories.” Thus, the theory that the Aryan race is indigenous to India receives wide popular support even as it lacks scientific evidence.

The second theory of Aryan origins, supported by most historians, archaeologists, linguists and secular academics is that the Aryans migrated to South Asia from the region in and around modern day Iran. The theory of Aryan migration depends largely on comparing the culture of early Aryans—gleaned from the *Rgveda*—to the ancient Indus Valley civilization. Comparisons are also made between Sanskrit, the language of the *Vedas*, and Dravidian languages. The writing of the *Rgveda* coincides with the gradual urban decline of the ancient Indus Valley civilization. Thus, the conjecture is that as the Indus Valley civilization declined, the Vedic culture of the Aryans gradually became dominant. Historian Romila Thapar estimates the Mature Harappan period of the Indus Valley Civilization to be between 2600-1700BC, with the *Rgveda* authored around 1500BC.²⁴² The distinct cultural difference between the Indus Valley civilization and the Vedic civilization is marked by a change from urban society to pastoral culture and most notably by a language. The ancient Indus Valley civilization’s script has not yet been deciphered, but is decidedly not the Sanskrit language of the *Vedas*. Many studies have concluded that the Aryans migrated to India from present-day Iran due to the similarities between ancient Persian, Greek and Latin languages.²⁴³ Linguists explain that the

²⁴² Thapar, Romila. *The Aryan: Recasting Constructs*. (Gurgaon: Three Essays Collection, 2008), 9.

²⁴³ The Sanskrit scholar William Jones was the first to suggest such a linguistic link in 1784. Commonly known as the “Indo-Aryan language group,” the idea of a common ancestral language divided by time and

incorporation of Dravidian agricultural words into Sanskrit languages point to a culture of exchange between distinct cultures—the pastoral Aryans who migrated to the region interacting with the agricultural Dravidians. Whether or not the peoples of the Indus Valley civilization were Dravidian speakers is still a debate. What is clear from studying languages is a difference between ancient Indus Valley script and Sanskrit, and a difference between Indo-European and Dravidian languages. Therefore, secular academic historians and linguists largely believe that Sanskrit speakers moved to India from a location outside.

This theory of Aryan migration to South Asia also informed the now discredited nineteenth-century race science. As discussed, the premise of race science was the belief in the superiority of the Aryan race. The supposed superiority of the Aryan race led to a correlation to caste hierarchy. The work of Max Müller, a scholar of the *Rgveda* in the 19th century, was highly influential in this regard. The *Rgveda* does not mention Dravidians or Aryans as races of peoples, but does discuss the *aryas* and *dasas*. The relation between *aryas* and *dasas* in the *Rgveda* is hostile. The *aryas* and *dasas* comprised different *varnas* according to the *Rgveda*. *Varna* translates to “color:” “Its literal meaning is colour and since the *dasas* were associated with darkness the word was taken as a reference to race.”²⁴⁴ Müller therefore theorized that the *aryas* were racially superior Aryans who destroyed the Indus Valley civilization and pushed the natives south. Müller further put forth the theory that the Aryans incorporated the native Indians (Dravidians) into the lower rungs of the caste system.

space by migrating peoples is generally accepted by historical linguists and historians today. See Jones, William, “Indo-European” Mehendale, MA “Indo-Aryans, Indo-Iranians and Indo-Europeans”, Deshpande, Madhav M. “Vedic Aryans, Non-Vedic Aryans and Non-Aryans, Renfrew, Colin “Archaeology and Language.” in *The Aryan Debate*, ed. Thomas Trautmann. (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2005).

²⁴⁴ Thapar, 10.

As Romila Thapar explains, “Racial separateness required a demarcating feature and conquest became the mechanism by which caste hierarchy and inequalities could be explained as a form of racial segregation.”²⁴⁵ Thapar further adds that the Aryan conquest theory made caste more understandable because kinship, occupations, and purity/pollution did not have to be added into the mix of understanding caste.²⁴⁶ This theory spoke to race scientists because caste provided a seemingly untainted historical record of racial divisions. As the caste system prevented mixing through endogamous marriages, caste was seen as a practice that left racial divisions fully intact and identifiable. Sumit Guha argues that “this method of research required the scholar to subscribe to the myth of the caste as a closed breeding population from time immemorial—or at any rate since its first establishment by the hypothetical Aryans thousands of years ago.”²⁴⁷ Thus, caste and racial difference could be easily researched in India by race scientists.

There is no evidence to suggest that Aryan migration was a migration of conquest. As mentioned, linguistic scholars today are in agreement that the *Rgveda* has many borrowed Dravidian words, pointing to a culture of exchange between Aryan and Dravidian language speakers. Further, if conquest was how Aryan culture became dominant, then the archeological studies of Harappan ruins should provide clues of destruction. No such clues have been found.²⁴⁸ Rather, a move away from urban based Harappan society to perhaps a pastoral society seems to be a gradual process in the

²⁴⁵ Thapar, 36.

²⁴⁶ Thapar, 36.

²⁴⁷ Guha, Sumit. “The Lower Strata, Older Races, and Aboriginal Peoples: Racial Anthropology and Mythical History Past and Present.” *Journal of Asian Studies*. 57, no. 2 (May 1998): 427

²⁴⁸ See Ratnagar, Shereen. “The End of the Harappan Civilization.” in *The Aryan Debate*, ed. Thomas Trautmann. (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2005), 131-144.

archeological record. Yet the theory of Aryan conquest seems to persist in present day understandings of Aryan migration even in the academic world. This is because migration through conquest explains caste subordination.

Today, the Aryan conquest theory has been picked up by the Dalit movement to prove present day Dalit subordination by ancient Aryan domination. If the natives of the land were Dravidian, Adivasi, and/or the people of the Harappan civilization and were subjugated into the caste system by conquering Aryans, then rights once enjoyed were taken away. As such, present day claims to rights rest on a caste identity based on racial origins. In this history, “lower castes have a chronological priority in their identity with the land.”²⁴⁹ Thus, in 2001, Dalit groups attempted to be part of the 2001 UN World Conference Against Racism. When the Indian government refused to include caste, Dalit groups staged an opposition. Caste and race are both forms of discrimination based on descent and, as Deepa Reddy argues, caste could be argued as tantamount to racial discrimination based on the idea that Dalits were oppressed into the caste system by conquering Aryans.²⁵⁰ As such, in the second theory of Aryans in South Asia—that they are not indigenous and migrated to the region—although supported by the academic world runs into problems of an orientalist history and the sliding together of race and caste that is difficult to untangle.

Both theories 1) of Aryan indigeneity and 2) Aryan migration become politically charged exactly because of the equating of Aryan culture to superior culture. In addition, both theories cannot seem to shake the ghosts of nineteenth-century race science. To

²⁴⁹ Thapar, 38.

²⁵⁰ Reddy, Deepa S. “The Ethnicity of Caste.” *Anthropological Quarterly*. 78, No. 3. (Summer 2005): 558.

discuss race in South Asia, then, we must explore the colonial investment in race as a social category that informed how caste was understood.

Aryan and Dravidian—The Colonial Investment

Race was of prime importance to imperialism and Western nationalism. Race as a social category could justify European presence in the colonies under the logic of “civilizing.” The supposed lower races could be improved by the superior Aryan presence of the British. Thus, one of the ways in which British presence in India was justified was through the Aryan two wave theory. As the Indo-European Language group united Europe with India, so too did the idea of peoples. The ancient Aryan race supposedly migrated to both Europe and India. *Rgveda* scholar Max Müller theorized that Aryan conquest gave rise to idea of nation in Europe and culture in India. As such, British colonization of India was only the “second wave” of Aryan conquest. The first Aryan wave created the Vedic society, the second was the colonizing British.²⁵¹ The British and Indian Hindus were thus merely separated cousins—separated by Muslim (Semitic) invasion and united after thousands of years. By promoting the two wave theory, Müller excluded Muslims in India and rationalized British controlled colonial government and their scholarship of Indian culture.²⁵²

Simultaneous with the Aryan second wave in South Asia were rising nationalisms in the Western world. To unite a group of peoples under a nation was to define national and bodily boundaries between populations. That is, a sense of belonging to a European

²⁵¹ Scholars have pointed out that Hindutva ideology works on a similar gendered progressive narrative and classification of peoples. Cutting out colonialism, Hindutva, or the ideology aimed at defining true Indian citizens as having both homeland and holyland in South Asia, attempts to revive the Vedic golden age free from Muslim “degeneration.”

²⁵² Thapar, 35.

nation had to attend to any sort of difference among peoples. Instead of directly dealing with difference within national borders, the colony could serve as *the* marker of difference. As Susan Bayly argues in “Caste and ‘Race’ in the Colonial Ethnography of India,” the threat of “degeneration,” struggle for global mastery and fractures in a national identity could be relieved by racially classifying South Asia.²⁵³ Historian Ann Stoler describes the fracturing and redefining of European national identities to be part and parcel of race classifications. In an age where the European Church was destabilized and Western national identities were not a given but in a developing status, the notion of a “European subject” was racially stabilized through the body of the colonized. The slave trade, annihilation of indigenous populations, massacres of resistors, and incarceration of natives, policed colonized bodies. It also reminded the legitimate population (colonizing) of their own disposability. In an effort to deflect the economic roots of a fear of disposability, focus was shifted to bodily safety and preserving the life of the legitimate. The colonized became increasingly criminalized, feared and resented. The colony served Europe as it helped map populations in order to administer, optimize and multiply the life of the “desirables.”²⁵⁴ As such, the idea of who belongs and who doesn’t, civilized and savage, white and colored bodies operated to define colonial policy and behavior based on perceived racial differences for European imperialists.

For example, feminist historian Antoinette Burton explains how Victorian and Edwardian British feminists compared their plight to the plight of brown women. Through a comparison that relied on assumptions of racial superiority, British feminists

²⁵³ Bayly, Susan, “Caste and ‘Race’ In the Colonial Ethnography of India.” in *The Concept of Race in South Asia*. ed. Peter Robb. (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1997), 168.

²⁵⁴ Stoler, Ann Laura. *Race and the Education of Desire: Foucault’s History of Sexuality and the Colonial Order of Things*. (Durham: Duke University Press, 1995), 7-9.

were able to critique the colonizing state—for if the British government did not allow British women to vote, they were no better than the “savage” native men who repressed Indian women through child marriages, dictates prohibiting widow remarriage and forcing women to commit suicide upon her husband’s funeral pyre. According to Burton: “as with feminist discourses around the idea of the nation, the chief function of the Other woman was to throw into relief those special qualities of the British feminist that not only bound her to the race and the empire but made her the highest and most civilized national female type, the very embodiment of social progress and progressive civilization.”²⁵⁵ Thus, as Burton rightly notes, civilization and whiteness was placed in political opposition to color and savagery in an era of national anxiety.

It would appear then, that race was a construction of European imperialism, as Romila Thapar argues in *The Aryan: Recasting Constructs*.²⁵⁶ The nineteenth-century especially engendered a plethora of studies on race in South Asia by Western scholars and thus race cannot today be understood without contextualizing it in the modern era. However, to attribute race as an invention of colonialism simplifies the social category and only adds to the understanding that the concept was something brought to South Asia from the Western world. Thus, Peter Robb asks in the introduction to *The Concept of Race in South Asia*, “was an idea of race already a commonplace in Indian thinking before it was articulated in Western terms?”²⁵⁷

To answer this question, historians turn to linguistics and the theory of the Indo-Aryan language group. Beginning with Sir William Jones’ famous speech in 1784 at the

²⁵⁵ Burton, Antoinette. *Burdens of History: British Feminists, Indian Women and Imperial Culture, 1865-1915*. (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1994), 82-3

²⁵⁶ Thapar, 31.

²⁵⁷ Robb, Peter. “Introduction: South Asia and the Concept of Race.” in *The Concept of Race in South Asia*. ed. Peter Robb. (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1997), 8.

Asiatic Society of Calcutta, linguists began to theorize that Sanskrit was a sister language to Latin, Greek, and Persian. According to the theory of Indo-Aryan languages, Sanskrit, Latin, Greek and Persian were all derived from a now extinct Indo-Aryan language. The similarities between languages are in words (parts of the body, kinship terms) and in similar syntax.²⁵⁸ A difficulty arises, however, when speaking peoples are equated with a particular race. Languages may migrate with a population, but speakers of a language need not be culturally or racially similar. However, early Indian linguistic scholarship did not understand this distinction resulting in a particular understanding of Sanskrit speakers as a race of peoples in India. That is *speakers* of a language were equated to a separate racial group, thus making linguistic scholarship paramount for understanding racial divisions between peoples.

British colonization of India introduced a flurry of linguistic scholarship of both North Indian and South Indian languages. As Bernard Cohn explains, the British conquest of India was a conquest of knowledge, and efforts were made to establish a discourse (orientalism) to convert Indian forms of knowledge into European objects. Such knowledge was to be used to maintain law and order, and to classify groups within Indian society.²⁵⁹ In 1776, under the direction of Warren Hastings, the *Gentoo Code* was published documenting Hindu personal law. Based on Sanskrit texts, the *Gentoo Code* was to be used in all Indian courts for the next decades. Sir William Jones, a judge in the Crown Court of Calcutta and the first to conjecture the link between European and Indian languages was increasingly frustrated with inconsistencies and translations of the Sanskrit

²⁵⁸ Lal, B.B. "It is Time to Rethink." in *The Aryan Debate*. ed. Thomas Trautmann. (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2005) 146.

²⁵⁹ Cohn, Bernard. *Colonialism and Its forms of Knowledge: The British in India*. (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1996): 21.

texts. Learning Sanskrit himself, Jones set to work on a new volume of Hindu personal laws. His work on Hindu law, *The Digest of Hindu Law on Contracts and Successions*, was ultimately published by Henry Thomas Colebrooke in 1798. “Jones, and especially his successor, Colebrooke, established a European conception of the nature of Hindu law that was to influence the whole course of British and Indo-British thought and institutions dealing with the administration of justice down to the present.”²⁶⁰ The code was based on Sanskrit texts and united Hindus throughout India despite linguistic and/or racial differences. “Hindus” were homogenized into their religion *and* homogenized as Aryans based on the Sanskrit texts. However, the existence of Dravidian languages and peoples complicated this idea. As mentioned, *Rgveda* scholar Max Müller was influential in promoting an Aryan conquest theory that subordinated the native Dravidians into the lower castes. But what exactly was “Dravidian?”

South Indian languages were coined as “Dravidian languages” by Robert Caldwell in his famous 1856 work “A Comparative Grammar of the Dravidian or the South Indian Family of Languages.”

The word I have chosen is ‘Dravidian’, from Dravida, the adjectival form of Dravida. This term, it is true, has sometimes been used, and is still sometime used, in almost as restricted a sense as that of Tamil itself, so that though on the whole it is the best term I can find, I admit that it is not perfectly free from ambiguity. It is a term, however, which has already been used more or less distinctively by Sanskrit philologists, as a generic appellation for the South Indian people and their languages, and it is the only single term they seem ever to have been used in this manner. I have, therefore, no doubt of the propriety of adopting it.²⁶¹

²⁶⁰ Cohn, 71.

²⁶¹ Caldwell, Robert. *A Comparative Grammar of the Dravidian or South-Indian Family of Languages*. 3rd edition J.L Wyatt and T. Ramakrishna Pillai, eds. (London: Kegan Paul, Trench, Trubner & Co., Ltd, 1913), 4.

According to the Dravidian linguist P. Sreekumar, “Drāviḍa” indeed had indigenous origins and shifted between a descriptive term for languages and peoples.²⁶² Caldwell was not the first Orientalist scholar of South Indian languages or the first to use the word “Dravidian” to describe the languages. P. Sreekumar’s enlightening essay documents the work of Francis Whyte Ellis’ 1816 introduction to Alexander Duncan Campbell’s *Dictionary of Teloogoo Language*. Both Ellis and Campbell theorized that the Dravidian languages had a non-Sanskrit base. Although now recognized as correct, their theories were ignored in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries—when Hasting’s and Jones’ Hindu law books were codified. Instead Henry Thomas Colebrooke’s 1801 publication “On the Sanscrit and Pracrit Languages” and William Carey’s *A Grammar of the Sanscrit Language* put forth the theory that all Dravidian languages had a Sanskrit root which had much more salience in the colonial administration than Ellis’ and Campbell’s studies.

The Sanskritization of Dravidian languages united all Hindus in India. Thus, Brahmin pundits familiar with Vedic texts written in Sanskrit were consulted in the codification of Hindu personal law under British India. In her work on *sati* in colonial Bengal, Lata Mani explains that texts were hegemonic to any regional variations in the practice of widow immolation. While Brahmin pundits familiar with texts referencing *sati* often times stressed that they were only interpreters, the pundits’ response was often taken by the British as authoritative. Brahmin pundits were called upon to have unambiguous textual support of *sati* and to have recourse to practice only when no other documentation was available. Further, older texts were preferred to newer. The oldest

²⁶² Sreekumar, P. “Francis White Ellis and the Beginnings of Comparative Dravidian Linguistics.” *Historiographia Linguistica*. XXXVI:1 (2009), 78.

texts were considered the least untainted as they supposedly originated from a purer Vedic tradition (and thus a purer Sanskrit) than texts written during or after Muslim invasions of India.²⁶³ Bernard Cohn's analysis of the codification of Hindu law also reveals that both Jones and Hastings preferred the text's literal meaning to an interpretation of the texts by natives and older texts were viewed by colonial administrators as more authoritative.²⁶⁴ Codification of law during British colonialism furthered a religious divide between Hindus and Muslims while it simultaneously homogenized all Hindus as governed by texts in one language. Hindu personal law was able to cover both the Aryan and Dravidian Indian language speakers because of the promotion of a Sanskrit base theory. If all Indian languages came from Sanskrit, then Hindu texts written in "pure" Sanskrit represented all languages. That is, *Hindu peoples as a race distinct from Muslims* throughout India could be considered governed by one personal code based on the Sanskrit language. Further, the unifications of Hindus throughout India justified a separate civil code for Muslims—governed by Arabic/Persian texts.

However, there remained a division between Aryans and Dravidians despite the hegemony of the flawed Sanskrit base theory. As Dagmar Hellman-Rajanayagam explains,

What European scholars did in applying the term [Dravidian] was to conflate the place and language with an assumed 'race,' and in the same breath to treat the language as a debased dialect derived from Sanskrit.²⁶⁵

²⁶³ Mani, Lata. "Contentious Traditions: The Debate on Sati in Colonial India." in *Recasting Women: Essays in Indian Colonial History*. eds. Kumkum Sangari and Sudesh Vaid. (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 1990): 109-115.

²⁶⁴ Cohn, 71.

²⁶⁵ Hellman-Rajanayagam, Dagmar. "Is there A Tamil Race?" in *The Concept of Race in South Asia*. ed. Peter Robb. (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1997), 132.

So the separation of Aryan and Dravidian races could continue on in the popular imaginary even as Hindu peoples were united under Sanskrit/Aryan roots. This additionally contributes to the confusing nature of race in South Asia. In Foucauldian terms, as the colonized population became a primary concern for colonial interests, a biological notion of sameness through race helped to mathematically group and govern speakers of all Indian languages. It in turn solidified an understanding that Hindus are the peoples of South Asia and further marginalized Muslims as “others.” At the same time, race continued to operate as the stand in for why and how caste divisions worked. Therefore, divisions between Aryans and Dravidians could remain without interrogating issues of purity/pollution, kinship and/or the ritualizing of female sexuality through endogamous marriages.

The Aryanization of Kerala High-Caste Christians

As mentioned, in the nineteenth-century, *Rgveda* scholar Max Müller theorized that the Aryans conquered the native Dravidians and established dominance over them by constituting themselves as the top of the caste hierarchy. In this theory, the lower-caste Dravidians were pushed South by the conquering Aryans until they settled in present day South India. In South Indian scholarship, the theory of Aryan racial supremacy has remained and is taken-for-granted as historical fact.²⁶⁶

²⁶⁶ Not all of South India embraced the theory of Aryan conquest over Dravidians and the submission of Dravidians to the caste system. In fact, the Anti-Brahmin and Dravidian movement of Tamil Nadu can be seen as a direct challenge to the theories of Aryan domination over Dravidians and Sanskrit inclusion of Dravidian languages respectively. Yet it is significant that no other South Indian state allied themselves with Tamil Nadu’s Dravidian movement. In fact, as Dagmar Hellman-Rajanayagam relates, the perception of Aryan superiority is so great that other South Indians attempt to stress Aryan heritage and disassociate from Tamils. Especially during British colonialism, an Aryan identity provided better access to resources, education and civil service jobs. See Hellman-Rajanayagam, 134.

According to the text, *Keralolpatti*, the South West region of India now known as Kerala was a gift of the Arabian sea to the avatar of Vishnu, Parasuram. Parasuram threw his ax across the sea, and from where he threw (Gokarnam) to where the ax landed (Kanyakumari), the water receded and fertile land sprang forth. Parashuram settled the Brahmins as masters of this land in sixty-four villages. This story of origins is understood by scholars as an explanation for Brahmin migration and later dominance in Kerala. However, the story also relates a difference between Aryans and Dravidians. The Brahmins ordained by Parashuram brought with them a ‘superior’ Vedic society and a caste system that gradually replaced a Dravidian society. Thus, in Kerala, Brahmin and Aryan are often used interchangeably.

It is generally believed that Brahmins came to Kerala from the north in different waves of migration. MGS Narayanan’s “Nambudiris: Migrations and Early Settlements in Kerala” examines the traditions of Kerala *Namboodiri* Brahmins and Brahmins from other South Indian regions. Kerala has a fairly large community of Tamil Brahmins that are considered distinct from *Namboodiri* Brahmin migration. For the most part, Tamil Brahmins remained quite separate from Kerala *Namboodiri* Brahmins over centuries. Narayanan hypothesizes that the Brahmins of Kerala most likely originated from Karnataka and Andhra as the customs of these Brahmins and Kerala Brahmins are similar. In fact, thirty-two of Parashuram’s villages are believed to have been in Karnataka and the remaining thirty-two in Kerala.²⁶⁷

However, as to the exact dates of Brahmin migration from the north to Kerala, scholars remain divided. In “St. Thomas Christians and Nambudiri Brahmins: A Note,”

²⁶⁷ Narayanan, MGS. “Nambudiris: Migrations and early settlements in Kerala” in *St. Thomas Christians and Nambudiris Jews and Sangam Literature: A Historical Appraisal*. ed. Bosco Puthur. (Cochin: LRC Publications, 2003), 87-92.

Rajan Gurukkal states that there was a Brahmin presence in Kerala during the 2nd century, but that they were not dominant in society at that time.²⁶⁸ Historian KP Padmanabha Menon theorizes that Brahmins were in Kerala even earlier—by the 3rd Century BC.²⁶⁹ TK Gangadharan’s estimates that Brahmin migration completed by 7th century.²⁷⁰ William Logan, British Collector of Malabar and author of the *Malabar Manual*, argued that there could only have been an established caste system by 8th Century AD.²⁷¹ In “Social Life and Customs of the St. Thomas Christians” George Menachery substantiates Brahmin domination in Kerala after the 10th century with an analysis of inscriptions and grants by Kerala rulers. According to Menachery, Brahmin and/or *Namboodiri* signatures are not present until then.²⁷²

With no consensus between historians, it is difficult to conjecture Aryan/Brahmin arrival into Kerala. However, the majority of histories seem to agree that while there may have been small settlements of Brahmins in Kerala, their influence was not felt until somewhere between the 7-10th century when society became feudal and temple orientated. Pertinent to this dissertation, then, are the dates of Brahmin dominance and time of conversion for Syrian Christians. Even if St. Thomas converted Brahmins in 52AD, they would not have been dominant in Kerala society. Syrian Christian communal memory of Brahmin origins and Aryan superiority, however, remains vivid despite a gap of about 600-800 years between their conversion and the *Namboodiri* Brahmin superior status.

²⁶⁸ Gurukkal, Rajan. “St. Thomas Christians and Nambudiri Brahmins: A Note,” in *St. Thomas Christians and Nambudiris Jews and Sangam Literature: A Historical Appraisal*. ed. Bosco Puthur. (Cochin: LRC Publications, 2003), 109.

²⁶⁹ Gangadharan, TK. *Evolution of Kerala History and Culture*. (Calicut: Calicut University Central), 92.

²⁷⁰ Gangadharan, 92.

²⁷¹ Gangadharan, 92.

²⁷² Menachery, George. “Social Life and Customs of the St. Thomas Christians in the Pre-Diamper Period. in *The Life and Nature of the St. Thomas Christian Church in the Pre-Diamper Period*. ed. Bosco Purther (Cochin: LRC Publications, 2000), 197.

Yet very few historians take up this chronological discrepancy. MGS Narayanan is one of the few stating,

The vested interests of communities and groups have been responsible for the persistence of certain traditions like the myths of Parusu Rama, St. Thomas, Cerman Perumal etc. Historical research had a delayed start in Kerala. This gave the opportunity for interest groups to popularize their pet ideas and pass them on as authentic history. They had come to associate these myths with their own status and privileges. Once the community leaders and politicians published their ‘theories’ about ancient history, their followers developed a mind-set that resisted interpretations based on evidence.²⁷³

The reluctance of other historians to critically examine the historical record only solidifies the superiority of Brahmins/Aryans through a preservation of privilege through believed origins. Narayanan’s statement questioning the timeline of ancient history of Kerala is followed by an editor’s footnote: “almost all good historians today consider the Parusu Rama legend as myth. This is not the case with the tradition of St. Thomas...The St. Thomas Christians have cherished this tradition from very early times and this consciousness is a mark of their identity.” The editor goes on to question Dr. Narayan’s credibility as a historian in comparison to Syrian Christian historians who are in agreement over St. Thomas’ evangelism in Kerala and the conversion of Brahmins/Aryans to Syrian Christianity.²⁷⁴

There is no evidence to suggest that Kerala Brahmins/Aryans were in any way superior to Dravidians. In fact, historians claim the opposite—that the incorporation of Vedic culture into Dravidian culture was more of a mutual exchange and was gradual. Yet in my own work, I have uncovered that South Indian historians continue to rely on the assumption of Aryan superiority. Sreedhara Menon, one of the foremost scholars on

²⁷³ Narayanan, 82.

²⁷⁴ Puthur, Bosco, 82.

Kerala history states: “Though the Aryans were numerically small, they possessed intellectual ability and organizing skill of a high order.”²⁷⁵ Menon also argues that the local Dravidians were forced to submit to “superior intelligence and administrative skills of Brahmins from the north” without stating exactly what those skills were.²⁷⁶ Although the Dravidians are theorized to be agriculturalists that taught the Aryan pastoralists, Gangadharan argues that the Aryans “came with better iron equipments than that of the tools of the indigenous people. They could clear the forest more easily and start cultivation. The spread of agriculture naturally paved way for their settlements.”²⁷⁷ What exactly these tools were and the fact that the Dravidians too were involved in agriculture does not factor into this assertion. MGS Narayanan, the well respected Kerala historian argues that Aryanization of Tamilians was simultaneous to the Tamilization of Aryans—a process of cultural exchange. Yet Narayanan contradicts this again and again in his work stating “The Dravidian tribes had their own social traditions, language and culture. However, they were not as developed or as well organized as the northern immigrants who represented the classical Hindu Sanskrit culture.”²⁷⁸ The alleged underdeveloped semi-tribal nature of Dravidian society is explained by Narayanan because they lacked naval power and coins. But it is not clear from his work that the migrating Aryans had a naval power or coins that would classify them as developed.²⁷⁹ Further, Narayanan seems to support the Aryan conquest theory stating: “As the moral and material superiority of the Aryans manifested itself, the majority of the Dravidians

²⁷⁵ Menon, Sreedhara. *A Survey of Kerala History*. (Madras: S. Viswanathan (Printers & Publishers) Pvt, Ltd, 2000), 57.

²⁷⁶ Menon, 101.

²⁷⁷ Gangadharan, 93.

²⁷⁸ Narayanan, 85.

²⁷⁹ Narayanan, MGS. *Cultural Symbiosis in Kerala*. (Trivandrum: Kerala Historical Society, 1972), 5.

gradually acquiesced in the caste system which relegated many of them to the outer darkness of poverty and slavish obedience.”²⁸⁰

In actuality, Aryanization in Kerala saw the rise of arguably the most rigid caste systems in all of India and the consolidation of Brahmanical patriarchal power as discussed in chapter 2. Kerala not only practiced untouchability, but unseeability. In addition, Kerala Brahmins became very ritualized in its adherence to caste boundaries and norms. Different from other Brahmins in India, the *Namboodiri* Brahmins of Kerala followed the strict *Sankara Smriti*. Sanskritization is also characterized by the rise of temple orientated and feudal society. Following the Sangam age, *devaswam* (temple) lands became exempted from tax and were never attacked. Landowners gradually signed over their lands to temples for protection and became vassals to landowners. “In the course of time, the temples became the biggest land-owners of medieval Kerala.”²⁸¹ As Brahmins consolidated land, local chiefs and rulers began to patron the Brahmin priests and bestow favors upon them. The social organizing caste based society and use of Sanskrit language as sacred language characterized Brahmanic power. This knowledge was reserved for Brahmin men alone.

Culturally, the Sangam age in Kerala that directly precedes Aryan migration to the region produced both men and women poets from a wide range of backgrounds. In outlining the literature produced by the Sangam poets, editors Susie Tharu and K. Lalita describe the volumes as “the oldest and most distinguished body of secular poetry extant in India.”²⁸² Noting that the poetry was written in a time before Aryan culture took hold

²⁸⁰ Narayanan, *Cultural Symbiosis*, 2.

²⁸¹ Gangadharan, 185.

²⁸² Tharu, Susie and K. Lalita. *Women Writing in India: 600 BC to the Early Twentieth Century*. (Oxford University Press, 1991) 70.

in South India, the editors explain that 154 of the 2381 poems were written by women, and a possible 102 anonymous poems most likely were authored by women. Considering that Aryanization resulted in the subordination of peoples in an emerging hierarchal social organizing system, effectively cut out women from education, and feudalized society it is curious that Kerala historians continue to attribute “superiority” to Aryan culture. I argue that this disconnection relates to contemporary political, caste, economic and social power. Understanding power and perceived origins in Kerala, then, can reveal why and how race continues to mediate behaviors between peoples based on perceived difference in South Asia.

Uma Chakravarty describes caste power through the intersections between casteism and patriarchy—otherwise known as Brahmanical patriarchy in *Gendering Caste through a Feminist Lens*. Chakravarty explains that as Brahmin men had a monopoly on knowledge, any caste that supported Brahmin dominance could act as the means of coercion to keep all other groups in line. This combined power downplays the skills/knowledge of the lower castes and women. Thus, Brahmanical patriarchy is enacted through the support of forward castes and the simultaneous suppression of lower castes and women.²⁸³ In Kerala, this alliance manifested itself in two ways: the peculiar marriage alliance between *Namboodiris* and *Nayars* and in Syrian Christians’ intermediate status between *Namboodiris* and so-called polluting castes.

During British colonialism, *Namboodiri* Brahmins were only .5% of population in Kerala, while foreign Brahmins in Kerala constituted 1.2%.²⁸⁴ The small numbers of

²⁸³ Chakravarti, Uma. *Gendering Caste Through a Feminist Lens*. (Calcutta: Stree, 2006), 17-18.

²⁸⁴ Namboodiri, Damodaran D. “Caste and Social Change in Colonial Kerala.” *Perspectives on Kerala History: The Second Millennium*. Vol II, Part II. ed. PJ Cherian. (Trivandrum: Kerala Gazetters, 1999), 430-1.

Namboodiri Brahmins can be attributed to the marriage arrangement between *Namboodiris* and *Nayars*. Only *Namboodiri* oldest sons were allowed to marry within the caste ensuring that landed property stayed in the hands of the *Namboodiris*. This ensured that the *Namboodiri* property, the *illam* would not be partitioned among sons. The problem with this arrangement was that property generationally increased in the hands of the few and tenancy for other castes became compulsory. To support this fragile agricultural arrangement, younger *Namboodiri* sons entered into a loose marriage arrangements with *Nayar* women. The *Nayar* caste was matrilineal and women stayed in the natal house after marriage. In other words, ties to the mother's house were not severed after marriage as in patrilineal castes.²⁸⁵ *Nayar* families entering into alliances were duly rewarded with posts, land, and upper-caste status. They became supporters of the landowning *Namboodiri* Brahmins. Thus, the Brahmin patriarchal alliance arose that benefited both castes:

While the Brahmanical perceptions of sudra rank had ostensibly informed the defilement customs vis-à-vis *Nayars*, the military, political and economic dominance of the matrilineal castes seemed to have extenuated even intimate marital ties between their women and Brahman husbands. Thus economic and power hierarchies seemed to most blatantly determine social practices and rules including those in relation to caste and marriage. The political and economic supremacy of the Samantas and *Nayars* in pre-colonial and colonial Kerala, like that of the *sat-shudras* such as Vellalas, Reddis, Kapus and Vokkalingas elsewhere in South India not only earned

²⁸⁵ Matrilineal is not to be confused with matriarchal. It would be easy (and feminists have assumed) that women were “empowered” and “liberated” under the matrilineal system. Kerala scholars have shown that it was much more complicated than this. While women did have certain autonomy they were also parts of large joint families and lived within restrictive duties/movements. Further, in the 19th Century the British interpreted the matrilineal family unit to be headed by the oldest male uncle, the *Karanavan*, who often controlled the marriages of women in the family. In the 20th century, it was *Nayar* women themselves who supported an end to the matrilineal system as Kerala moved from a feudal to capitalistic economic system. See Arunima, G. *There Comes Papa: Colonialism and the Transformation of Matriliney in Kerala, Malabar c. 1850-1940*. (Hyderabad: Orient Longman Private Limited, 2003), Saradamoni, K. *Matriliney Transformed: Family, Law and Ideology in Twentieth Century Travancore*. (New Delhi: Sage Publications, 1999), and Renjini, D. *Nayar Women Today: Disintegration of Matrilineal System and the Status of Nayar Women in Kerala* (New Delhi: Classical Publishing Company, 2000).

them an elevated status but also granted them privileged participation in local and temple administration.²⁸⁶

Despite being of the Sudra caste, then, the *Nayars* in their support of Brahmanical patriarchy became part of the privileged castes of Kerala. Like *Nayars*, Syrian Christians are part of the forward castes. High caste status is not only a claim of the Syrian Christians, but is *supported* by many Kerala historians, castes, religions and the Kerala government itself.²⁸⁷ As previously stated, while Brahmins may have existed in Kerala in 52 AD, the caste stratification of *Namboodiris* was not solidified from somewhere between 7-10th century. Only with help from chiefs, civil strife of Chera/Chola wars, and *Namboodiri* consolidation of land as custodians of temples does Kerala's caste stratification emerge. However, historians have neglected this disconnection. Lack of historical scholarship allowed community leaders and politicians to associate Aryan origins with their status—that is, to associate present day status/gains in economic, social, and cultural realms as part of a natural supremacy stemming from their Aryan/Brahmin origins. This insistence of Aryan/Brahmin (and slip between the two) would not be possible unless supported wholeheartedly by communal memory. As related by members of the community:

Romo-Syrians believe they were converted from Brahmins. If you ask any ordinary Catholic they'll say "yes, we were converted from Aryans." They will not give any proof, they will simply say they are Aryans...We believe we are converted because we are upper class in Kerala. We believe converted from *Namboodiris*.²⁸⁸

We [Romo-Syrians] are *Nayar* and *Namboodiri* converts. We are Aryan. We know because we are related to Hindus. We have lamps in our

²⁸⁶ Namboodiri, 431-2.

²⁸⁷ Syrian Christians do not receive reservations while other Christians of Kerala do.

²⁸⁸ Mathai, Interview in English and Malayalam by Author, Dec 11, 2007.

churches. We build our churches in the model of temples. Latins have a different layout. Our cross is different than Latins.²⁸⁹

There are no *jatis*...there are only two *vargums* (races/colors): Dravidian and Aryan. With two languages and civilizations. From there, St. Thomas came to Kerala and converted Brahmins. That's how we Catholics came about. We [Romo-Syrian] are Aryan.²⁹⁰

In a caste stratified community it would make sense to want to identify with upper-caste/Aryan race status. But what would make Kerala society, or those in power (*Namboodiris* and *Nayars*) allow and even support claims of caste/racial superiority of the Syrians?

The answer lies in their becoming a both separate entity within Kerala religions and an entity that could act as an intermediary between other religions and castes and their support of brahmanical patriarchy. The use of the Aramaic language was one of the ways in which Syrians defined themselves as a legitimate separate group. Romo-Syrian priests resisted the Latin language and liturgy for almost five-hundred years, and continued to conduct mass in Aramaic before finally switching to the vernacular in the late 1950s. The use of Aramaic allowed the Syrians to establish themselves as a separate religious identity in Kerala: Syrian Christian sacred language was Aramaic, Hindu sacred language Sanskrit, and Muslim sacred language Arabic. The use of Aramaic became associated with an indigenous practice standing up in the face of persecution and reform efforts coming from the West.

After the rise of Brahmin power and temple centered society, Christians filled an economic void and largely were merchants. Knowledge of Aramaic also helped with Middle Eastern trade. As MGS Naryanan notes, "This phenomenon of cultural symbiosis

²⁸⁹ Saramma. Interview in Malayalam by Author. December 3, 2007.

²⁹⁰ Markos. Interview in Malayalam by Author. December 3, 2007.

can be explained by the fact that such small communities brought enormous profit from trade and did not threaten the interests of the ruling classes.”²⁹¹ This non-threatening nature of Syrian Christians in respect of the Hindu forward castes ultimately resulted in the use of Christians for purification purposes. That is, Syrian Christians became known as purifiers and were able to nullify the polluting aspects of lower castes. By the 9th century, lamp oil made by the polluting castes was an important aspect to Kerala life in both temples and households. Oil was readily available in Kerala and was largely manufactured by the low caste Vaniyans: “For some obscure reason, Manu, the law-giver, ordained oil-pressing as a base occupation. Those who took to it were held in poor esteem.”²⁹² With the growing caste divisions, oil manufactured by lower castes would not be touched by upper castes in household or temple use. Syrians Christians fit neatly into this social arrangement as purifiers. One touch from a Syrian Christian would have purifying effects. According to a Syrian Christian elder, Threshamma, Syrians were often invited to *Namboodiri* households to purify objects that were touched by lower castes.²⁹³ Many Syrian Christian families entered into social contracts with the *Namboodiri* landlords. For instance, the *Vazhiambalathumkal* family of Kottayam district traces both their name and landed property to this intermediary status. *Vazhi* meaning “road” *ambalam* meaning “temple,” the *Vazhiambalathumkal* Christians traveled at the behest of a Hindu landed family to purify the lamps of their temples. In return, they were given large tracts of land. This special status of Christians also granted distance from low-castes that elevated their status—the low caste touch defiled, the

²⁹¹ Narayanan, *Cultural Symbiosis*, 96.

²⁹² Iyer, Krishna LA. *Social History of Kerala. Vol II—The Dravidians*. (Madras: Book Centre Publications, 1970), 8.

²⁹³ Threshamma. Interview in Malayalam by author. Sept 7, 2007.

Syrian Christian touch would put the low caste touch null and void. Thus, Syrians also began to practice untouchability to keep themselves pure and in service to *Namboodiri* Brahmins. In return, Syrian Christians supported the brahmanical patriarchal system. This exchange between the separate and intermediate Romo-Syrians and upper caste Hindus strengthened Brahman patriarchal authority over who was pure and who was polluted, who was dominant and subordinate, and which knowledge mattered or was considered insignificant. Like *Nayars*, Syrians benefited from and contributed quite willingly to brahmanical patriarchy in Kerala.

Romo-Syrian practices that were similar to upper-caste practices were not judged as mimicry of upper-caste Hindu practice, but accepted by upper-caste Hindus as a Romo-Syrian birthright. There is a differentiation between those who would mimic and those who reportedly *are*. In Kerala, this was exemplified *bodily* in allowed clothing and ornaments of women (Chapter 2). The attempts of the low-caste Christian converts, the Nadars, to cover and also the right to wear cream/white was seen by upper-castes as a mimicry of upper-caste traditions—as an attempt to cross a caste boundary. The Romo-Syrian use of white and covering of the breasts, however, was/is not seen as a mimicry but as a birthright stemming from their declared Aryan roots and Hindu upper caste recognition of those roots. Rather than just accepting their acknowledged upper-caste status, Syrian Christians actively maintained their privilege by policing lower-caste Christians. The Syrian Christians themselves considered any kind of appropriation of dress as infringing on their status: “The Syrian Christians consider the usurpation of the traditional Syrian dress and genealogical connections by the Latins as presumptuous

attempts to claim Syrian or upper caste status.”²⁹⁴ And when the Church Missionary Society attempted to seat *Pulaya* (low caste) converts among the Syrian Christians, Syrian Christian families resisted forming the Anti *Pulaya* Agitation Committee.²⁹⁵ As CJ Fuller explains, a Syrian Christian can attend a Latin Catholic mass and still retain their Syrian identity. Latin Christians, however, rarely ever attend Syrian Christian masses. Thus, a Syrian Christian is more likely to marry a *Nayar* or *Namboodiri* than a low-caste Christian revealing the mutual exchange associated with brahmanical patriarchy.²⁹⁶ Caste divisions, then, rigidified under the notion of origins and strengthened by Brahmanical patriarchy, served to wed together definitions of polluting castes and Dravidian races and by relation, purity and Aryan races.

Race as Class Determined

As discussed in the previous section, caste and race are often times used interchangeably in Kerala and the idea of pollution is distinctly tied up with the purity of race. Mixed into this is the fairness of one’s skin. The association between Aryan and purity of caste led to the taken-for-granted assumption that upper castes are more fair skinned than caste Dravidians. Of course, this is not always the case, and upper caste men/women may have dark skin and Dravidian features just as readily as lower caste men/women could be fair. It does, however, continue to shape the economic prospects of bodies—which bodies are suited to do which jobs.

In an intriguing chapter of *Modernization and Effeminization in India*, Anna Lindberg discusses how jobs within cashew factories in Kerala are dependent on one’s

²⁹⁴ Philips, 259.

²⁹⁵ Jeffrey, 21.

²⁹⁶ Fuller, CJ. “Kerala Christians and the Caste System.” *Man*. 11 no. 1 (March 1976), 57.

caste. The dirtiest job, shelling the cashews, is done by the lowest castes of the factories. Shelling is the most unhealthy job as it involves removing the roasted nuts from the corrosive black oily shells. The next step up is peeling, or removing the brown skin from the cashews and is performed by both the scheduled castes and the Ezhavas caste. *Nayar* women in cashew factories exclusively work in the grading section, separating the peeled white cashews.²⁹⁷ Although Lindberg's analysis rests on caste as the basis for the division of labor, the fact that the lowest caste employee works with black shells, the middle castes with brown skins and the highest caste with white cashews points to *an understanding of color when it comes to employing certain castes*. That is, the supposed darkest bodies of the factory deal with the darkest part of the nut, and the supposed fairest bodies (recall the *Nayar/Namboodiri* marriage alliance) with the whitest part.

Such an association between skin color and polluting jobs has its roots in which bodies are considered suited for manual labor and toiling in the sun. As mentioned, caste and occupation became tied to each other during the Aryanization of Kerala in the post-Sangam age, when Kerala became feudal, lands were handed over to the tax exempt and conflict free temples, and *Namboodiri* Brahmins consolidated power. A whole host of occupations emerged that were tied to Kerala's emerging temple orientated society. It is from this social division of labor by caste that *Pulayas* and *Parayas* became agricultural laborers, Syrian Christians became purifiers and the Ezhava caste became toddy tappers (coconut harvesters). According to Eapen, this division of labor has lasted into the 21st century: "A casual acquaintance with these activities reveals that the division of workers in these occupations by social groups has not undergone much change—the *Pulayas*

²⁹⁷ Lindberg, Anna. *Modernization and Effeminization in India: Kerala cashew workers since 1930*. (Copenhagen: NIAS Press, 2005), 55-82.

engage in agricultural labour, *Parayas* in basket weaving, *Ezhavas* in coir (coconut husk production), handloom weaving and brick-making.²⁹⁸ There rose an association between manual labor and dark skin—toiling in the hot sun as toddy tappers or agricultural laborers, then, would result in dark skinned bodies.²⁹⁹ Therefore, employment is limited by skin color just as skin color invokes assumptions on what type of work one's body is suited for.

In the second half of the 20th century, Kerala's economy shifted dramatically. As discussed in chapter 2, the rise of rubber cultivation in Kottayam district profoundly decreased the need for agricultural labor. Education of all castes, religions and both genders led to high unemployment rates for white collar job seekers. Emigration for the sake of employment has come to characterize Kerala peoples and Kerala culture, and within the dynamics of migration, jobs prospects for migrants and returning migrants continue to be based on race. The Centre for Development Studies estimates that 3.75 million people have migrated to other countries and to other states in India in search of employment.³⁰⁰ In the decades of the 1970s-90s, Kerala male laborers filled the need for construction workers in the increasingly affluent Middle-Eastern countries. 95% of all Kerala migrants migrate for manual labor jobs.³⁰¹ The Centre for Development Studies estimates that 65% of migrants are from the Scheduled Castes/Scheduled Tribes, 60% are Muslims, and 50% are *Ezhavas*. Yet Syrian Christian migrants to the Gulf very rarely

²⁹⁸ Eapen, Mridul. "Women in Informal Sector in Kerala: Need for Re-Examination." *Economic and Political Weekly* (June 30, 2001): 2391.

²⁹⁹ Philips, 259.

³⁰⁰ Zachariah, KC, ET Mathew and S. Irudaya Rajan. "Impact of Migration on Kerala's Economy and Society" *Center for Development Studies Working Paper Series*. 297 (October, 1999): 8.

³⁰¹ Zachariah, KC, ET Mathew and S. Irudaya Rajan. *Dynamics of Migration in Kerala: Dimensions, Differentials and Consequences*. (Hyderabad: Orient Longman Private Limited, 2003), 128.

were employed in manual labor: “The Syrian Christians were under-represented (only 5.5%) in this sector.”³⁰²

Table 3.36 Occupation of Emigrants at Destination by Community
(in per cent)

Occupation at destination	Community							All
	SCs/STs	Nairs	Ezhawas	Syrian Christians	Latin Christians	Muslims	Others	
State/govt. employee	0.0	6.7	1.8	6.0	2.4	1.3	2.1	2.4
Semi-govt. employee	0.0	0.7	0.4	1.7	0.6	1.0	0.0	0.8
Private-sector employee	32.3	59.3	38.2	75.7	45.0	29.0	42.3	40.3
Self-employed	3.2	3.3	4.0	1.7	3.6	5.2	5.6	4.4
Unpaid worker	0.0	0.0	0.0	0.0	0.0	0.0	0.0	0.0
Agr. labourer	0.0	0.0	0.0	0.0	0.0	0.1	0.0	0.0
Non-agr. labour	64.5	24.0	50.2	5.5	41.2	59.6	44.4	46.9
Unemployed	0.0	0.0	1.4	0.9	1.2	0.5	0.7	0.7
Voluntarily employed	0.0	1.3	0.0	0.9	0.0	0.3	0.7	0.4
Student	0.0	0.7	2.2	3.8	2.4	0.9	0.7	1.5
Household work	0.0	4.0	1.8	3.8	3.6	2.1	3.5	2.6
All	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0

Syrian Christians, in other words, migrate for desk jobs.

Upon return, migrants are again face differing employment opportunities by race.

Looking at employment in Kerala among returning migrants, the Centre’s study combined data on Gulf returning migrants and internal returning migrants. Generally, they found that both types of migrants tended to improve in “employment status” when abroad. That is, the type of work and pay generally increases from the job the migrant had before migrating to the job the migrant takes at the destination. However, when a migrant returns, only Syrian Christians and *Nayar* castes benefited.³⁰³ That is, Syrian

³⁰² Zachariah, et.al. *Dynamics*, 105.

³⁰³ Zacharia, et. al., “Impact of Migration,” 28.

Christians migrants, largely migrating for white collar jobs, benefited from that employment abroad while other castes/religions did not. This suggests that something about Syrian Christians would make them more employable upon return than Ezhavas, Scheduled Castes/Scheduled Tribes and Muslims. I suggest this something is race.

The assumption that light bodies do status work and dark bodies do manual cuts across employment opportunities for women as well. Job opportunities for women are gender segregated, women disproportionately doing more “care” work and employed in jobs that have few opportunities for upward mobility. Small agricultural labor including weeding, informal sector work, coir work (coconut husk), fish vending, sewing, teaching and nursing are some of the jobs gendered “female.” But these jobs are divided by race and caste. Syrian Christian women dominant the fields of teaching and nursing while manual labor jobs (such as weeding, coir work and fish vending) are reserved for the lower-castes. As Kerala’s agricultural sector underwent a shift in the mid 20th century, upper-caste women retreated to the domestic sphere while low caste women continued to be employed in manual labor jobs. Manual labor is now seen as beneath women from affluent communities such as the Syrian Christians: “Women in such upwardly mobile or affluent household retreat from poorly paid manual and/or informal sector work but are not averse to more employment considered to have ‘status’, particularly regular jobs in the government sector.”³⁰⁴ Both Lakshmy Devi in her article “Education, Employment and Job Preferences of Women in Kerala” and Mridul Eapen’s article “Women and Work Mobility” suggest this preference for “status employment” is because of education.³⁰⁵ If

³⁰⁴ Eapen, Mridul. “Women and Work Mobility: Some Disquieting Evidences from the Indian Data.” *Centre for Development Studies Working Paper Series*. 358 (May, 2004): 21.

³⁰⁵ Eapen, “Women and Work,” 21. Devi, Lakshmy KR. “Education, Employment, and Job Preference of

a woman is educated, they would expect and desire a better job. Yet it is common for women of all castes and religions to be educated—not just Syrian Christian women.

Thus, it is not just education that engenders desire for status jobs/disdain for manual labor.

“Women” as a group are not united in their participation in the state’s labor force. Female labor force participation is high for low and middle income groups and low for high-income groups.³⁰⁶ That is, lower income women do work at a high rate while affluent women do not. Further, Devi’s quantitative analysis of Kerala women and their work patterns reveals that the proximity of a job to the home factors into job preference.³⁰⁷

There is actually a preference for staying at home rather than taking on a position that is racially beneath a desired status. The role of mother and housewife is very much idealized in Kerala. It is commonly viewed that “tradition” and “culture” is disseminated to the young by mothers. This formation is historically tied to social constructions of gender based on the sexual division of labor. While it is not inevitable that the female must bear the consequences of unintended pregnancy and be in charge of raising children, in patriarchal societies, motherhood is ascribed as the primary role for women. South Asian feminists have discussed at length how women come to represent community and indeed, the nation, through their caregiver role.³⁰⁸ Thus, it is a role that is often celebrated and subscribed to by women. If having a job would interfere with a women’s supposed moral behavior by exacting the necessity of traveling alone without her

Women in Kerala: A micro-level case study” *Centre for Development Studies Discussion Paper Series*. 42 (2002), 81.

³⁰⁶ Devi, 76.

³⁰⁷ Devi, 76.

³⁰⁸ See, for example, Sarkar, Tanika. *Hindu Wife Hindu Nation: Community, Religion and Cultural Nationalism*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2002. Sarkar, Tanika, and Urvashi Butalia, eds. *Women and the Hindu Right: A Collection of Essays*. Delhi: Kali for Women, 1995.

husband, traveling great distance from the house, or traveling at night, employment is forgone and one's domestic role is lauded.

Keralites having claim to Brahmin and Aryan origins succeeded in stratifying Kerala society to such a degree that to this day, caste and race privilege continues to divide women based on the perceived morality of upper-caste women. Prema Kurien's analysis of ethnicity and migration in Kerala discusses, at length, the link between community status and ethnicity. According to Kurien, "status manifests what the group considers to be important and prestigious and these values give the group unity and coherence. Such behavior is closely related to codes of honor and shame." These codes of honor value different virtues for men and women. Yet they are most visible in the distinctions between "good" and "bad" women and notions of the appropriate female body.³⁰⁹ As Amali Philips notes in "Gendering Color: Identity, Femininity and Marriage in Kerala," the "good" Kerala women is fair skinned. Philips explains how the *pennukannal* or bride-viewing ritual has a large role in the Syrian Christian marriage exactly because of this link between fairness and perceived morality. In this custom, the prospective groom and his family visits the prospective bride's parents. Sometime during the visit, the prospective bride serves the groom and his family tea and sweets allowing the fairness of her skin (and her mother's skin) to be viewed. As the ideal wife and mother is devoted to the moral upbringing of children, women's skin color can be the basis for a rejection/proposal of marriage.³¹⁰ The curious *mannapedi* and *pulapedi* custom of Kerala is believed to be practiced in order for moral norms and caste/racial purity to be maintained and again exemplifies these divisions between upper caste

³⁰⁹ Kurien, 32-3.

³¹⁰ Philips, Amali. "Gendering Colour: Identity, Femininity and Marriage in Kerala." *Anthropologica*. 46.2 (2004): 262-3.

morality and lower-caste immorality. In this custom, an upper-caste woman seen or touched by a stick/stone thrown by lower caste man in the evening of a particular day was excommunicated from her caste and claimed by the low-caste man.³¹¹ Thus, it is up to the women of upper-caste communities to preserve their moral goodness and reserve their sexuality for men of their community alone. Restrictions on mobility, the prevalence of sex-segregated spaces and a public space absent of upper-caste women at night only serve to support this protection of upper-caste female chastity (chapter 3). Conversely it renders the low-castes entirely bound by sexual deviance. Taboos against inter-caste marriage and scandals over illicit unions between upper-caste women and low caste men sensationalized in the media reveal the link between caste purity, race and sexuality. As Anupama Rao relates in the introduction to the edited volume *Gender and Caste*:

The co-existence of prohibitions against marriage and the persistence of illicit sexual union is an important paradox in understanding the profound anxieties about sexuality and caste purity that issues of caste and gender raise, and clearly, there are resonances between structures of caste and race here.”³¹²

These “illicit unions” that persist are only between upper-caste women and lower-caste men. There is no such reciprocity between upper-caste men and low caste women. In fact, quite the opposite exists: an entrenched understanding of the sexual availability of low-caste women for upper-caste male pleasure. Gabriele Dietrich argues that this difference in perceptions of the moral behaviors of women relates to the suturing of race and caste in 19th century race science. According to Dietrich, the monocausal explanation of caste as being determined by race led to a preoccupation with Brahminic sexual controls over women and an idealization of the sexual freedom of low caste and

³¹¹ Ganghadaran, 197.

³¹² Rao, Anupama. “Introduction.” in *Gender and Caste*. ed. Anupama Rao. (New Delhi: Kali for Women, 2003), 14.

tribal women. This racial etiquette concerning the relational aspect of race and sexuality, Dietrich notes, makes it very difficult to tackle the very real issue of collective rape of Dalit and Adavasi women.³¹³ As Vasanth and Kalpana Kannabiran reveal, gender within a caste society is structured around the degree of control men exercise over women.³¹⁴ Kannabiran and Kannabiran show that when lower caste women confront being policed by upper caste men, rape is used as an acceptable punishment.³¹⁵ Conversely, the mere suggestion of a lower-caste male's sexual union with an upper-caste woman justifies upper-caste violence against all low castes and Dalits because the degree of control upper-caste men have over 'their' upper-caste women is thrown into question. Not only is the illicit union policed by upper-caste men, but also by upper-caste women:

The motivation behind this rare demonstration of collective action by upper caste women needs little explanation: the primary duty of an upper caste woman being to protect the life of her man and ensure his longevity, because her own social existence is defined by and hinges on his life. The dalit women can claim no such privilege since she can and has been expropriated by the upper caste men as a matter of their right.³¹⁶

That is, the upper-caste woman's existence is defined through her ability to protect her moral integrity through a chaste union with her husband alone. Upper-caste women gathering to protest the sexual licentiousness of low-caste men is within the domain of protecting their chastity. Such agency as it relates to the protection of upper-caste women need not always be collective. Women's self policing and adherence to gender orthodox customs in Kerala—restricting where and when she moves—also centers around the protection of upper-caste and Aryan purity. As discussed in chapter 3, the

³¹³ Dietrich, Gabriele. "Dalit Movement and Women's Movements" in *Gender and Caste*. ed. Anupama Rao. (New Delhi: Kali for Women, 2003), 77.

³¹⁴ Kannabiran, Vasanth and Kalpana Kannabiran. "Caste and Gender: Understanding Dynamics of Power and Violence. In *Gender and Caste*. ed. Anupama Rao. (New Delhi: Kali for Women, 2003), 254.

³¹⁵ Kannabiran and Kannabiran, 255.

³¹⁶ Kannabiran and Kannabiran, 255-6.

public space of Kerala today is primarily gender stratified with separate spaces denoted for men and women at bus stops, buses, men and women only colleges, public protests, processions, and self segregation at other cultural and political events. In addition, the public space is male dominated at night. Women from affluent classes/upper-castes rarely travel long distances alone and are absent from public life after sunset. The discourse that arises with mobility is associated with a woman's morality and chastity. While women protecting such channeled sexuality flood public transportation between 5-6pm in urban areas, women outside in the public sphere after dark and/or alone instead of in a sex-segregated environment marks her as sexually available. The lower caste woman has no comparable economic privilege to fall back upon and therefore is read as having no morality to protect.

In "Dalit Women's Socio-Economic Status," Achamma John found that many Kerala Dalit women travel long distances as agricultural laborers and often travel alone at night. According to the survey, "a large number of [Dalit women] replied that after a particular age, it was alright but half of them believed that no matter what the age, traveling alone was dangerous."³¹⁷ Further, the survey participants felt that they were at risk on the basis of their skin color and their dress (chapter 3).³¹⁸ Yet despite these fears, women in the lower-classes and castes work at much higher rates than their upper-caste/class counterparts due to economic necessity. Preference for jobs close to the home and the decision to opt out of the labor force—luxuries only afforded to those with the

³¹⁷ John, Achamma. "Dalit Women's Socio-Economic Status: A Study." in *Confronting Violence Against Women: Engendering Kerala's Development Experience*. Vineetha Menon and K.N. Nair, eds. (New Delhi: Daanish Publishers, 2008), 183.

³¹⁸ John, 183.

means to do so—ensures that morality is confined in and defined by the dominant groups in Kerala society.

This is not a division that occurred in suddenly contemporary society, but has its roots in an earlier time. Syrian Christian women, with their supposed fair skin and dressing habits, factored neatly into British dictates of moral sexual behavior. The Syrian Christian dress was considered modest wear and was given to newly converted Christians as a result. As a patrilineal community, the Syrian Christians were seen as morally superior to their light skinned Hindu counterparts—the matrilineal *Nayars*. Matrilineity was understood by early anthropologists as a primitive social system that usually graduated into patrilineity in most parts of the world. According to K. Saradamoni, in the *Nayar* matrilineal union either the husband or wife could terminate the union whenever and turn to another member of the *tharavadu*.³¹⁹ D Renjini explains that reproduction was the primary role of fathers, and sexuality had different meanings than the Western conception of the patriarchal patrilineal family.³²⁰ Nevertheless, *Nayar* loose marriage arrangements led many British missionaries to view the custom as immoral. While the *Nayar* marriage alliances with the *Namboodiri* Brahmins and the matrilineal system in general was pressured to reform, Syrian Christians were poised to take advantage of alliances with the British. And they did.

Under British Regent Monroe's rule Syrian Christians were favored. As Robin Jeffrey explains, "Munro, however, saw the encouragement of the Syrian Christians as a means of evangelizing Travancore Hindus."³²¹ The patrilineal succession of the Syrians

³¹⁹ Saradamoni, 35.

³²⁰ Renjini, 13.

³²¹ Jeffrey, Robin. *The Decline of Nayar Dominance: Society and Politics in Travancore 1847-1908*. (New Delhi: South Asia Books, 1994), 15.

allowed for easier access to opened lands after the 1865 Pattom Proclamation. With small pieces of land up for grabs for commercial cash crop profit, Syrian Christians who were not tied to the joint family structure or the large impartible *tharuvadu* began buying small tracts of land for first and second sons. Their patrilineity aided in ushering in the nuclear family as the ideal family. And Syrian Christian women, as belonging to the husband's family after marriage, were seen as chaste mothers in this patriarchal model. The assumed "natural shyness" of Syrian Christian women bound them to the home, and further restricted their mobility.³²² It also helped to reproduce notions of racial purity through sexual morality and the "good" chaste woman.

The stark differences in regulations of mobility, protection of chastity, and skin color/facial features leave a glaring picture of racial discrimination in the state. As an unmarried woman of South Asian decent trying to complete dissertation research, I often needed to travel alone and was constantly trying to make my way home before sunset. Due to my light brown skin and described as having "an Aryan brow," I was often read as upper-caste which made traveling alone and being out at night different than other women.³²³ One morning while conducting research in Kerala, I was introduced to the friend of a *Nayar* research participant. Auntie's friend asked me if I was *Namboodiri*. After explaining that I was Romo-Syrian, Auntie's friend was nodding knowingly and

³²² In 1912, the Maharaja commissioned a committee to document the practices of Christians that eventually led to the Christian Succession Act. Questions were asked to witnesses considered to be representatives from the committee. However, very few women were consulted. As quoted from the report: "Considering the natural shyness of the generality of the Christian ladies and their inability to express clearly formulated views on the complex and intricate questions bearing on the law of inheritance and succession, the Committee did not think it necessary to make any special effort to examine a large number of ladies." *Report of the Christian Committee*. (Trivandrum: Travancore Government Press, 1912), 3.

³²³ I wouldn't presume that it was only my features that was read as high-caste but also my class—what I wore (sometimes jeans, sometimes churidars, sometimes saris), what I had with me (camera, digital recorder, sometimes my laptop), the amount/newness of fashion of my ornaments, etc. Yet as mentioned above, the wedding together of race with caste, caste with class, and class with race makes for generalizations of social hierarchies based on the body.

said “Oh that explains it. I’m *Namboodiri*, and you have such Aryan looking features, that I was sure you were Brahmin too. But, you know, the Romo-Syrians were once all Brahmins. That’s why you look like us.” After this incident, Auntie would introduce me to others in the neighborhood by saying “She’s Romo-Syrian, doing research on Romo-Syrian women. Doesn’t she look Brahmin? My Brahmin friend says she look Brahmin.” This understanding and acceptance of my “Brahmin features” had profound effects on my daily life (including two marriage proposals) and especially when I did end up on the streets after dark.

One day, after visiting a monastery in the Western Ghats, I was unable to make it to my home before sunset. I was lucky to catch the last bus to the village I was staying in. A woman, two years my senior and vending fish entered the bus and was immediately ordered to sit by me. On a bus that increasingly began to be filled by men, I was questioned by the ticket collector and bus driver: who is your uncle, where does he live, why is he not here, who were you meeting and for what reason, why are you out at night, why didn’t you go home earlier, why are you alone, what were you thinking? But no such questions were asked of her. She told me that she travels often at night because she has no choice—selling fish necessitates traveling long distances and after dark. When I asked her if she is ever questioned about her uncle, her whereabouts, her contacts with others she laughed. “Look at my dark skin. You are very fair and that is why they are concerned. Some gents may be coming in here and you and I may be in danger. We are both young and traveling alone at night is always dangerous for young women. But if someone harasses me, what will anyone do? It is my fate for being dark.” The simultaneous invisibility and hypervisibility of dark women after sunset only upholds the

standards of morality dictated and policed by upper-caste Aryan racial norms. A fair skinned body's chastity will be protected and policed. A dark skinned body's chastity is, in contrast, already suspect and she becomes visible only in her embodied sexuality—read as always available.

Chapter 5

The *Vimochana Samaram* (The Liberation Struggle): The Homogenization of Indian Christians and the Rise of a Minority Rights Discourse

In this chapter, I explore the Christian minority identity of the Syrian Christian community. Christians constitute 2.3% of India's population and 19% of Kerala's state population. Thus, they are a numerical minority in India and in the state of Kerala.

The Indian nation-state understands numerical minorities to be politically subordinate to the dominant majority. As such, the Indian Constitution offers certain protections for religious minorities in India. However, the Syrian Christians are a caste, race and class privileged community in Kerala, India and they have used constitutional protections to further entrench these social privileges. "Minority," and the social implications of this identity, have become contested both in Kerala and across India.

One of the Constitution's articles aimed at protecting religious minorities is Article 30 (1)—the right for minorities to establish and administer their own educational institutions. By the time Kerala became a state in 1957, education had become part of Kerala's culture. Education became a social good and all castes, religions, races, and both genders clamored to attend schools.³²⁴ The state could not keep up with the demand for government schools, and the Syrian Christian community stepped in, establishing and administering the majority of private schools in the state. Using this particular constitutional article, then, the Syrian Christians have consistently fought against state regulation of private schools and have continued to benefit economically from their

³²⁴ Kerala has the highest rates of literacy in India. 90.9% of Kerala's population is literate with 87.7% of females literate. This compares to the all-India average of 64.8% and only 53.7% of females literate. "Census of India, India at a Glance." http://www.censusindia.gov.in/Census_Data_2001/India_at_glance/literates1.aspx. (accessed Friday, May 6, 2011).

dominance in Kerala's private education sector. In the sections that follow, I examine private education in Kerala, India, and the rights of minorities in India under Article 30 (1).

I specifically examine Syrian Christian opposition to the 1957 Kerala Education Bill that led to the historic *vimochana samaram* or "liberation struggle." Christians united across castes and denominations in their opposition to the Bill which led to a three month protest in defense of their "minority rights." The *vimochana samaram* halted daily life and eventually led to the dismissal of the first elected state ministry of Kerala, India. The overthrow of the ministry questioned India's very constitutional boundaries. In addition, the way in which "minority rights" were invoked under Article 30 (1) set a precedent for communal organizing in the Indian nation-state. Analyzing how the Syrian Christians united with other Christians under a "minority" identity during the *vimochana samaram*, I argue, is crucial to understanding acts of caste and class difference and religious divisions between minorities and majorities in India today.

Romo-Syrian Communal Politics and Private Education

The leading parties in Kerala are the Communist Party and the Congress Party—each trading coalition ministries since the state's inception in 1956. The state Congress Party, The Kerala Pradesh Congress Committee (KPCC), was formed in 1921. The Communist party actually formed out of the Congress Party in 1939. During the Freedom Struggle, the Congress Party enjoyed a very strong majority while the Communists struggled to find a footing. The Communists in Kerala vocally opposed India's support of the British in World War II. As a result, the British government

banned their activity and the party suffered losses. Communist candidates resorted to contesting lost elections. Still, growing leftist thought during and after independence had attracted many Congress Party members to the Communist Party and Socialist Party.³²⁵ In addition, the Congress Party suffered from internal bickering and its unity was beginning to disintegrate due to leadership rivalries and socialist party break offs. Despite the popularity of the Congress Party and the Communist Party's early struggles, not a single Congress ministry between India's independence and Kerala's statehood (1948-1956) was able to complete its term.

The Communist Party benefited from this fracturing within the Congress Party. The continued exploitation of agricultural laborers made the Communist Party extremely attractive to many sections of Kerala society. Slavery was abolished in Kerala in 1843. Yet this actually strengthened the privilege of elites. The former agricultural slaves still did same manual labor for the upper-castes, however the landlord's responsibility to the slaves was severed. In effect, slavery offered more protection for the agricultural laborers than the exploitative tenancy that followed.³²⁶ The Communist party called for agricultural reforms including tenant land distribution and land ownership for the former agricultural slaves. Yet under British rule, the exploitation of tenants continued. By the 1920s, certain crops such as pepper and coconut saw a rise in world market prices and as a result, many paddy fields were converted. A boom in world prices for cash crops and the increase in cultivable land in Kerala led many upper-caste Hindu landlords to start

³²⁵ The Congress Socialist party formed in 1935, the Kerala Socialist party in 1942, and the Indian Socialist Party of Kerala in 1948.

³²⁶ Arunima, G. *There Comes Papa: Colonialism and the Transformation of Matriliney in Kerala, Malabar c. 1850-1940*. (Hyderabad: Orient Longman Private Limited, 2003), 56.

evicting their tenants for the promise of new tenants who would pay a higher rate.³²⁷

This had considerable impact especially on the Mappila Muslim communities in Malabar.

Mappila Muslims were primarily agricultural laborers and tenants to upper-caste Hindus. A series of attacks against the eviction of Muslim tenants leveled at Hindu landlords in 1921 finally caused the Madras Presidency to look into the matter of agricultural exploitation and tenancy rights. Yet by this time, oppressed classes such as fishermen, coir workers, toddy tappers and agricultural workers were already flocking to the Communist party. Reading rooms, a growing educated population and extremely popular plays depicting corrupt landlords and the plight of Kerala's poor galvanized many and furthered the Communist base. As Dilip Menon explains:

Through the reading rooms, newspapers and tea shops a whole new world was imagined, and discussions built up on collective memory of organization, strikes and campaigns against landlords as well as victories of reduced working hours, more wages and less rent.³²⁸

Communist leaders encouraged the spread of unions and supported worker strikes. Many of the agrarian strikes of Malabar were communist organized and/or supported.³²⁹ In October of 1946, Communists in the towns of Vayalar and Punnapra staged a workers resistance against the autocratic government. The Travancore Diwan sent in military troops and declared martial law. Violent clashes arose and more than 1,000 people died. Instead of deterring the populace from communism, the clash increased Communist Party membership. According to historian Sreedhara Menon, public opinion in the state

³²⁷ Menon, Dilip M. *Caste, Nationalism and Communism in South India: Malabar 1900-1948*. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994), 27-8.

³²⁸ Menon, 147.

³²⁹ Fic, Victor M. *Kerala, Yenan of India: Rise of Communist Power: 1937-1969*. (Bombay: Nachiketa Publications Limited, 1979), 5.

stiffened against the Maharaja and Diwan and increased the number of communist sympathizers.³³⁰

Communism also promised a break from rigid caste and religious dictates of the prior age. Social reform movements had used secular ideas to critique caste divisions in religions. The early communists were decidedly atheist and thus many were fundamentally opposed to religious dictates that separated low-castes from high. In fact nine out of eleven ministers refused to swear an oath under God when elected in 1957 as a public declaration of their atheism and as a steadfast belief in communist ideology.³³¹ In short, the Communist party in Kerala was well poised to become the next democratically elected party. Reform was priority number one. After their election as the first ministry of the Kerala state in 1957, the communist led ministry shook Kerala's infrastructure to the core and introduced bills aimed to relieve debt, fix tenures, reform land ownership through re-distribution, develop industry, and reform education.

While Communists championed atheism and progressive social reform, the Catholics mobilized based on communal sentiments that had animated millions during Kerala's social reform movements decades earlier. They declared atheistic communism "public enemy #1," and part of Satan's efforts to tempt believers.³³² Catholicism was held up as a stable referent in a time of changes to the social order. Communism, on the other hand, was painted as anti-religious and dangerous. Publications for the Catholic community warned "that even Catholic students, born and brought up in the best Catholic

³³⁰ Menon, Sreedhara. *A Survey of Kerala History*. (Madras: S. Viswanathan (Printers & Publishers) Pvt, Ltd, 2000), 374.

³³¹ Devika, J. "Memory's Fatal Lure: The Left, the Congress and 'Jeevan' in Kerala, *Economic & Political Weekly*. (July 26, 2008): 15.

³³² Leonard, Peter. "Communism and Catholic Action." *Rays of Light Supplement. Twelve Booklets on Communism*. (February, 1938) 1

families, come out of our Catholic institutions, affected by the gravest plagues of modern society, such as religious indifference, anti-clericalism, communism, etc.”³³³ Atheism and Communism were seen as one and the same and thus pitted against Catholicism. As such, the Christians chiefly supported the opposition Congress Party. So much so, the Congress Party in Kerala was often referred to as “Christian Congress Party.”³³⁴

From very early on in Kerala state politics, the Syrian Christians were extremely vocal. “Ever since the first election in Travancore after Independence to-date, there was hardly any electoral battle in the state in which the influence of the Church was not felt...the Roman Catholic Church remains the most effective in elections, powerful enough to brighten or mar the electoral chances of a candidate, party or front.”³³⁵

Christian opposition to the Communist party was so great that priests and bishops began to use their influence over the faithful to promote the Christian Congress. As mentioned in Chapter 2, the existing church hierarchy of parish-diocese-archdiocese proved to organize the Romo-Syrian laity in a remarkably effective way. Bishops would issue letters to be read from the pulpits of each parish church that combined religious duty with political duty³³⁶:

The bishops appealed to the faithful to vote for godly and democratic-minded candidates and the very wording of the pastoral read from the pulpit was clear enough to make anyone understand that the preference of the prelates had been for the Congress. In most of the churches, special prayers were conducted for the success of the democratic candidates, which meant none other than Congress candidates. Many priests, it was

³³³ Philip, OCD. “Christianity in Free India.” (Bp of Salem: Henry Prunier, 1947), 18.

³³⁴ Mathew, George. *Communal Road to Secular Kerala*. (Delhi: Concept Publishing Company, 1989), 135.

³³⁵ Thomas, Cyriac, “The Church and Elections” in *Dynamics of State Politics: Kerala*. N. Jose Chandler, ed. (New Delhi: Sterling Publishers Private Ltd, 1987), 88.

³³⁶ The practice is still used today as archbishop’s issue Pastoral and Circular letters even to the local newspapers to explain their position on political issues. See “Pastoral Letters Tool of Catholic Church?” *India Express*. Feb 3rd 2008).

alleged, converted their Sunday homilies into campaign speeches for the Congress and its candidates.³³⁷

The All Kerala Catholic Congress (AKCC) became the mouthpiece and decision making body of the Romo-Syrian population in Kerala. The AKCC and the hierarchy became very political and especially influential in elections. Efforts to register Catholics to vote dominated the 1947 resolutions of the AKCC³³⁸ and in 1951, the AKCC produced a list of candidates that Catholics were to vote for.³³⁹

Priests were involved in swaying their congregation's political views because of the changing face of religion in Kerala, and most notably, the Syrian Christian control of education in the state. The demand for education drew all walks of Kerala society into the public sphere, and the expense of education was becoming a political battle. In a state with rising literacy rates, education was to become the political issue which was most often spoke of in Romo-Syrian pastoral letters and prayers.

Education is today touted as the state's finest achievement. Kerala is often referenced for its high literacy rates. Encouraging education has reportedly resulted in an average later marriage age for women, smaller family sizes, a proclivity to seek health care and social services, and migration for jobs outside the state. In short, education is embedded into the very fabric of Kerala society. In the first half of the 20th century, the demand for education increased exponentially. The state was obliged to budget an enormous amount for education—a third of the state budget.³⁴⁰

³³⁷ Thomas, 91.

³³⁸ "All Kerala Catholic Congress Resolutions of Meeting, 14 Sept 1947," Legislature 1945-9, Record Group 340. Kerala State Archives, Thiruvananthapuram.

³³⁹ Mathew, 135.

³⁴⁰ Leiten, George. *The First Communist Ministry in Kerala. 1957-1959*. (New Delhi: KP Bagchi & Company, 1982), 33.

TABLE 2.1. RISE OF EXPENDITURE ON EDUCATION IN TRAVANCORE, COCHIN AND KERALA

Year	Total Expenditure in lakhs Rs.	% of total Expenditure on Revenue Account	Plan Expenditure Social Services in lakhs Rs.	Of which education %
1951-52	247	18	44	2
1953-54	349	34	48	9
1955-56	575	29.5	89	8
1956-57	711	34.9	190	24
1957-58	958	37.8	441	37
1958-59	1374	36.0	646	44
1959-60	1475	34.8	632	41
1960-61	1621	33.5	844	48

Sources : P. Radhakrishnan Nair 1961 appendix E.
Census 1961 Volume III Part I A (I) p. 718.

15. T.K. Velu Pillai 1940 p. 749.

“Rise of Expenditure on Education in Travancore, Cochin and Kerala”³⁴¹

The demand for more schools was met by private schools, largely managed by minority communities. The history of missionary involvement in social welfare in the state was the root cause for the numerous Syrian Christian managed private institutions.

As mentioned, there were many missionaries in Kerala coming to convert Syrian Christians to protestant Christianity. These missionaries, while unsuccessful in converting Syrians for the most part, were highly influential in initiating social reform. I have already discussed missionary involvement in the breast cloth controversy in chapter 3. Yet missionaries were also very influential in establishing schools. In the early decades of the 19th century, the London Missionary Society (LMS), Church Mission Society (CMS), and the Masel German Evangelical Mission laid the foundations of western education in the state. The Syrian Christians were, compared to other upper-caste communities in Kerala, receptive to the idea of a western education and adopted the system of western education decades before other communities in Kerala. In the late 19th

³⁴¹ Leiten, 31.

and early 20th centuries, the *Nayar* caste was undergoing massive change with the dissolution of the joint family structure and matrilineal system of inheritance. The *Ezhava*, *Pulaya*, and *Paraya* castes agitated for the right to worship in temples reserved for upper-castes, the right to wear the upper-caste Hindu breast cloth, and the right to frequent public space through the dissolution of pollution rituals which controlled the movement of bodies and the employment opportunities of lower castes. And the *Namboodiri* Brahmins were reeling from the external criticism for their extreme restrictions on women and the landlord system which effectively enslaved the lower castes. As other communities underwent such internal and external reforms, their focus was not on western education. In contrast, the Syrian Christians positioned themselves as a community that was willing and ready to receive a Western education. The British colonial government supported the establishment of educational institutions as they did not hire on the basis of caste, but on the basis of education. Thus, the Syrian Christian's exchange with missionary schools benefited them economically as well. In 1813 CMS helped Syrian Christians set up a college and seminary in Kottayam, and a grammar school in 1821. In 1865, the influential Romo-Syrian Fr. Kuriakos Elias Chavara (now beatified to become a saint) issued a pastoral letter to the Romo-Syrians stating that all churches should be accompanied by an education institution. So started a process where almost every Romo-Syrian Church in Kerala additionally supports a private school. These schools are known as *pallikudams*—literally, “with the church.”

By the mid 20th century, the western education of all castes, all classes, all religions and both genders became part of Kerala society—a social good that all sections of society eventually supported. The reasons for this abrupt change were numerous. As

Robin Jeffrey notes, education was what challenged the old Kerala society and thus breaking the restrictive caste barriers in and through education of the lower castes was a common trope in the writings of Sri Narayan Guru, the leader of the *Ezhuva* caste reform movement. Yet lower caste education also entrenched the existing caste divisions through an identification with one's caste. The 1910 Education Code of Travancore gave full fee concessions to the scheduled castes/scheduled tribes and half concessions to other poor classes. The demand from low castes for education was largely met by missionary schools. Yet these schools were also viewed as venues to convert the lower-caste Hindus.³⁴² Upper castes appealed to the state for their own schools free of missionary conversion attempts and to evade attending schools they saw as benefiting other castes. As schools integrated and reservations were made for low-caste students, upper-caste students were made aware of a political position based on caste. As Robin Jeffrey explains, "the mechanism designed to help low-caste students not only forced on them a heightened awareness of a particular kind of identity, but also made upper-caste students, who were not entitled to benefits, aware that such distinction could have concrete value...Schooling thus encouraged people to think in terms of social blocs."³⁴³ As a result, "one might argue that one ironic consequence of missionary intervention in education in Travancore was that the upper castes acquiesced to a new universalistic policy concerning education."³⁴⁴ Thus, all walks of Kerala society suddenly began agitating for education.

³⁴² Desai, Manali. "Indirect British Rule, State Formation, and Welfarism in Kerala, India, 1860-1957." *Social Science History*. 29:3 (Fall 2005), 472.

³⁴³ Robin, *Politics Women and Well-Being: How Kerala Became 'A Model.'* (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1992), 62.

³⁴⁴ Desai, 473.

However, because of a liberal attitude towards western education early on, the Christians had a firm hold on the establishment and administration of private education institutions in the state by the time other castes were demanding education. In 1945, Christians owned 63% of primary, 88% of middle and 66% of high schools in the state.³⁴⁵ This only increased over the decades. By the time the first communist government was elected, 65% of the primary and secondary schools were run by private management and 2,608,823 students attended these private schools.³⁴⁶ The ratio of government schools to private schools in 1957 was a staggering 2 to 7.³⁴⁷ 70% of these private management belonged to the Christian community.³⁴⁸

The 1910 Travancore-Cochin Education Code held that when private schools were unable to meet the salaries for teachers and/or maintain schools, they could apply for grant-in-aid from the government. After a government inspection, grant-in-aid was usually received. This state policy of grant-in-aid increased the number of private schools from 20 to 1,908 from the years 1875-1910.³⁴⁹ The 1951 Private Secondary School Scheme further defined grants by standardizing amounts. 80% of fees collected by private management were given to the government, while 20% was kept for contingency expenses. The scheme also increased teacher salaries, and if private schools could not cover the costs of teacher salaries, the grant-in-aid system would cover private schools. By the mid 20th century, the majority of private schools operated under this state aid system. However these regulations were only grafted onto the already established

³⁴⁵ Thekkedam, Joseph Sebastian. "The Catholics and the New Education Policy of the Travancore Government." *Journal of Kerala Studies*. University of Kerala. Kariavattom, TVM. Vol 26-29. 1999-2002., 127.

³⁴⁶ "Church and Communist Party Friction," *Malayalam Manorama*, Sept 17th, 1957. p 1.

³⁴⁷ Leiten, 35.

³⁴⁸ Jeffrey, 155.

³⁴⁹ Leiten, 38.

missionary/private school system.³⁵⁰ As a result, private management controlled the appointment of teachers, salaries, and student fees. Further, there was no legal basis for enforcing any government orders on private schools. The government basically only had the power to spend money on education. By the late 1950s, private education had become a profit making machine for the Christian community. Student fees skyrocketed and were grossly uneven from school to school. In addition to this unregulated fee structure were bribes and nepotism for teaching appointments. Because of literacy and education efforts, there was a rising number of educated unemployed in Kerala. Although teachers were dismally paid by private management, teaching appointments were coveted. Since there was no state regulation of teaching appointments in private institutions, teaching positions were being auctioned off to the highest bidder by Christian management of private schools.

On the national level, Christian management of schools were protected through the Indian constitution. As per article 30 (1) of the Indian constitution, minorities have the right to establish and administer their own educational institutions. This clause of the constitution was enacted along with other articles specifically protecting the rights of minorities after independence. As discussed in chapter 3, the secular Indian state both intervenes in religious matters and exempts itself from involvement in other matters in the name of protecting minority religions. That is, the Indian state often is embroiled in religious matters by either actively intervening or actively taking itself out for the sake of protecting religions in the name of secularism. For minority communities, the right to establish their own schools could provide a space in which to practice their minority way of life free of majority co-option or control. Therefore, this protection in the constitution

³⁵⁰ Jeffrey, 151.

was a secular move that results in a decided lack of involvement by the state when it comes to regulating minority schools. For the Catholic Church, private institutions run by Christians were seen as having the same protections as minority school despite getting state aid. However, profits gained from managing private educational institutions fueled growing resentment from the oppressed classes. If these private institutions run by Christians were getting both state aid and autonomy through a minority status, then abuses were further unchecked. Thus, the Kerala government from the early twentieth century onward made attempts to regulate and standardize education in the state.

Because of Christian dominance in managing private educational institutions, any move by the state government to regulate education was continually met by strong opposition from the AKCC and the Romo-Syrian clergy. For example, in 1945, Travancore Dewan, CP Ramaswami Aiyar, championed the nationalization of primary schools in southern Kerala. The resolution carried in the assembly, but was met by protest, especially from the Romo-Syrians. Bishop James Kalacherry issued a pastoral letter to the Romo-Syrian faithful asking them to “fight with their purses and with the spiritual sword.”³⁵¹ The orders to arrest Fr. Kalacherry after he refused to withdraw the letter resulted in statewide rallies by Catholics: “There was a spontaneous response from the Catholics of Travancore and Cochin and more than a thousand meetings were held throughout Kerala against the proposed state monopoly and the intended secularization of education.”³⁵² September 16, 1945 was declared “Education Day” against the secularism of education and Romo-Syrians tasted their first victory in political protest against education regulation.

³⁵¹ qtd in Thekkedam, 128.

³⁵² Mathew, 105.

To a large degree, this political organizing of the Romo-Syrians polarized the Kerala population. One of the vanguards of the newly elected Communist ministry was to reform education and make it accessible for all classes. It was thus through schools and attempted regulation of schools that many in Kerala became involved in politics: “For more than a hundred years, most Keralans have first encountered government—and, indeed, public politics—through a school system that has become the heart of the new Kerala.”³⁵³ Nepotism and rising private fees led to a growing resentment of the Christian community’s control over education and influence in politics. Romo-Syrian Catholic private school teachers largely supported reform to equalize the playing field and bring down the bids for teaching appointments. They demanded the same salary as government school teachers and supported appointments from the government. Despite the support of private teachers for state regulation of schools, the Church continued to oppose reform. To illustrate their point, the Romo-Syrian raised Education Minister Joseph Mundassery was fired from St. Thomas College, Trichur and excommunicated for writing *Professor*, a novel chronicling the plight of teachers in the state.³⁵⁴

The Kerala Education Bill (KEB), introduced by the Communist ministry in 1957 and into law on June 1st, 1959, was the first successful bill to semi-nationalize schools in the state. The bill proposed that appointments to teaching positions be made on a communal rotation (Christians, low-caste Hindu, upper-caste Hindu, Muslim, etc). Teachers were to be paid directly from the government. In addition, certain provisions were included to acquire private aided schools in an effort to guard against what the state called “mismanagement of schools.” An advisory board with elected local educational

³⁵³ Jeffrey, 153.

³⁵⁴ Because of the excommunication, Joseph Mundassery, born a Romo-Syrian Catholic, was also denied burial in a Catholic cemetery. See Leiten, 33.

authorities was proposed in the bill to assist the State Education Department. The KEB also delineated a distinct difference between minority schools protected by the constitution and state-aided private institutions. In this definition, the KEB would serve to make a shaky distinction between religious minorities and secular citizens of the newly created Kerala state. The following two sections examines 1) the particulars of the KEB and competing notions of “minority rights” through a chronological look at the documents and 2) the specific way in which Romo-Syrians organized communally and sometimes violently protested the KEB in the supposed defense of “minority rights.”

The Kerala Education Bill and the Definition of “Minority.”

The KEB was introduced into the state legislature in 1957 “to provide for the better organization and development of educational institutions in the State providing a varied and comprehensive educational service throughout the State.”³⁵⁵ States across India were introducing similar bills in a move towards the standardization of education. For example, Andhra Pradesh passed the Andhra Educational Institutions Bill in 1956 that had provisions comparable to the KEB. The Communist ministry held that government regulation of education was necessary because education fell under social welfare of Kerala citizens. In the Legislative Assembly’s 1957 second session alone, 310 amendments were made to the bill.³⁵⁶ In the course of two years, *The Hindu* reported that 650 KEB rules had been tabled, 260 rules were moved and discussed, and 120 accepted during the debates.³⁵⁷

³⁵⁵ “The Kerala Education Bill, 1957,” (Trivandrum: The Government Central Press, 1957), 1.

³⁵⁶ “Report of the Select Committee on the Kerala Education Bill, 1957 and the Bill as Reported by the Select Committee.” (Trivandrum: The Government Central Press, 1957), 15-35.

³⁵⁷ “Assembly Concludes Consideration.” *The Hindu*. May 24th 1959, p 5.

The communist ministry justified the bill in a June 15, 1957 meeting with the central government:

At present the little control over these aided schools by Government, despite the substantial amounts given from the Consolidated Fund of the State, is based on certain non-statutory rules and practices. There have been complaints of abuse by management in the actual conduct of the schools including the treatment meted out to teachers. The lack of statutory provisions to check or prevent the abuse has been felt for some times past and is being increasingly felt now. It has also been found necessary to standardize education.³⁵⁸

The Catholic clergy maintained that the bill was in no way helping teachers in Kerala.

The Catholic Church maintained that the KEB was an attempt to curb Catholic influence over education in the state. Catholic priests wrote to the state government accusing the Communist KEB as directly attacking private management:

In view of the ideological affiliations of the party in power in Kerala and the attempts of communist Governments everywhere to suppress all private and religious education and to gain control of youth for purposes of communist indoctrination, the vast majority of people in Kerala and in the entire country are convinced that this is a preparation for the total suppression of privately managed State aided schools.³⁵⁹

Indeed, the KEB was described by the Kerala Pradesh Congress Committee (Kerala Congress Party) as a bill aimed to “break the [Catholic] management.”³⁶⁰ While I cannot conjecture the motives behind the bill, it is apparent that the Communist Ministry sought quick passage of the bill and resisted attempts at revisions that would give Christian management any more leverage than they already had. In the June 15, 1957 meeting with the state, the central government suggested to the communist ministry that the KEB could

³⁵⁸ “Summary of June 15th 1957 Conference” Education 1956-68. Vol 1. Record Group 627. Kerala State Archives, Thiruvananthapuram.

³⁵⁹ “12 Aug 1957 letter from Xavier Board,” Education 1956-68. Record Group 627. Vol 1. Kerala State Archives, Thiruvananthapuram.

³⁶⁰ Pillai, Kainikkara Padmanabha. *The Red Interlude in Kerala*. (Trivandrum: Kerala Pradesh Congress, 1959), 139.

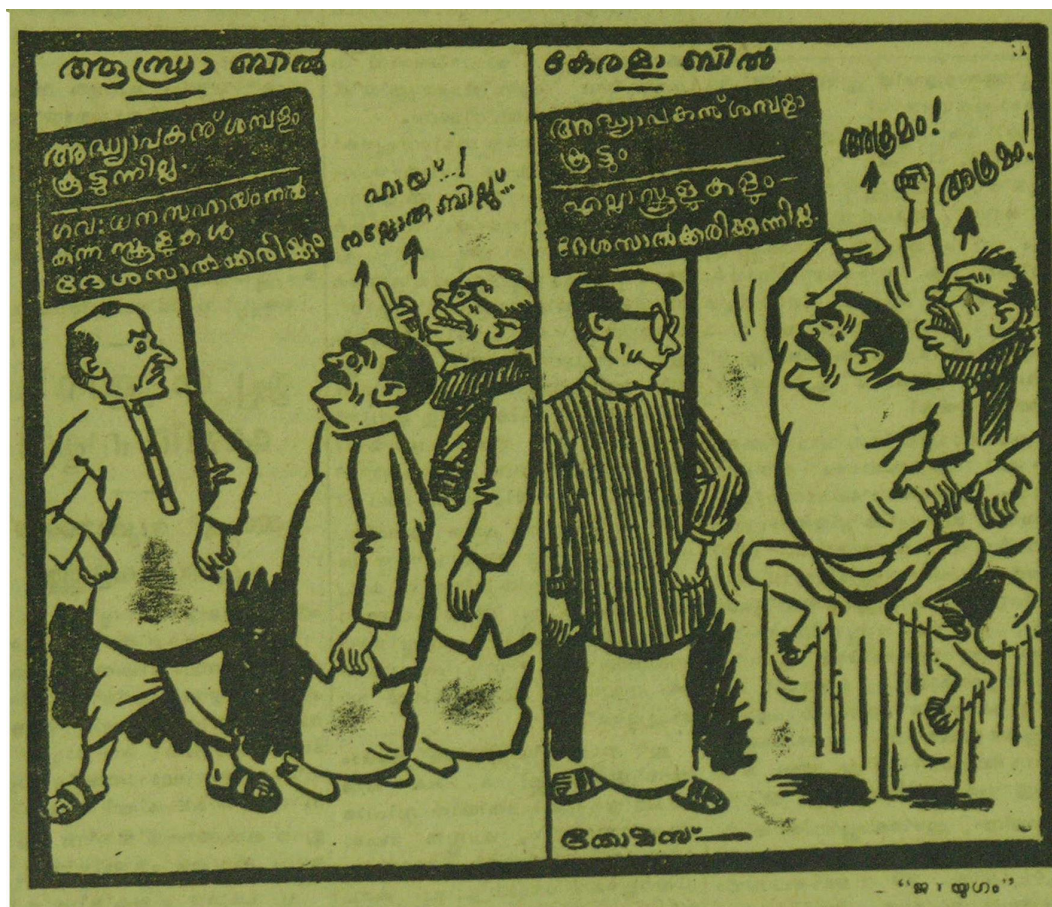
be patterned after the passed education bill in Andhra Pradesh, where management were given the right to appeal to the high court. Yet the Kerala state strongly declined stating that revisions would delay passage of the bill and the amount of time the matter would remain in the courts would make the provision imprudent.³⁶¹ As I will discuss, the Communist ministry repeatedly opposed circulating the bill for public opinion. Such maneuvers only convinced the Romo-Syrian Catholic hierarchy of a Communist conspiracy against the Christian community. So while the Communist ministry claimed the bill was in order for standardization and to guard against mismanagement, the Romo-Syrian hierarchy and Christian management saw the bill as a direct attack against Christian management and their administration of private schools.

The particulars of the bill were well known to the public through the media and social organizations. Romo-Syrians were kept abreast of the clergy's position on education through pastoral letters read at Sunday mass and through Christian private management where their children attended schools. The cultural practice of tea drinking in reading rooms and rising literacy in the state increased the readership of newspapers and the public's awareness of political issues. The bill was hotly debated in the Legislative Assembly for two years with Congress assembly members representing the Syrian Christian community giving frequent interviews to communal newspapers. The prominent Romo-Syrian opposition leader, PT Chacko from Kottayam district, was often quoted and his speeches and amendments discussed at length in the Romo-Syrian staple newspapers *Malayalam Manorama* and *Deepika*.³⁶² Also included in newspaper reports

³⁶¹ "Summary of June 15th 1957 Conference," Kerala State Archives.

³⁶² See for example, "PT Chacko's Speech at Legislature," *Malayalam Manorama*. August 31st 1957, page 1. "Education Bill: Government Wants to Recover Revenue from Managements. *Malayalam Manorama*. Sept. 1st, 1957, page 1. "Poverty and Communist Cells." Sept. 8th, 1957, page 2.

were in depth discussions of many of the bill's clauses and political cartoons on the KEB.³⁶³



“Andhra Bill/Kerala Bill”³⁶⁴

Articles decidedly against the KEB were matched by support for the bill in Communist newspapers and state newspapers outside Kerala.³⁶⁵ These informational outlets were so

³⁶³ See for example “Kerala Education Act: Amendments to Rules Voted,” *The Hindu*, May 13th, 1959, page 5. “Kerala Education Act: Assembly Debate,” *The Hindu*, May 15th, 1959, page 5. “Namboodiripad’s Religion” *Malayalam Manorama*, Sept. 1st 1957, page 5. “Communist Control” *Malayalam Manorama*, Oct 18th, 1957, page 2. “Mundasheri Taught,” *Malayalam Manorama*, May 13th 1959, page 3.

³⁶⁴ Left pane: Andhra Bill—No raise in teachers’ salary, government schools will be nationalized. Crowd: “Hai! One good bill!”

Right Pane: Kerala bill—Teachers’ salary increased, schools will not be nationalized. Crowd: “Akramom! Akramom! (attack, attack!)” “Andhra Bill/Kerala Bill.” (image). *Deshabhimani*.

http://www.firstministry.kerala.gov.in/frame.php?img=2_aug_57_cartoon.gif&pg_id=4. Dr. Thomas Mathew, trans.

informative to the population that people for and against the KEB, old and young, male or female, participating in demonstrations or not, all seemed very aware of many particulars:

I remember, I was a high school student at the time. I didn't participate...I saw the protest. It was about an education bill. The government was interfering in education and trying to nationalize. They [Government] wanted to make a local committee, to give them some control over schools was the aim...The protest was to overthrow a democratically elected government.³⁶⁶

At the time of the protest, I volunteered to train youth in marching. I was a lecturer...Now, I believe that all of that was wrong. [wife: Why do you believe that?]. Because what was the big deal about paying teachers from the government? Did it warrant that much of an upheaval? I received 50 rupees at that time in salary. That was what we were living on! When we moved here in 1962, we were making 79 rupees in salary because of the changes.³⁶⁷

Women were also very knowledgeable about the details that sparked the protest.

According to a seventy-three year old woman:

Then, it was schools giving the salary. But it was a small salary. EMS [Chief Minister, EMS Namboodiripad] stopped that. They made a law: if teachers did the work, salary must be given. We [Romo-Syrian women] may not have known all that, but management said we should have meetings to make sure communists don't control everything. People were mad because maybe only Catholics got jobs in Catholic schools. But can they [people] come into our [Romo-Syrian] schools and teach Sunday school? No! that's why we protested. For our own [Romo-Syrian] independence.³⁶⁸

³⁶⁵ See for example articles collected in "Public Opinion of the 'Direct Action' in Kerala." (Trivandrum: Government Press, 1959). "Red Herring." *The Free Press Journal* July 20th, 1957. *Kerala Education Bill: Facts and Fancies. Response of the Kerala Public Relations Department.* http://www.firstministry.kerala.gov.in/kerala_educationbill/red_herring_the_Free_press_journal.htm. "The Kerala Education Bill." *The National Herald*. July 12th, 1957. *Kerala Education Bill: Facts and Fancies. Response of the Kerala Public Relations Department.* http://www.firstministry.kerala.gov.in/kerala_educationbill/notes_on_the_news_national_herald.htm. C. Unniraja. "Education Bill and Congress." http://www.firstministry.kerala.gov.in/pdf/v_b_c.pdf

³⁶⁶ Varghese. Interview in Malayalam by author. Dec 13, 2007.

³⁶⁷ Ausep. Interview in Malayalam by author. Dec 31, 2007.

³⁶⁸ Kochamma, Interview in Malayalam by author. December, 17, 2007.

Romo-Syrians began their opposition to the bill with a letter/telegram writing campaign to state and national ministers. On June 11th 1957, the Minister of Home Affairs, Govind Ballabh Pant, wrote to Kerala chief minister EMS Namboodiripad informing Namboodiripad that he and the Prime Minister had received a number of telegrams from Catholic organizations protesting the KEB. Namboodiripad responded by acknowledging similar communications and adding that the letters were part of an agitation sponsored by Catholic management:

[The Catholic Church] have developed a theory of “every religious groups having the right to run their own schools as they please” to which of course they add the condition that the Government should finance them. It is only under these circumstances, they argue, that the educational institutions can be made to permeate the “religious atmosphere.”³⁶⁹

Yet as the majority of teachers and the general population supported the bill, Namboodiripad also wrote that he was convinced that the protest would dissipate. In the following four month correspondence between the chief minister and the central government, Namboodiripad outlined what would become the communist ministries’ stance against Romo-Syrian opposition to the KEB: If the cost of education had to be met in any part by the state, then the state should have the right to regulate schools. This, however, did not mean that minority religions couldn’t conduct their own schools free from regulation—only that such schools would not receive state aid. Minority educational institutions would thus be exempt from the reaches of the KEB and enjoy continued protection from Article 30 (1) of the Indian constitution.³⁷⁰

³⁶⁹ Namboodiripad, EMS. “17 June, 1957 Correspondence” Education 1956-68. Vol 1. Record Group 627. Kerala State Archives, Thiruvananthapuram.

³⁷⁰ Namboodiripad, EMS and Gobind Pant. “June 11—Aug 13, 1957 Correspondence.” Education 1956-67. Record Group 627. Kerala State Archives, Thiruvananthapuram.

Throughout the debate over the KEB, the definition of “minority” became a sore point. The brand of secularism adopted by India as a legacy of British colonialism had given rise to a minority rights discourse in Indian national politics. Under India’s secularism, minorities were equal to all other Indian citizens. Yet they were unequal to the majority in terms of political power and in need of protection. As Talal Asad argues, the rise of this sort of minority rights discourse sits uncomfortably with the secular Enlightenment concept of the abstract citizen. For “minority” identities didn’t come from theories of citizenship, but from membership in a historical group with embodied memories and practices.³⁷¹ What Asad does not add, however, is that these “embodied memories and practices,” are quite often represented by the interests of the privileged minority. Specifically these embodied memories and practices that become representative of the minority community’s culture are often determined in and through patriarchal interpretations of a group’s religious traditions. In the case of Syrian Christians, we can add to this a class, caste and racial privilege as well. A year after the introduction of the KEB in the Legislative Assembly, member Thanu Pillai frustratingly spoke:

In regard to the minorities, who are the minorities? In one place they say, Christians and Muslims and Anglo Indians (who are also Christians) are minorities. Then, who are the known majorities? Hindus. That is a very comprehensive term. There is more difference between certain sections of Hindus and certain other sections than there is differences between Hindus as a whole and the Christians...how can minorities be defined? Should there be a definition?³⁷²

Pillai’s frustration reveals the uneasiness around protections for minorities as a group of citizens unequal to majorities politically, yet members of a group historically preceding

³⁷¹ Asad, Talal. *Formations of the Secular: Christianity, Islam, Modernity*. (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2003), 174.

³⁷² “25 Nov. 1958.” *Kerala Legislative Proceedings* (Trivandrum: Kerala Gazeteers, 1958), 147.

the emergence of the secular Indian citizen. Pillai essentially asks, “what/who exactly needs to be protected?” The need for minority protection in law is to guard against the (un)intentionally dominant majority. The sheer numbers of the majority could lead to a tyranny by the majority in a democratic system. The right of minorities to maintain and administer private schools aims to give minorities the ability to conduct the affairs of the institution free from external control. This freedom gives minority management the space to conduct the institution as they see fit and in accordance with their ideas of how the community would best be served. The idea is that if the majority religion or language infringes on minority culture through (un)intentional assimilation of the minority into the majority, then educational institutions run by minorities and free of external (majority) control will preserve the minority culture.

Both the Communist and Congress positions on the KEB considered that this constitutional protection must not be infringed upon. Indeed, in the wake of the horrible communal violence during Partition, protection of minority rights in a democratic and secular Indian nation was seen as paramount to law and order. Yet in this reading of minority, there is an assumption that subordinate in numbers translates to subordinate in power. It also assumes that minority management are authentic and legitimate authorities over what constitutes “minority culture.” The Romo-Syrians, although demographically a minority, are not subordinate in power. They are a caste, race and class privileged minority that had historically held power and profited from their privileged position in the education business. Thus, “minority” and the protection of Romo-Syrians during protest of the KEB came under fire not only in the Kerala Assembly, but in press releases as well. In “Not A Minority,” the Communist government asserted that the Christians

could not claim the right to establish schools under the label “minority schools” because they were one of the three largest communities in the state.³⁷³

There developed two competing understandings of the rights of minority citizens as it pertained to Article 30 (1) and the KEB. The state government argued that minority rights are protected through choice—a management can choose to either run a minority institution or a state aided institution. This created a boundary between minority/religious and aided/secular schools. Such a distinction was convenient for the state as it avoided the definition of who exactly constitutes a “minority.” Law minister Krishna Iyer illustrated this convenient reworking of “minority” during a discussion of the bill saying:

So now we have provided a definition by way of an amendment saying that “minority schools” means schools established and administered or administered by minorities in exercise of their rights under clause (1) of Article 30 of the Constitution of India, so that, later on, we can say that “clause 14 will not apply to minority institutions”: “clause 15 will not apply to minority institutions.”³⁷⁴

In this explanation, Iyer avoids having to define what a “minority” is. Instead, minority schools are defined and minorities only in relation to their institution. A consequence of this, however, created a difference between religious and secular education. Minority institutions in Kerala could be a site to impart moral/religious education. In contrast, state aided schools were to be inherently secular whether managed by minorities or not. Delineating difference between religious and secular schools also created a boundary between populations. Religious minorities were seen as inherently religious through religious institutions and were suddenly placed in direct opposition to members of the

³⁷³ “Not a Minority.” *Kerala Education Bill: Facts and Fancies. Response of the Kerala Public Relations Department.* http://www.firstministry.kerala.gov.in/kerala_educationbill/Not_a_minority.htm.

³⁷⁴ “26 Nov 1958.” *Kerala Legislative Proceedings.* (Trivandrum: Kerala Gazetters, 1958), 229.

religious majority. Conversely, a correlation is often made between the religious majority and secularism so that any political action taken by an individual/group from a majority community can be seen as religion free. As a result, in Kerala, “minority” became wedded to “religious minority” and subsequent political battles over minority rights rarely take up linguistic minority communities.³⁷⁵

The second reading of “minority” was put forward by the Catholic clergy and Christian management. They argued that religion was not a choice but a way of being that preceded the state. According to priests, “The Church is not merely a group of men, women and children bound together by a common purpose like the State, but a living organism, composed indeed of a variety of members, but all co-ordinated in their action by a common principle of life.”³⁷⁶ The right to impart moral education to children was one that was not given by the state, but given by God. The state could only supplement that power. This position on the definition of minority unified Romo-Syrians politically along a victim position. Any type of interference from the state in education could be painted as an attack on a Catholic way of life. After two years of protesting the bill, Romo-Syrian Archbishop Mathew Kavukatt stated:

Catholic parents are bound to send their children to Catholic schools, in which a distinctly Catholic atmosphere is maintained. Hence arises the duty and right of Catholic parents to have schools of their own. Any enactment of law, therefore, which would compel the attendance of Catholic children at schools, regardless of whether such schools are under Catholic management or not, or regardless of whether or not facilities are afforded for instruction in the Catholic faith, would be openly at variance with the common ecclesiastical laws of the Catholic Church, and directly opposed to the conscience of Catholics.³⁷⁷

³⁷⁵ Kerala has a large minority of Tamil speaking Brahmins and tribals that rarely, if ever, take part in “minority rights” discourse as it is used in the state.

³⁷⁶ Leonard, 8.

³⁷⁷ qtd in “Catholics’ Protest” May 23rd, *The Hindu*. Page 7.

Thus, Christian management and the Romo-Syrian clergy held that minority rights are not to ensure the protection of religious freedom through choice, but to preserve the tradition of a minority way of life that could be given only by religious minorities.

Both sides appealed to the center for approval of their version of “minority.” The controversy was beginning to place the Congress led central government in a difficult situation. The rise of the Communist Party in Kerala was a blow to the Congress Party at large. Post independence, the Congress Party won elections in most Indian states. Kerala shocked not only the world, but the national Congress Party in India by electing a Communist Party to head their first state ministry. The Communist ministry’s ambitious agenda can be read as an attempt to prove itself in the face of national skepticism and criticism of a party other than Congress. If the Congress led central government supported the Christian Congress opposition to the KEB, they could be seen as favoring the Congress Party in Kerala. If they showed unfettered support for the Communist bill, they could alienate the Kerala Congress *and* minorities within the state/India. Therefore, the central government also became concerned with the interpretation of minority. The Attorney General, MC Setalvad, questioned the separation between “minority” and “secular” institutions in that such a distinction may prevent minority institutions from receiving recognition or aid if they so wished. If this happened, he warned that the Kerala state would unconstitutionally discriminate against minorities.³⁷⁸ At the same time, Nehru assured the Communist government that the Centre did not support any undemocratic behavior on the part of the Congress Party members.³⁷⁹ When the protest escalated into an all out strike, the Center publically denounced protesting the communist

³⁷⁸ Setalvad, MC. “MC Setalvad’s Statement.” Education 1956-68. Vol 1. Record Group 627. Kerala State Archives, Thiruvananthapuram.

³⁷⁹ “Summary of Assembly Happenings.” <http://www.firstministry.kerala.gov.in/articles.htm>

government under the KPCC organization, but allowed individual congress members to participate in the agitation if they so wished as minorities. So the central government tread a fine line; listening and advising both sides, allowing the protest against the bill to continue and all the while expressing concern that the agitation continued. By May 13th, 1959, EMS Namboodiripad frustratingly stated that “...the Congress organization is trying to have it both ways—it wants to whip up and support the Nair-Catholic communal agitation against us, and on the other hand, it does not want to displease the large mass of people belonging to the backward communities. Is this a principled stand in which [Indira] Gandhi claims her organization is taking, or is it an opportunistic alliance with anybody who may be useful in attacking the Communists?”³⁸⁰

Christian Managements’ specific contentions of the bill were with three distinct clauses—the last of which struck dead center on the controversy surrounding the definition of minority rights in the secular Indian state:

- 1) the proposed district list of teacher appointees
- 2) the proposed establishment of a local education authority
- 3) the ability for the state government to acquire of schools

The first two points of contention are marginal. Congress Members of the Legislative Assembly (MLAs) maintained that a state list would be much more just than a district list. The objection to the local education authority was largely due to their powerful constituent Christian management who did not want the authority to interfere with management roles. The third point of contention, the ability of the state to take over private schools, became the most salient argument against the bill and the way in which to seek protection under Article 30 (1). KEB’s clauses 14 and 15 outlined the takeover of an aided school in case of mismanagement and to ensure standardization respectively. As

³⁸⁰ qtd in “Communists in Kerala.” *The Hindu*, May 13, 1959, Page 7.

per the state's argument: "if schools under private management continuously act in violation of departmental rules in a way and detrimental to the interests of students, such schools will be taken over by the Government."³⁸¹ Clauses 14 and 15 would be invoked only if there was any sign of dysfunctionality in private management or when standards defined by the state were not being met by management.

The opposition requested, both in the Legislative Assembly and in their letter writing campaign, that the bill be circulated for public opinion. As the Catholic laity was easily mobilized by the clergy, public circulation of the bill could potentially stir up widespread communal protest against school takeovers—something that the Christian management wholly supported. The state government refused stating that circulation of the bill would only delay its passage and was therefore not practical. Further, the chief minister understood the communal organization of the Syrian Christians writing that circulating the bill "will not succeed in reducing the intensity of [Catholic] opposition."³⁸² The Communist ministry did, however, seek the central government's opinion and referred the KEB to select committee on July 20th, 1957, to report to the Assembly by August 24th, 1957.

1,300 people came to Alwaye and Trivandrum to testify before the select committee with only 38 of them selected.³⁸³ The central government was flooded with form telegrams from citizens (many Romo-Syrian) who were denied an opportunity to present evidence to the select committee. These telegrams stated that witnesses were "denied audience," to a "procedure arbitrary and undemocratic" and requested that the

³⁸¹ *Kerala on the March* (Trivandrum: Department of Public Relations, 1957), 27.

³⁸² Namboodiripad, EMS. "Sept 17th 1957 Correspondence." Education 1956-67. Record Group 627. Kerala State Archives, Thiruvananthapuram.

³⁸³ "Writ Petition No. 78 of 1958." Education 1956-68. Record Group 627. Kerala State Archives, Thiruvananthapuram.

central government intervene to “circulate or withdraw the bill.”³⁸⁴ Further, Romo-Syrian Archbishop Mathew Kavukatt claimed that the evidence of those 38 witnesses was not made available to the Legislative Assembly.³⁸⁵

The select committee’s questions primarily focused on clauses 14 and 15 of the KEB—the clauses dealing with takeovers of private management. As per the committee’s recommendations, both the manager and the educational agency would be notified if a private school was to be acquired by the state. Proposed takeovers of schools could only be conducted if it was in the interest of the students. Further, such a move could only be enacted by a resolution in the Kerala Legislative Assembly. During any takeover, the committee assured the public that property used for religious purposes would be exempt and nothing in the KEB was to affect the rights of minorities under Article 30 (1).³⁸⁶ These provisions did not stop many members of the select committee from dissenting—among them EP Paulose, MA Antony and PT Chacko, prominent Romo-Syrian assemblymen. Dissenters stated that even in the case of gross mismanagement, managers should be given an opportunity to rectify any specific flaw before school is acquired and clauses 14 and 15 of the KEB should be amended accordingly. Further, like the Romo-Syrian organized letter writing campaign, the dissenters of the bill advised that it should be circulated for public opinion.³⁸⁷ Despite dissent, the Bill passed and was sent to the governor for approval.

In response, the Romo-Syrians sent a delegation of priests and bishops to Delhi to meet with the Prime Minister Nehru and central ministers to reiterate their opposition to

³⁸⁴ “Protest Telegrams.” Education 1956-68. Record Group 627 Vol 1. Kerala State Archives, Thiruvananthapuram.

³⁸⁵ “Writ Petition,” Kerala State Archives, Thiruvananthapuram.

³⁸⁶ *Report of the Select Committee* (Trivandrum: Kerala Government Press, 1957), iv-v.

³⁸⁷ *Report of the Select Committee*, vii-viii.

the bill. In response to the delegation and confusion over whether the take-over of schools could infringe on Article 30 (1), the Governor sent the KEB to President as per Article 200 of the Constitution. In turn, the President sent the bill to the Supreme Court. Opponents of the KEB welcomed this action. As Congressman M Narayana Kurup argued, it was not for the assembly or the central government to decide the definition of “minority” under Article 30 (1)—that power was reserved for the courts alone.³⁸⁸ But in a blow to the Romo-Syrian clergy and Christian management, the Supreme Court decided that if a school was aided, the KEB was constitutional and had the right to regulate all aided schools within reason. This regulation could include the takeover of schools in the case of gross mismanagement. The KEB was sent back to Kerala Legislative Assembly for minor revisions as per the opinion of the Supreme Court. Two years after it was introduced, the KEB was passed went into effect June 1st, 1959.

Were the Romo-Syrians justified in their contention? Were minorities and a minority way of life threatened by the passage of the KEB? As stated, many states in India during this time were passing similar bills to standardize state education and to regulate teachers’ pay. There were also a large number of national newspaper editorials expressing opinion against the agitation.³⁸⁹ The Romo-Syrian community, a rising class in Kerala, would stand to lose much if the regulation passed. Why else would the Romo-Syrian hierarchy lead their community against a bill that was widely supported by their own private school teachers? These facts seem to support the view that what the Romo-Syrians were protecting was perhaps not a minority way of life, but their privileged class

³⁸⁸ “26 Nov 1958.” *Kerala Legislative Proceedings*. (Trivandrum: Kerala Gazetters, 1958), 229.

³⁸⁹ Compiled by the Department of Public Relations in two publications: “Democratic Opinion on the Kerala Agitation” (Trivandrum: The Government Press, 1959), and “Public Opinion on the ‘Direct Action’ in Kerala.” (Trivandrum: The Government Press, 1959).

position. It is tempting to make this into a class issue, as George Leiten does in his work *The First Communist Ministry*.³⁹⁰ However, I argue that the debates over the KEB and definitions of “minority” augmented not only the Syrian Christians upper-class status, but their caste and racial privileges as well. The Syrian Christians were very successful in masking such privileges under a united “Christian” identity persecuted and threatened by the Communist government. Such perceived threats are a very powerful way in which to politically organize people in secular India.

In recent years, Hindutva has successfully used perceived threats of the “other” community to revamp a history of Hindu/Muslim relations in South Asia. In India, a justification for British colonial rule was the opulence of Muslim rule and the declared disunity and decline of the country after Muslim invasions. This divided Indian history into the golden age of Vedic society, its downfall engendered by Muslim rule and progress through the civilizing mission of the British. South Asian scholars have worked to understand British colonialism as not creating these differences, but intensified them through codification and policing of the private.³⁹¹ It is a gendered ordering of history where the injured Hindu victim (feminine) and the Muslim conqueror (masculine) are both reformed by the benevolent British (secular and paternalistic).

Today, the injured Hindu identity of the fallen Vedic past is co-opted and used in Hindutva discourse with ease. Hindutva ideology—defining “Indian” under the identity of having both holyland and homeland in the soil of the subcontinent—is the politics of

³⁹⁰ Leiten, George. *The First Communist Ministry in Kerala. 1957-1959*. (New Delhi: KP Bagchi & Company), 1982.

³⁹¹ See for example Dirks, Nicholas. *Castes of Mind: Colonialism and the Making of Modern India*. (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2001.) Cohn, Bernard S. *Colonialism and its Forms of Knowledge: The British in India*. (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1996.) Sangari, Kumkum and Sudesh Vaid, eds. *Recasting Women: Essays in Indian Colonial History*. (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 1999.)

the injured identity trying to reassert itself as powerful. The story is a bit altered from colonial rhetoric: A injured Hindu identity by the barbaric Muslim conquerors is recuperated through present day Hindu fundamentalism. Group cohesion based on an injured identity can be quite powerfully politically. As Wendy Brown explains in *States of Injury*, revenge as a reaction produces identity bound to the history that produced it. It reiterates existence of the identity whose present past is an unredeemable injury.³⁹² This identity is attached to injury and cannot hold a future that triumphs over the pain of the past—for then, it would not be the same identity. It is seductive identity because the cause of the injury and the site of blame for the degenerate present are easily located in the “other.” In other words, you know yourself by knowing who did you wrong. However, the injured identity is an identity based solely on looking back and cannot have any futurity except through revenge violence against the “other.” It is perhaps the only politics available for a group so defined by injury.

The politics of today are narrated as return and re-appropriation. Changes to textbooks connecting ancient India to the Aryan race and equating Aryan culture to Vedic and depicting Muslims as foreign invaders were implemented into children’s education for this motive (Chapter 4).³⁹³ The very citizenship of Muslims in present day India can be painted as suspicious. Thus, all Muslims can become a target of Hindu violence as the already guilty party, as so terribly illustrated during the Partition, the razing of the Babri Masjid and during the 2002 Gujarat riots (among many incidents of communal violence in the region).

³⁹² Brown, Wendy. *States of Injury: Power and Freedom in Late Modernity*. (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1995), 73.

³⁹³ For a detailed discussion of such changes in history books, see: “Rewriting History” issue of *Seminar Magazine*. 522 (Feb 2003), Thapar, Romila. “Politics and the Rewriting of History in India” *The Critical Quarterly*. 47:1-2 (2005). Friese, Kai. “Hijacking India’s History.” *The New York Times*, 30 Dec. 2002.

Unlike South Asian scholarship of communal relations and Hindu/Muslim violence in North India, Kerala is seen as relatively peaceful and with little incidence of communal violence. Large-scale rioting and distinctly Christian/Hindu, Christian/Muslim, Hindu/Muslim clashes are not part of Kerala's modern history. Religious harmony (*mathamaithri*), like education statistics and women's perceived well-being, is touted as an achievement. In fact, communalism is not seen by scholars to have an impact on state governance. Ashutosh Varshney's comprehensive study on communalism in India acknowledges that Kerala has many religious groups and communalism in the state does exist. Yet because of communism and inter-religious connections, Varshney argues that Kerala has redefined communalism and religious groups were disassociated from political identities in the state.³⁹⁴ As argued by Patrick Heller, Kerala's social and economic cleavages have not threatened democratic governance.³⁹⁵ Yet Kerala's inability to sustain ministries to full terms since its inception can hardly be seen as "effective democratic governance."³⁹⁶ I argue against Heller that the *vimochana samaram* did directly threaten democratic governance in the state and indeed the nation. What these studies on Kerala's exceptionally peaceful status fail to account for is the dynamics played between identities that shape a communally organized political violence. The intersections of a class, race, religion, gender and caste are foregone in political/historical analysis of Kerala's religious harmony and clashes are defined by one social category alone: Romo-Syrians protested the KEB only for class

³⁹⁴ Varshney, Ashutosh. *Ethnic Conflict and Civic Life: Hindus and Muslims in India*. (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2002), 162-66.

³⁹⁵ Heller, Patrick. "Degrees of Democracy: Some Comparative Lessons from India." *World Politics*. 52 no 4. (2000): 500.

³⁹⁶ Heller, 511.

reasons, the change in Romo-Syrian women's dress was a change from the religious to the secular, racial divisions are purely linguistic.

An examination of the dynamics between social categories in Kerala shows a type of communalism at work that South Asian scholars are familiar with. Similar to North Indian communalism, privilege was defended through the idea of a perceived threat to a community. Kerala communal leaders were able to use the idea of a perceived threat in a way comparable to North Indian communalism. In the separation between minority (religious) and aided (secular schools), the communist ministry created a boundary between religious minorities and majorities. This division allowed the Christian community to claim that their religious way of life was under attack from Communist reform. Unlike the Hindutva rhetoric which often paints Muslims as suspect, the Romo-Syrian hierarchy skillfully bypassed any accusations of being "unpatriotic" or "suspect citizens" by invoking their right as protected citizens of the state. They successfully turned the notion of suspect citizenship back upon itself and questioned the very constitutionality of the Communist government's bill and Communists at large for attacking minority Christian citizens. That is why the Supreme Court's upholding of the KEB's constitutionality was such a blow to the Christian management and Romo-Syrian hierarchy. Communal leaders were relying on the Indian Constitution to prove that the state governments' actions were a threat to their way of life. If the Supreme Court ruled that regulation of private schools through takeovers was unconstitutional, then Romo-Syrian communal leaders would have legitimated their victimization on a national scale. Since this was not the case, Romo-Syrian political leaders were forced to change communal tactics entirely and began a new sort of communal protest. Sensing the futility

in contesting the bill democratically, the Romo-Syrians made plans to shut down public life through protest. The historic agitation was to begin only a week after the passage of the bill and became known as the *vimochana samaram* or “Liberation Struggle.”

The Vimochana Samaram

The *vimochana samaram* was a statewide strike pulled off by a coalition of communal forces of which the Romo-Syrians provided key numbers. Translated, *vimochana samaram* means “liberation struggle.” The idea was a struggle to liberate Kerala from Communist rule. After the failure of the Romo-Syrians to prevent the KEB’s passage, they joined forces with the Nair Service Society (NSS), the Kerala Pradesh Congress Committee (KPCC), the Praja Socialist Party (PSP), the Revolutionary Socialist Party (RSP) and the Muslim League in an effort to remove the Communist government from power.³⁹⁷ The alliance between the NSS and Romo-Syrians also marked an abrupt change in communal tactics. No longer was legislation the entity infringing on Christian minority rights through a perceived threat, but now the Communist government as a whole was identified as the point of contention. The opposition began to argue that the majority of Keralites now supported the Congress Party and not the elected ministry. Mannath Padmanabhan, president of the NSS

³⁹⁷ The *vimochana samaram* is also rumored to have had the support of the CIA (See Austin, H. The Anatomy of the Kerala Coup. (Delhi: People’s Publishing House, 1959), 99). The Nair Service Society, originally behind the KEB, joined forces with the Catholics due to another Communist introduced bill, the Agrarian Relations Act (ARA). The ARA sought to impose ceilings on land ownership and secure *kudikidapukaran* land ownership that would adversely affect the landowning *Nayars*. The *kudikidapukaran* were landless agricultural laborers that lived on owner’s lands with permission from the landowner—a leftover from the feudal agricultural system and slavery. In a revolutionary communist move, all landless workers gained ownership of their dwellings through the ARA. The *Nayar* and *Namboodiri* castes, historically landowning castes, stood much to lose with the passage of the ARA. The ARA passed despite widespread *Nayar* protest of the bill. As such, the NSS reversed its support of the KEB and joined forces with the Catholic Church. Without this partnership, the *vimochana samaram* would have arguably failed.

declared in March 1959 that all the ministers of the state government should resign because the majority of people wanted them out.³⁹⁸ In May, the Syrian Christian Knayan Archbishop also claimed that the impending strike was against the Communist government.³⁹⁹ Yet to protest legislation is one thing. To protest a democratically elected government is quite another. What the coalition forces headed by the NSS and Romo-Syrian Catholics were aiming for was the dismissal of the Communist ministry through President's Rule. According to the Indian Constitution, the central government can institute President's Rule when/if the constitutional mechanisms of a state have failed. The central government in essence takes charge of the state's governance. However, the mere change in public opinion, from majority voting for Communist to majority supporting the Congress Party should not equate with a failure of the state. The protest aimed at removing a democratically elected government tested India's very constitution and the sovereignty of a newly independent nation. If overthrowing the state government could be achieved through protest and disruption of public life, then what was to become of democracy in the post-colonial nation? The fear grew across India that Kerala would set the precedent for state elections in the nation. In other words, the *vimochana samaram* invoked debates throughout India concerning the workings of India's democracy.

The protest itself was multipronged, but a key element was the united Christian management's decision to shut down all private schools in the state. On March 20th, 1959, the Christian and *Nayar* school managers met to discuss possible action where it

³⁹⁸ "All Ministers Should Resign" *Malayalam Manorama*. March 13, 1959, page 2.

³⁹⁹ qtd in "We will strike against the Communists." *Malayalam Manorama*. May 12th, 1959, page 4.

was first decided to close down private schools.⁴⁰⁰ By May, Christian management were announcing that all private schools would be shut down until the Communist ministry was dismissed. One by one, the different factions of Christians in the state publically announced the intended closure of their schools.⁴⁰¹ The state government first tried to delay school openings in the state from June 1st to June 15th to contain the school closures. The Communist ministry called on the National Guard, appealed to the centre, and vowed protection for government schools and any private school that remained open. They also declared that the management had no right to stop education in the state and questioned the legality and patriotism of protesters.⁴⁰²

On June 12th 1959, the communal forces formally launched the statewide strike to remove the Communist ministry. The Romo-Syrian population was instrumental in the *vimochana samaram*. In a pastoral letter to the faithful issued by 16 Catholic bishops in Kerala on May 7th, the clergy cried: “Let us be inspired by the words of the Divine: ‘Blessed are those who are tortured in the cause of justice, for theirs is the Kingdom of God.’ And in the end darkness is gathering around us. But we should not be frightened. This is darkness before dawn. Every member of our society is responsible to protect our rights and institutions.”⁴⁰³ The faithful saw it as their duty to the community and their faith to participate in the struggle:

⁴⁰⁰ “Opposition Preparations for Violent Overthrow of the Government: Facts placed before the Prime Minister.” (Trivandrum: Department of Public Relations, 1959), 7.

⁴⁰¹ See “Schools will close: Catholic conference decision.” *Malayalam Manorama*. May 6th, 1959, page 1. “CSI schools will close.” *Malayalam Manorama*. May 13th, 1959, page 1. “Schools will Close, Marthomas passed decision.” *Malayalam Manorama*. May 14th, 1959, page 1. “All private schools will be closed” *Malayalam Manorama*. May 15th, 1959, page 1. “Malankara Christians: June 14th Will be the day of education, schools will close, children will not be sent to school.” *Malayalam Manorama*. June 5th, 1959, page 1.

⁴⁰² “Management has no right to say school is off” *Malayalam Manorama*. May 14th, 1959, page 4.

⁴⁰³ Austin, 55.

As Catholics, we were to support our leaders. Whatever the priests said, we would listen because that's the way in which we were taught...At mass, the priests would preach to us about the situation...There were many letters read at mass pertaining to the protest. Those letters were our inspiration.⁴⁰⁴

Priests would lecture us and say that communists had no belief. [wife: at that time, bishops were like God to us]. We gave our support because the bishops told us that the Communists would ruin our way of life because Communists had no belief in God. The bishops had power—they were the ones who coordinated the protest. The Congress influenced the bishops. What was the intention of the Congressmen? They wanted to rule this country—to pull down the Marxist Party and get on the throne, that alone. They wanted the chair of the minister. The political parties influenced the bishops and the NSS. We can't justify anything, but I took part in the protest because the bishops told me to. At that time, we would believe anything the bishops told us. The clergy influenced the believers. The politicians influenced the Church and the Church influenced the common man. And the common man fought...The clergy said we should fight and dethrone them. And we fought and dethroned. We didn't know about democracy. We were ruled by kings before statehood and that's all we knew. And the Pope was a king, and the bishop was king to us. That was our mentality at that time. They made us believe that the Marxists were against God.⁴⁰⁵

I used to go to marches and to meetings...The priests would tell us through bishop's pastoral letters. Pastoral letters. That's from the bishop. The priest would read it at mass. [Sonja: So when everyone hears the letter, they have belief?] Yes, there is faith. When the priest speaks, we would listen with open ears. At church, there is belief, isn't there? There is a Catholic faith. When the priest speaks we reverently listen and heed.⁴⁰⁶

The struggle began with the one-anna boat fare strike and children were frequent protesters beside their parents fighting for their faith. One year earlier in June of 1958, students throughout the state of Kerala began staging a protest against the rise in boat transportation fares. The Communist government had nationalized water transportation in the state and marginally increased boat fares. Students received concessions for transportation to and from school and students living in the backwaters of Kerala riding

⁴⁰⁴ Thomachen. Interview in Malayalam by author. Dec 31, 2007.

⁴⁰⁵ Ausep. Interview in English and Malayalam by author. Dec 31, 2007.

⁴⁰⁶ Chacko. Interview in Malayalam by author. Jan 2, 2008.

ferries saw a fare increase from one-anna (six paisa) to ten paisa. The student strike against this fare hike was a huge success. Eventually, this strike merged with the *vimochana samaram*. Students were very effective in their organizing. Student leaders would go in gangs from school to school calling the students out to join in the protest and then march to a particular location. According to student organizer, Yohinan, if the front line of students were arrested/beaten by police, the next line of students would step up and take their place.⁴⁰⁷ The key element that Christian schoolchildren provided to the protest was the *forced* closings of government schools, colleges and other private management that attempted to remain open after the Church called for school closures:

The [Christian] management gave the support... We'd go from school to school and call the leaders. Then all the kids would jump out. The last one we went to was Assumption College under Fr. PC Mathew. St. Peter's high school kids came there. But to go in—we were scared because the priest may dismiss us. Assumption College had a huge gate that was barred. Some of the kids climbed it while shouting slogans until they had no choice and closed the school.⁴⁰⁸

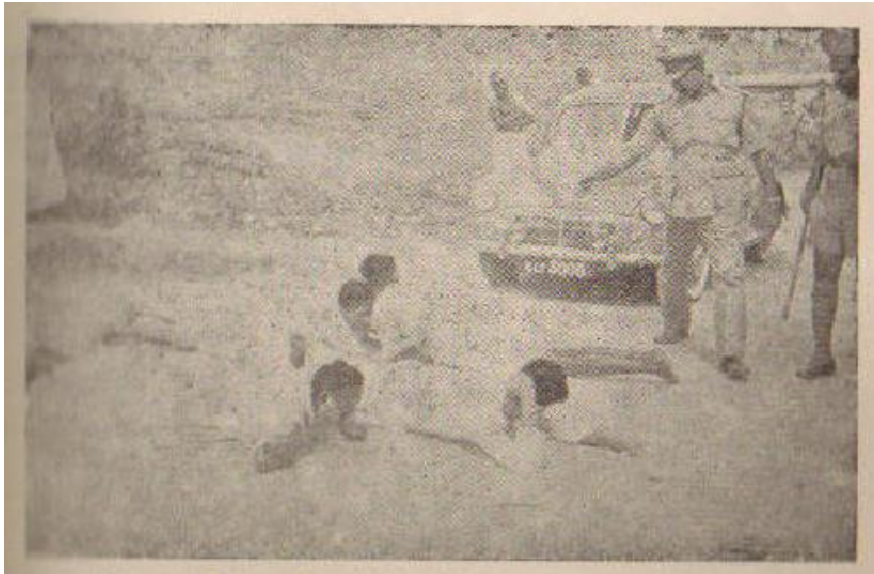
In Malabar (Northern Kerala), 200 schools that tried to remain open were forcibly closed by students on the first day of protest, and by June 15th, all Malabar schools decided to close.

As mentioned, the protest was multipronged. Not only were schools (forcibly) shut down, but public transportation and government life was also brought to a standstill. Villages in Kerala were increasingly relying on buses for the transportation of goods and people. As part of the Communist second five-year plan in Kerala, the government set out to improve and construct 1,147 miles of road, build 180 bridges and construct 1,500 miles of village roads. By 1957-8, Kerala had 150 vehicles per lakh of population while

⁴⁰⁷ Yohinan. Interview in Malayalam by author. Sept 11, 2007.

⁴⁰⁸ Paulose. Interview in Malayalam by author. Dec 3, 2007.

India as a whole had only 89. The transportation department was offering passenger service on at least 301 routes covering a mileage of 5,795 miles.⁴⁰⁹ Increasingly, the population had come to depend on these roads and buses. Seemingly spontaneous sit-ins were staged across Kerala to prevent transportation of public and private vehicles.



Picketing of private cars.⁴¹⁰

The picketing of government offices was often times coordinated from churches. Village churches would organize buses/transportation (it was a rarity at the time to have a chartered bus). Protesters would gather at the churches in the morning to leave with other Romo-Syrian villages to the protest in larger cities: “We’d meet at the church because the church is the meeting place for Christians.”⁴¹¹ Romo-Syrians, organized by the village churches, picketed in front of the collectorate and education office in Kottayam, the secretariat and assembly in Trivandrum and police stations in villages throughout the state in an effort to totally paralyze the government and its response to the protest. The

⁴⁰⁹ “Economic Review” http://www.firstministry.kerala.gov.in/eco_index.htm, 14.

⁴¹⁰ “The volunteers also picket private cars. The picture above shows the car of the RDO Trivandrum being picketed by PSP volunteers” (image). “Opposition Preparation for Violent Overthrow of the Government: Facts Placed Before the Prime Minister.” (Trivandrum: The Government Press, 1959.), 40.

⁴¹¹ Annamma. Interview in Malayalam by author. Dec 15, 2007.

local jails were not able to hold all of the detainees, and protesters were sometimes released and rearrested through the course of the *samaram*. On June 16th, *Malayalam Manorama* reported that in only 3 days, 1,041 people had been arrested. One month later, that number had risen to 71,176.⁴¹² Public order was in chaos as police lacked the manpower/strength to handle the number of agitators.⁴¹³ In all, 177,850 people were arrested and 1,937 people were physically wounded from protesting and police firings/lathi charges.⁴¹⁴

Gender, Class and Communal Violence—the Unification of “Kerala Christians.”

Unlike public events in the past, there was a special call for women to participate in the protest. Out of the more than 100,000 arrested, 42,745 were women.⁴¹⁵ While women entered the public sphere in Kerala a generation before, it was not until the *vimochana samaram* that Romo-Syrian women were sanctioned by the Church herself to participate in public life. Within pastoral letters and calls to participate from the pulpit, Romo-Syrian priests particularly called upon women in the community. The call coincided with a new array of social opportunities for women through the church. Prior to social reform, women were restricted from leaving the home except for mass. With the change of language from Aramaic to Malayalam and the prevalence of women in the public space, the Church became more accessible to all women of the faith. Older women, unable to return to school for more education did take part in large numbers in public life through the Church—from Catholic organizations for women, to family

⁴¹² “1041 people arrested in 3 days” *Malayalam Manorama*. June 16th, 1959, page 1. and “71,176 people arrested all together.” *Malayalam Manorama*. July 14th, 1959, page 1.

⁴¹³ “Not Enough Police.” *Malayalam Manorama*. July 4, 1959, page 4.

⁴¹⁴ Vithayathil, Varkey. “Pastoral Letter. 50th Anniversary of Liberation Strike,” May 31st, 2009.

⁴¹⁵ Vithayathil.

reunions organized in and sometimes by churches. For many women, the Church was the only (and welcome) social outlet. Many devout women saw the *samaram* not only as their Catholic duty, but as a way in which to take part in a changing notion of femininity through the church: “That’s when women got emancipation. The women would shout: [in falsetto] “This government should go...”⁴¹⁶

The prevalence of women in the protest was a daily news story in June and July, 1959. Over forty-five articles in this two month span of the popular *Manorama* were devoted to the fact that women were protesting. For example, on June 5th, the paper ran an article entitled, “In Kerala, an Unprecedented *Samaram*, Women Involved.”⁴¹⁷ So while the protest itself was unique in India’s short history, for Keralites, the numbers of women protesting with sanction from the Church and Romo-Syrian families was a profound oddity:

The *samaram* was a mass movement and women took part. They were important in fund collections because they would go door-to-door for us. My sister, 22 years old at the time, would daily go from house to house with two female friends—traveling alone by boat! That would never have happened before the *samaram*.⁴¹⁸

Women protesters entered the streets during a time when younger Romo-Syrian women getting an education, when joint families became nuclear, the *chatta/thuni* was replaced by the *sari* and definitions of femininity, morality and domesticity were being reworked. In *Engendering Individuals*, the Kerala historian J. Devika argues that specific gender codes existed before Kerala’s social reform movements. Old ideologies of gender were selectively incorporated into new definitions and attempts were made to create continuity

⁴¹⁶ Ausep. Interview in Malayalam by author. Dec 31, 2007.

⁴¹⁷ “In Kerala, an Unprecedented *Samaram*, Women Involved.” *Malayalam Manorama*. June 5, 1959, page 5.

⁴¹⁸ Mulasheri Achin. Interview in English by author. May 14, 2008.

between past and modern women.⁴¹⁹ As I argued in chapter 3, this “modern woman” was exemplified in the *sari* clad educated woman. While they were able to leave the home for education, in many ways what ensued was not necessarily the emancipation of women, but a social space that began to delineate men from women as gender became the primary difference from which other differences were understood. In chapter 4 I explained how sex-segregated spaces developed to incorporate past racial and caste divisions so that “moral woman” could be distinguished from “other” as much as “women” was distinguished from “men” in the public sphere. The separation of women from men and the difference between castes/classes of Christians in the protest helped to set a precedent for women’s political participation in the state.

Sex-segregated protesting defined women’s participation in the *samaram*. Early in the protest of the KEB, D. Hari wrote to education minister Joseph Mundascheri saying: “Some may interpret it by saying that I am doing all this [protesting the KEB] because I am the Secretary of the Kerala Schools Managers’ Association in which the majority are Catholics. To me there are only two castes—man and woman—and I belong now to no Party.”⁴²⁰ And this two caste system divided men’s protests from women’s. Every meeting of the *samaram* was implicitly read as a men’s meeting. Women’s meetings were called in conjunction with the men’s meetings by educated women in the community and only attended by women. On June 19th, 34 prominent women Romo-Syrian women issued a joint call for a meeting to protest Pulluvila and Kochuveli police shootings of protesters. *The Hindu* reported that “the signatories have appealed to all

⁴¹⁹ Devika, J. *En-gendering Individuals: The Language of Re-forming in Early Twentieth Century Keralam*. (Delhi: Orient Longman, 2007), 98.

⁴²⁰ Hari, D. “Letter from D. Hari to Chief Minister.” Education 1956-68. Record Group 627. Vol 1. Kerala State Archives, Thiruvananthapuram.

‘patriotic women’ to attend the meeting.”⁴²¹ Romo-Syrian educated women led the picket lines and were invited to give lectures at women’s meetings, volunteered to be arrested, and spoke to the press as representatives of women protesters.



“In Pala on Sunday, a women’s gathering. Mrs. R. V. Thomas speaks.”⁴²²

Their participation in the protest was lauded by the community. Women’s marches, picketing and meetings were made public and exploited by politicians as evidence that all walks of society supported the overthrow of the Communists. Prominent Romo-Syrian politician PT Chacko stated that women in Kerala were the spark that lit the fire that would burn the Communist government.⁴²³ Yet their participation was not absolute and/or free from scrutiny. There arose within definitions of morality, a specific way in

⁴²¹ “Agitation in Kerala. Protest meeting of women called.” *The Hindu*. June 19th, 1959. page 7.

⁴²² “In Pala on Sunday, a women’s gathering. Mrs. R. V. Thomas speaks” (image). *Malayalam Manorama*. July 5, 1959.

⁴²³ “Kerala women’s spark” *Malayalam Manorama*. July 28th 1959, Page 2.

which it was acceptable for women to protest that embraced a new domesticity. Women did not take part in any of the torchlight marches (at night). Neither were they trained as Christophers (discussed below).

Romo-Syrian women have, in actuality, been systematically removed and discouraged from participating in politics except through protest outlets sanctioned by the church. In the 1957-9 ministry, an unprecedented six women served on the state legislature. But in less than a decade, that number dwindled to one. In “Programmes for the Uplift of Women in Kerala with Special Emphasis on their Political Awareness and Social Welfare,” P. Valsama Kumari argues that Kerala men continually dissuade women from participating in politics. Kerala society respects employed women, but looks down on women politicians and there are only a few women in professional, intellectual and political fields. Further, while there are women’s wings of political parties, they are only active at election times and do not promote political awareness among women.⁴²⁴

Women’s protesting during the *samaram* was made acceptable only because it was channeled into avenues of the new domesticity and femininity. Seen as caregivers and the embodiments of tradition to be passed onto children, women were mobilized to protest under their identity as mothers of Catholic children. A prominent Romo-Syrian protester, Chinamma Chandy, declared to women protesters: “we cannot stand this kind of tyranny against our children who we give milk. If we don’t do the protest, they [communists] will control our life too.”⁴²⁵ This definitely marked a shift in definitions of domesticity. It was suddenly acceptable for women to be publically political, because

⁴²⁴ Kumari, Valsala P. “Programmes for the Uplift of Women in Kerala with Special Emphasis on their Political Awareness and Social Welfare,” *Journal of Kerala Studies*. VI. No. I and II. (March-June 1979).

⁴²⁵ “Women’s Samaram.” *Malayalam Manorama*. June 17th, 1959, page 4.

they were attempting to preserve a Catholic way of life through the family. This was picked up by a political cartoonist during the height of the protest:



At the Women's ward of the Jail: "I have four more kids at home. Bring them, because we're living here til Onam [late August/early September]"⁴²⁶

Spending months in jail away from the home was by no means acceptable for any Kerala woman. It became normal during the *samaram* precisely because it was within the new Catholic women's moral codes—protest for the sake of preserving the Catholic way of life through their role as the caregiver in the family unit. Thus, the woman depicted in the cartoon brings her children with her to spend months in jail. This role is made ideal and seen to encompass *all* women. As a class, women could be part of the protest without upsetting the dictates of sex-segregated spaces or sexual morality. However, it is

⁴²⁶ "At the Women's ward of the Jail: "I have four more kids at home. Bring them, because we're living here til Onam [late August/early September]" (image). *Malayalam Manorama*. July 30, 1959. Sonja Thomas, trans.

far from the truth that women were a united class of people. As argued, caste, religion, class and race separate Romo-Syrians from other women in Kerala. The participation/use of lower class Christians in the organization known as the Christophers and the sensationalization of lower-caste Christian martyrs denote a specific discourse used by Romo-Syrians in which “Christians” seem to be united. Nothing could be further from the truth.

From the very beginning of the *samaram*, Syrian Christians were indicating the necessary use of violence. *The Blitz* reported on June 13th 1959 that “weapons are stockpiled inside Churches, private armies are raised and drilled in Church compounds, even bulbs collected for acid-bombs!”⁴²⁷ The Marthoma Education Act Committee issued a leaflet containing seven instructions including creating lists of men, identity cards, and first aid preparations. Two offices for the *Vimochana Samaram Samithi* or “action council” were created to coordinate the Romo-Syrian protest. There were rumors that the action council along with the Catholic church was training youth in paramilitary tactics for the protests. While priests mostly coordinated the protest from the wings, Fr. Vadakan of Thrissur fashioned the Christophers, a volunteer organization for violent protesting. The communist ministry alleged that the Christophers were trained in the use of lathis (clubs), ropes for beating, choppers and daggers.⁴²⁸ Further, the ministry alleged that some of the Christopher meetings were made under the pretext of bible classes and that the training expenses were met by Romo-Syrian Catholic churches.⁴²⁹ While the exact doings of the Christophers was kept under the utmost secrecy, the strength and

⁴²⁷ “Deliverance to the Devil” *The Blitz*. June 13th 1959. In “Public Opinion of the Direct Action in Kerala” (Trivandrum: Government Press, 1959), 20.

⁴²⁸ “Kerala Government’s reply to the KPCC Memorandum.” (Trivandrum: Public Relations Department), 1959. Kerala. Annexure VII.

⁴²⁹ “Kerala Government’s Reply,” xvi

impact of the Christophers was felt throughout Kerala. The Communist ministry reported that in Trivandrum district alone, the Christophers were 9,000 strong. And in Allepey district, “the Catholic Churches of Allepey are reported to have decided to house the volunteers at convenient places for utilizing them to picket schools and to meet the force expected from supporters of the Government.”⁴³⁰

At the same time of paramilitary training of the Christophers covertly occupied Romo-Syrian agendas, police violence against lower-caste/class Christians reverberated through the Romo-Syrian community. In Ankamali on June 13th, 1959, police opened fire on a large crowd of protesters. The police fired forty-two rounds into the crowd, alleging that the mob was throwing stones and becoming increasingly violent. Thirty people were injured and five died in the violence. The Communists claimed that “church bells in the area, which is stated to be predominately Christian, began tolling incessantly at 9:30 pm last night as is done only in times of danger to the community or other emergencies.”⁴³¹ These church bells purportedly called Christians from around the area to unite in violence against the police. However, the KPCC charged that this area was specifically targeted by the police because it was predominantly Catholic and that the government was attempting to prove to the “Hindu fanatics in North India” that the unruly members of society were all Catholic.⁴³² Similarly, on July 4th, a protest at a fishing village incited the police to fire into a crowd. 2,949 people were arrested, 1,844 of them women. Among those killed was a Latin Catholic woman named Flory, a pregnant mother who was reportedly standing by a well and breastfeeding when hit by one of the bullets.

⁴³⁰ “Kerala Government’s Reply,” xviii.

⁴³¹ qtd in “Fire Opened Near Alwaye.” *The Hindu*. June 15, 1959, page 1.

⁴³² Pillai, 187-8.

The Ankamali shootings and Flory's death became rallying points for the Romo-Syrian community. The innocence of Flory was used to highlight the inhumanity of the Communist government and to create a boundary between protesting Christian and the atheistic government officials and policemen. Participants in the protest remember slogans that combined the tragedies of Ankamali and Flory's death into one violent event:

As it was getting dark in the evening,
Our husbands still not at home
The government cremated
The pregnant woman named Flory.
Know that we will demand
Justice for every drop of blood that was shed.⁴³³

In the deadly fields of Ankamali
you who cremated
The pregnant woman named Flory
Expect no forgiveness from us.⁴³⁴

According to Mr. Kacheeramatum, the foremost historian on the *vimochana samaram*, the actual slogans were: 1) In Ankamali killings fields/ St. Paul surely will get his revenge. 2) In this Southern State/A pregnant woman named Flory/Was murdered by the government/Expect revenge from us. The change in both these slogans to the 'cremation of Flory' is very telling as it creates yet another boundary between Christians (who are to be buried at death) and Hindus (cremated at death). The insult carried in the slogan of the government "cremating" a Catholic woman whipped up communal anger at the injury. However, neither the Christophers, Flory, nor the victims of Ankamali matched the class, caste and racial privilege of the Romo-Syrian clergy, rally/lecture leaders, or politicians. The mob at Ankamali was comprised 95% Syrian Christians, yet 70% of these Christians

⁴³³ Rosamma. Interview in Malayalam by Author. Dec 5, 2007.

⁴³⁴ Yohinan. Interview in Malayalam by Author. Sept 11, 2007.

did not own land.⁴³⁵ And the Latin Catholic community of which Flory was a part of was a lower class/caste fisher community. Very few Romo-Syrians comprised the force of Christophers. The Christophers were mainly volunteers from poorest sections of Kerala society and very separate from the middle class/upper middle class Romo-Syrians.⁴³⁶ Many Romo-Syrian participants in the *samaram* recalled Fr. Vaddekan and the Christophers but none of the participants I interviewed were part of the organization themselves. Nor did they know of any of their friends or family who were members of the Christophers.

Yet it would be a mistake to think that lower classes/castes of Christians were duped into participating in the protest through violence by class privileged Romo-Syrians. As early as 1955, the Latin Catholic Mahasbha petitioned the state government for reservations on the basis of their difference from other Christians in Kerala: “There is a misconception that we being one of the denominations of Christians, we are likely to be helped in the elections by our Christian brethren. Our experience tells us that there is no love lost between the various denominations of Christians in such political affairs. In times of contest we have not only to depend on ourselves but sometimes face even the opposition of other Christians.”⁴³⁷ As mentioned, a difference in class, race and caste existed between Latin and Romo-Syrians on a daily basis that was and continues to be extremely pronounced. Flory, a member of the Latin Catholic fisher-folk, mother of five

⁴³⁵ Leiten, 143.

⁴³⁶ Leiten, 140.

⁴³⁷ “Latin Catholic Petition.” Legislature 1945-49. Record Group 150. Kerala State Archives, Thiruvananthapuram.

and pregnant, is offset by educated Romo-Syrian women's rally leaders such as Chinamma Chandy and R.V. Thomas who represented Kerala's "dominant women."⁴³⁸

Sharmila Sreekumar's *Scripting Lives: Narratives of 'Dominant Women' in Kerala* uses personal narratives including diaries, letters, stories and scribbles to reveal how Hindu, upper-caste, and upper classed women become dominant and normative in Kerala society today. As Sreekumar explains, in Kerala's utopia (characterized by high literacy rates, access to education and health care and supposed high-standards of well-being), dominant women become ordinary and use their ordinariness to malign, exclude and render inferior the "other" women. In Kerala's dystopia, (characterized by class divisions, alcoholism, sexual violence, sexual transmitted diseases, and suicide), all women are potentially failed subjects and victims. By examining personal narratives of dominant women, Sreekumar's analysis reveals the ways in which Kerala women oscillate between utopian ideals and dystopian failures in an effort to fashion respectable selves. For Sreekumar, the image of the dominant woman is only possible if she distances herself from the working-class, lower-caste woman, seen to consciously flirt with sexual violence, failure and victimization. The utopia/dystopia framework offered by Sreekumar aptly illustrates Christian women's participation in the *vimochana samaram*: Syrian Christian women as dominant and part of Kerala's utopia distanced from lower-class and lower-caste Christian women's experiences in dystopia.

What is clear about the *vimochana samaram* is that the way in which Romo-Syrians organized on the basis of the supposed threat to a religious identity was sensationalized and continued to galvanize the people across other social differences

⁴³⁸ Sreekumar, Sharmila. *Scripting Lives: Narratives of 'Dominant Women' in Kerala*. (Hyderabad: Orient Blackswan, 2009).

including caste and class. The *vimochana samaram* thus set a precedence of communal protest in the state. By protesting government policy through a minority rights discourse, Romo-Syrians bypassed discussions of privilege between communities of Christians in the state and in the nation. Although unequal caste, class, and racial differences existed and continue to exist in everyday life, Romo-Syrians successfully organized under the umbrella term “minority” and were able to present a popular argument in which the Christian way of life was something to be protected under any perceived attack. As such, Romo-Syrian communal leaders could now politically mobilize a large population to serve upper-caste and upper-class interests.

The differing codes of conduct for women in the Christian community reveal the actual divisions between castes, races, and classes and deconstructs the notion of a homogenized Christian identity. However, as “dominant women” came to represent all women in Kerala, the realities of lower-caste, lower-class Dravidian women could be painted as part of Kerala’s unfortunate dystopia. Further, their “failures” could be cast as individual failures operating outside of the representative “Christian” experiences. This framework helps to keep hegemonic structures of the past in place. As I will show in the next chapter, fifty years after the *vimochana samaram*, these codes of conduct continue to shape communal politics and everyday life in Kerala.

Chapter 6
***Mathamillatha Jeevan* (A Life Without Religion): Christian Minorities, the
 Charismatic Movement and Ritualized Female Sexuality**

In the summer of 2008, Syrian Christians staged a protest in Kerala, India in defense of their minority rights. Called by Archbishop Andrus Thazhath as a second *vimochana samaram*, this 2008 protest had many similarities to Kerala's first *vimochana samaram* including the way in which Christians rallied under Article 30 (1) of the Indian Constitution. However, this protest differed from the 1959 protest especially because of changing conceptions of religion, education and morality in postcolonial India. Taking off from the end of chapter 5, this chapter furthers my analysis of minority rights by specifically examining morality in textbooks and the evolution of minority rights in India today.

The 2008 protest was over a story entitled *Mathamillatha Jeevan* in a Malayalam medium 7th standard social science textbook. In the story, a boy named Jeevan claims “no religion” and “no caste” on an admissions interview due to the fact that his parents entered into an interfaith marriage. The story set off a three month communal protest, led by the Syrian Christian community, against the textbook's “anti-religious” sentiments.

In the first section of this chapter I discuss textbook education in postcolonial India. I explain how “morality” was first linked to secular education and reflected in the construction of textbooks and a national curriculum. However, I argue that secularism did not replace religious versions of “morality” in textbooks. In many ways, there has been a backlash against state-sponsored secularism especially in regards to education. For this reason, Christian run educational institutions in Kerala

have developed a monopoly on so-called moral education. Two versions of morality, then, one seemingly devoid of religion and the other as completely saturated with it, operate in the politics surrounding Indian textbook content today.

Using ethnography to especially examine the 2008 protest, in the second section I explain how political protesting against the textbook was justified through a “minority rights” rhetoric. As the Syrian Christians have the right to establish and administer their own educational institutions (as per Article 30 (1) of the Indian Constitution) the alleged “anti-religious” sentiments in *Mathamillatha Jeevan*, stood in opposition of the community’s right to morally educate their children. However, the link between the story’s portrayal of an interfaith marriage and the “anti-religious” sentiments of *Mathamillatha Jeevan*, were not discussed by protesters or by the Romo-Syrian hierarchy that supported the full withdrawal of the textbook. I discuss the particulars of the protest in this section, responses from the state government, and the silence concerning the interfaith marriage of the *Mathamillatha Jeevan* story during the protest.

In the third section of the chapter, I take up minority rights in the 21st Century and a number of Supreme Court cases that has further defined Article 30 (1). Calls have been made to limit the power of privileged minorities and to guard against reverse discrimination in minority run educational institutions. However, the state cannot understand numerical minorities in any way other than being politically subordinate to the religious majority. For this reason, I argue that state sponsored secularism through constitutional protections continues to implicitly privilege the dominant castes and classes from minority religious communities.

In the fourth sections of this chapter, I examine the rise of the Charismatic movement in Kerala and a new religiosity for Syrian Christians. I explain how devotional programming, television dramas and religious retreats have all culminated into a renewed spirituality that reworks past definitions of religious and caste distinctions. These divisions, I explain remain exacerbated by endogamous, or in-faith, marriages—overwhelmingly the norm in India today.

“Morality” is often centered on sexual morality with endogamous marriages being the moral and all else immoral. Therefore, I argue that the 2008 protest against *Mathamillatha Jeevan* was entirely shaped by the interfaith marriage of Jeeven’s parents. I contextualize the new religiosity of Indian Christians within an analysis of the 2008 protest that rested on the perceived immorality of the inter-faith marriage of Jeeven’s parents. In this chapter I ask, “how can we understand religious- and caste-identities within an analyses of minority rights and sexual morality in the 21st century?”

Textbook Education in India

Today, the majority of school-going children attend private schools in Kerala. According to the National University of Educational Planning and Administration, 64.54% of Kerala students from grades I-V are enrolled in private schools, while only 35.42% are enrolled in government schools.⁴³⁹ Private schools, as discussed in chapter 5, are overwhelmingly managed by Christians in Kerala and have made the

⁴³⁹ For grades VI-VIII, 65.12% are enrolled in private schools, 34.86% in government. “Elementary Education in India Progress Towards UEE.” (New Delhi: National University of Educational Planning and Administration, 2009), 10. <http://www.dise.in/downloads/Flash%20statistics2007-08.pdf> (accessed February 8, 2010).

community a political and economic force in the state. Therefore, changes by the state that may adversely affect private management (economically) are met by strong challenges from Christian management and the Romo-Syrian community.

Since the late 1950s, the Catholic private schools have, in comparison to government schools, increased their standards, operate with larger budgets and provide better resources for students. They have become a source of pride for the community. As related by a Romo-Syrian woman, Selinamma, “Romo-Syrians have the best schools and the most number of schools. Other communities don’t help out society as much as we do, and that’s why we need money. To do that sort of social work.”⁴⁴⁰ Minority run educational institutions have become the vehicle through which to dispense moral (often read as religious) education to children. Ashis Nandy explains this phenomenon through the way in which secularism is practiced in India in the article “The Politics of Secularism and the Recovery of Religious Tolerance.” Nandy divides religion into faith and ideology—faith being the way in which religion is practiced as a way of life, plural and heterogeneous. “Religion as ideology” marks populations for political or socio-economic interests, freezing them into identifiable religious groups. As the Indian nation-state tries to protect religious minorities through secular policies, it tends to understand religion only through the lens of ideology and not faith. For over fifty years of state sponsored “religion as ideology,” the faithful in India are asked to push their religion to the corner. Nandy realizes that for many “religion as faith” citizens:

It has become increasingly clear that, as far as public morality goes, the culture of the Indian state has very little moral authority

⁴⁴⁰ Selinamma. Interview in Malayalam by author. September 26, 2007.

left...obviously we are at a point of time when old-style secularism can no longer pretend to guide moral or political action.⁴⁴¹

Thus, with the rise of secularism as an ideal, there also grew desire to re-connect with religion as faith and to recuperate public morality. One way this is achieved is through moral education. Christian private management in Kerala is thus seen as providing not only the best education for children, but the most moral education to children in the secular state. Therefore, so-called anti-religious and/or atheist indoctrination of the young through government supported textbooks and curricula are routinely used by Christian management to justify opposition to state regulation of minority run educational institutions. In the summer of 2008, implementation of the 7th standard Malayalam medium social science textbook was one such action in which defense for “moral education” and accusations of atheistic teachings came under scrutiny from the Christian community.

In 2005, the central government introduced a new curriculum framework for elementary standards and up to plus eight. States were to base their curricula on the national curriculum framework but to also add state specific issues to account for India’s cultural and regional diversity. In theory, the state and national curriculums should not have much of an impact on private schools as private management need not use the government issued textbooks. However, standard examinations in all schools are based on the national curriculum. In what Krishna Kumar has dubbed

⁴⁴¹ Nandy, Ashis. “The Politics of Secularism and the Recovery of Religious Tolerance.” In *Secularism and its Critics*. ed. Rajeev Bhargava (Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1998), 334. Nandy has been critiqued especially because of the transcendence of “religion as faith.” As Gyan Prakash argues, secularism and modernity go hand-in-hand and Nandy’s division between “religion as faith” and “religion as ideology” assumes religion as faith falls outside modernity. However, as I am situating textbook in a post-colonial era, Nandy’s use of “religion as ideology/faith” is a convenient framework to understand the relationship between moral and religious education in contemporary India. See Prakash, Gyan. “Secular Nationalism, Hindutva and the Minority” in *The Crisis of Secularism in India*. Rajan, Rajeswari Sundar and A.D. Needham, eds. (Ranikhet: Permanent Black, 2007), 183.

“India’s Textbook Culture,” this has led to the replication of content in privately published textbooks. The textbook content therefore reaches thousands of schools, both government and private.⁴⁴² Yet despite the similarity between the national curriculum and privately published textbooks, there remains a perceived difference between secular education championed by national/state curriculum and moral education given at private Christian schools.

The National Council Educational Research and Training (NCERT) developed social science/history textbooks in post-colonial India that centered learning on secularism and nation building. In this secular framework, citizens of a democratic nation move beyond self (caste, race, religious, gender, class divides) and toward a society united in their commitment to the nation. Recited by all Kerala students daily, the national pledge is a reflection of this movement beyond self:

India is my country and all Indians are my brothers and sisters.
I love my country and I am proud of its rich and varied heritage.
I shall always strive to be worthy of it.
I shall give my parents, teachers and all elders, respect, and treat
everyone
with courtesy.
To my country and my people, I pledge my devotion.
In their well being and prosperity alone, lies my happiness.

Many prominent secular historians including Romila Thapar assisted in developing the secular textbooks in the 1960s to reflect the movement beyond the religious/caste defined self to a group of people united in Indian citizenship. The secular approach to the social sciences divided India into a before and after: Before equated with a communal India divided and regressive—and after was secular India, progressive and

⁴⁴² Kumar, Krishna. *Prejudice and Pride: School Histories of the Freedom Struggle in India and Pakistan*. (New Delhi: Penguin Books India, 2001), 63-5.

inclusive.⁴⁴³ However, textbooks are shaped by socio-economic and cultural milieu in which they are created, religious identity included. On local levels, a concept of morality, often equated to a religious understanding of morality, is deemed necessary for successful childhood education. The simple dividing of history into religious past and secular future fails to take this desire for moral education into account. Therefore, the academic left often is unprepared to address communal politics aimed at textbook content.

Take, for example, Hindu nationalist politics and debates around the content of children's history textbooks. In the communally charged atmosphere of India post-emergency, the Janata party attacked NCERT textbooks for being too soft in its depiction of Muslim invasions during India's medieval period. The party unsuccessfully tried to ban the textbooks but were successful in mobilizing a conservative viewpoint that positioned academic secularists as soft on history. In 2000, the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) tried a different strategy that again caused uproar among Indian scholars: to change the *content* of social science textbooks. As discussed in chapter 4, one change was to equate Aryans as indigenous with India. Historians were outraged by the deletion of passages including the origins of the caste system and prohibitions on eating beef. According to the Delhi Historians Group,

...the deletions were not made after consultation with or on the basis of recommendations of any recognized committee of historians. The NCERT has not been able to name a single well-known nationally and internationally recognized historian who is associated with the changes sought to be made in the syllabus...This either means that the entire job of getting new books ready is being undertaken in a cavalier fashion, or that the books are really being prepared by people whose names will not pass scholarly and popular scrutiny. Either scenario is a recipe for disaster as far as school children, in whose name and for whose

⁴⁴³ Kumar, 50-52.

welfare this entire exercise is being carried out, are concerned. Instead of books by internationally recognized historians, they would possibly be dished out thinly-veiled communal propaganda literature.”⁴⁴⁴

Despite outrage from historians, the new curriculum had large public support. The debate began to pit academic secularists against the populace as a whole. As Partha Chatterjee explains in “History and the Domain of the Popular,” before centralized education and NCERT there existed “old social histories” with religious, caste, local, and language specific differences. The academy didn’t replace these old histories, it only displaced old social histories to areas outside of the academy where they continued to flourish in vernacular languages. According to Chatterjee, these old social histories “were often deeply ideological and fiercely partisan histories, seeking to bolster the claims of one side or another in current political or cultural battles.”⁴⁴⁵ Not only was academic secularism pitted against the knowledge of the communal populace, secular academics were equated with a lofty elitism as their works were written primarily in the English language and were inaccessible to the masses.⁴⁴⁶

The BJP content changes to NCERT actually forced secular academic historians to defend themselves and their versions of Indian history. South Asian historians found themselves defending Aryan migration theories—largely in English language forums and, as outlined in chapter 4, with all the problems associated with the Aryan race migration theory as it relates to supposed caste divides between Aryan “conquerors” and Dravidian “conquered.” In many ways, this inability to be on the

⁴⁴⁴ Mukherjee, Mridula and Aditya Mukherjee. “Communalisation of Education, The History Textbooks Controversy: An Overview” in *Communalisation of Education: The History Textbooks Controversy*. (Delhi Historians’ Group, 2001), 8.

http://www.friendsofsouthasia.org/textbook/NCERT_Delhi_Historians_Group.pdf

⁴⁴⁵ Chatterjee, Partha. “History and the Domain of the Popular” *Seminar Magazine: Rewriting History*. 522. (February 2003). <http://www.india-seminar.com/semframe.html>.

⁴⁴⁶ Chatterjee, <http://www.india-seminar.com/semframe.html>.

offensive against “old social histories” only furthered the divide between academic elite and the “religion as faith” populace. Thus, the Hindu Right’s movement to change history textbook content continued to receive widespread support and had far reaching implications.⁴⁴⁷

Textbooks have historically been a hotbed political issue in the Kerala state as well. According to M.M. Mathew, one of KSU’s first initiatives after it was founded in the late 1950s was to “set right the misrepresentation of facts about India in some High School textbooks.”⁴⁴⁸ One of the most widely read pamphlets dispersed during the *vimochana samaram* was entitled “The True Color of Textbooks,” and documented supposed communist indoctrination of Romo-Syrian young through state textbooks. Communist propaganda has thus been one way in which Christians have claimed an attack on minority rights as it relates to textbook content.

All Christian schools developed a moral component to their curriculum in part to guard against such alleged indoctrination by the Communist party. Since Christians run the majority of private institutions, the moral education offered by Christian schools is seen as being intrinsic to them. However, this monopoly on moral education is not solely for Christian students. Christian private schools are open to students of all faiths. In the Church’s dedication to social justice for all castes

⁴⁴⁷ In the state of California in 2005, similar deletions/changes to history textbooks were made as per the recommendations of the Hindu Education Foundation in a ten page memorandum to the State of California’s Department of Education. Ninety-one edits were ratified by the California Curriculum Commission including deletions on the caste system and unequal treatment of women. This was followed by a letter to the Commission from Michael Witzel, a South Asianist from Harvard University asking the board to reject the edits. Blog postings, email campaigns and newspaper reports (primarily in English language forums) from the academic left blasted through the internet. The controversy was finally taken to the California courts, where a judge ruled that the edits did comply with the legal standards. However, it was also ruled that the Board had not complied with regulations. In short, both sides claimed victory. See Kurien, Prema. “Who Speaks for Indian Americans? Religion, Ethnicity and Political Formation.” *American Quarterly*. 59 no 3: 2007, 776-7

⁴⁴⁸ Mathew, MM. *Student Politics in Kerala*. (Kottayam: Learners’ Publishers, 1998), 69.

and religions, the moral education offered by Christian private schools are—simultaneously and paradoxically—considered to be part of a secular education. Even before the rise of the secular Indian nation-state, missionary schools were known to promote secular values. As Ninan Koshy explains, “[Missionary] institutions for the first time gave benefits of education to large sections till then excluded. This is not to romanticize all such institutions as there were problems with some of them occasionally. But on the whole they worked within the secular framework of education with a fair degree of social control and a high degree of social justice.”⁴⁴⁹ It is almost as if two understandings of secularism are at work as it pertains to education: the secularism that chooses to move past religion in favor of a united Indian identity through citizenship under the nation-state (NCERT), and the secularism that promotes social justice by embracing and educating all religions (Christian private education). It is under this second rubric—secularism that embraces all religions—that Christian schools and the moral education afforded by them is one element of private school education preferred by the populace.

NCERT history textbooks, promoting only one brand of secularism through the idea of citizenship, have been unable to even address this divide. Realizing this, NCERT re-wrote the curriculum in 2005. The writers, including Krishna Kumar, author of *Prejudice and Pride: School Histories of the Freedom Struggle in India and Pakistan* and “Origin of India’s ‘Textbook Culture,’” sought especially to address the invisibility of Dalits, Adivasis, women, peasants and rural India in the textbooks.⁴⁵⁰

⁴⁴⁹ Koshy, Ninan. “Minorities and Higher Education. Rights Access and Social Justice.” (emailed article to author, January, 2010).

⁴⁵⁰ Guichard, Sylvie. *The Construction of History and Nationalism in India: Textbooks, Controversies and Politics*. (New York: Routledge, 2010), 121.

The 2005 national curriculum sought to rectify these problems by providing a more global focus, problematizing the nation and by emphasizing that different communities have specific histories that can't be encapsulated by the nation.⁴⁵¹ The Left Democratic Front (LDF) of Kerala, a coalition government led by the Communist Party of India (Marxist) (CPI (M)) implemented their version of the national curriculum framework in 2007. Added were specific references to Kerala's social reform movements and caste and religious history. The state initiated multiple levels of discussions on the curriculum, and from these discussions the textbook was developed. According to Kerala Education Minister, MA Baby:

We wanted the stakeholders to make their contributions involving this framework. So school level discussions were there. Ground panchayat level discussions were there. District panchayat organized discussions. To kick off this process of discussions on the draft with a view to further strengthen and modify it, taking points raised in various discussions, we organized a state-level discussion which was inaugurated by none other than the leader of the opposition from your district [Kottayam district]—Oommen Chandy... So our idea was to take points from everybody. We don't want to conceal anything from anybody. So, after having had a very detailed discussion in which over hundred thousand people participated—that is the statistics, we brought so many—on the basis which we reframed the draft state curriculum framework. And it was on the basis of that curriculum framework this textbook was created.⁴⁵²

The content of the textbook itself was prepared by teachers and faced analysis by a curriculum steering committee. Once approved by the committee, the textbooks were presented to concerned faculty member of the State Council Educational Research and Training (SCERT). If this concerned faculty member suggested modifications, it was given back to the teachers that prepared the texts, and the process was to be repeated. There were ten teachers involved in writing the draft which was eventually

⁴⁵¹ Guichard, 160.

⁴⁵² MA Baby. Interview in English by Author. June 12, 2008.

approved by the state. The steering committee had relatively no problems with any of the content or the teachers involved in writing the content.⁴⁵³ However, beginning the 2008-2009 academic year, the public went into a frenzy concerning chapter two of the 7th standard social studies textbook.

Chapter two of the 7th standard textbook deals with caste and religion in Kerala and India. An excerpt from a 1924 Kerala school admissions ledger is intended to teach students about unfair caste practices as the students listed on the

⁴⁵³ After the smoke cleared from the textbook controversy, regret was expressed at the lack of women's participation in writing and approving the textbook. As stating in the government report on the textbook, "All textbooks need to ensure gender sensitivity. More concrete narratives and case studies need to be incorporated in the text to address issues regarding unequal gender relations in society. A serious effort must be made to involve more women in the preparation of curriculum syllabi and textbooks." Panikkar, KN (chairman). "High Power Expert Committee on Textbook Review Report." 20. <http://www.education.kerala.gov.in/FINAL%20REPORTnew.pdf> (accessed November 25, 2009).

ledger are overwhelmingly from the upper-castes.

മുകളിൽ കൊടുത്ത പ്രതിഭാസം പൊല്ലി-വളർന്ന നമ്മളിൽ ചിലർ ഇത്തരം അതിൽ പെരുമാറുന്നത് എന്തുകൊണ്ടാണ്?

ഏതെങ്കിലും തരത്തിലുള്ള തൊട്ടുകൂടായ്മ ഇന്നും നിലനിൽക്കുന്നുണ്ടോ? പണ്ടു നമ്മുടെ നാട്ടിലും പലതരം വേർതിരിവുകൾ നിലനിന്നിരുന്നു. കേരളത്തിലെ ഒരു വിദ്യാലയത്തിൽ 1924-ൽ ചേർന്ന കുട്ടികളുടെ വിവരങ്ങൾ പട്ടികയിൽ കൊടുത്തിരിക്കുന്നു.

വർഷം 1924

നമ്പർ	പേര്	ജനന തീയതി	കുടുംബത്തിന്റെ പേര്	മതം/സ്ഥാപനം	ചേർന്ന തരം	വർഷം	വിവരങ്ങൾ
1	തങ്കപ്പൻ	01.07.1916	കുടുംബം	ഹിന്ദു, വാലിയർ	I	III	പഠനം നിർത്തി
2	കുട്ടികുടുംബവാലിയർ	01.07.1913	കുടുംബം	ഹിന്ദു, വാലിയർ	II	IV	പഠനം നിർത്തി
3	ബാലകൃഷ്ണൻ അയിരൂർ നായർ	01.07.1917	കാരുണ്യം	ഹിന്ദു, നായർ	II	IV	പഠനം നിർത്തി
4	കാരുണ്യം നായർ	01.07.1918	വീട്ടു പ്രവൃത്തി	ഹിന്ദു, നായർ	I	II	
5	വേലായുധൻ നായർ	16.08.1918	വീട്ടു പ്രവൃത്തി	ഹിന്ദു, നായർ	I	II	
6	മോൻ നായർ	16.08.1915	വീട്ടു പ്രവൃത്തി	ഹിന്ദു, നായർ	I	II	
7	വേലായുധൻ നായർ	17.04.1919	വീട്ടു പ്രവൃത്തി	ഹിന്ദു, നായർ	I	III	മരിച്ചു
8	തോപാലൻ നായർ	16.09.1914	വീട്ടു പ്രവൃത്തി	ഹിന്ദു, നായർ	I	II	പഠനം നിർത്തി
9	നാരായണിയമ്മ	25.09.1915	നല്ലത് കാരുണ്യം	ഹിന്ദു, നായർ	I	II	"
10	വേലായുധൻ	15.02.1916	കുടുംബം	ഹിന്ദു, നായർ	I	II	"
11	മോൻ നായർ	01.06.1915	മുഹൂർത്തം	ഹിന്ദു, നായർ	I	II	"
12	താഴെക്കുട്ടി വാലിയർ	12.02.1918	കുടുംബം	ഹിന്ദു, നായർ	I	II	"
13	കുടുംബം പണിക്കരായി	01.07.1915	വീട്ടുപണി	ഹിന്ദു, നായർ	I	I	"
14	ഇത്താഴി അമ്മ	01.07.1915	വീട്ടുപണി	ഹിന്ദു, നായർ	I	II	"
15	ലക്ഷ്മിയമ്മ	01.07.1918	വീട്ടുപണി	ഹിന്ദു, നായർ	I	II	മരിച്ചു
16	കുടുംബകൃഷ്ണൻ	15.10.1916	കോൽക്കാൽ	ഹിന്ദു, നായർ	I	III	പഠനം നിർത്തി
17	മോൻകുട്ടി പണിക്കർ	01.07.1914	വീട്ടുപണി	ഹിന്ദു, പണിക്കർ കണ്ടിയൻ	I	III	പഠനം നിർത്തി
18	ബാലകൃഷ്ണൻ	15.10.1914	വീട്ടുപണി	ഹിന്ദു, സ്വാമൻ	I	II	"
19	പെരു	01.10.1916	പത്ത പെരു	ഹിന്ദു, നിർമ്മാൻ	I	I	"
20	കുടുംബകൃഷ്ണൻ	01.07.1914	മുഹൂർത്തം	ഹിന്ദു, നായർ	I	II	"
21	പത്താലൻ നായർ	15.07.1910	മുഹൂർത്തം	ഹിന്ദു, നായർ	I	II	"
22	പത്ത പെരു	01.07.1914	മുഹൂർത്തം	ഹിന്ദു, സ്വാമൻ	I	III	"
23	മീനക്കുട്ടി	15.06.1917	മുഹൂർത്തം	ഹിന്ദു, പെരു	I	III	"

(മലപ്പുറം ജില്ലയിലെ പത്താലൻ ജി.എസ്.പി.സ്കൂളിൽ 1924 - ൽ ചേർന്ന കുട്ടികളുടെ അറബി എഴുതിയ പട്ടികയിൽ നിന്ന്)

“1924 School Ledger”⁴⁵⁴

Descriptive paragraphs on the Nadar breast cloth agitation, the Vaikam Satyagraha to allow *Pulayans* and *Parayans* the right to travel on approach roads to the Vaikam temple and the Guruvayur Satyagraha to allow temple entry of all castes were included to discuss caste movements in Kerala that abolished distance pollution and

⁴⁵⁴ “1924 School Ledger.” (image). *Kerala 7th Grade Social Science Textbook* (Kerala Government Publication: 2007), 18.

caste based discrimination. Vakkom Moulavi, a Muslim leader who fought for tenant rights for Muslims and social change within Kerala Muslim communities also make the chapter specific to Kerala. Following this is a portion from Nehru's will requesting that no religious ritual performed after his death, and excerpts from the Mahabharata, the Bible, and the Koran. The lesson for the chapter includes questions such as "Which caste is most likely to be affected by a tsunami?" The lesson attempts to teach students that as natural disasters do not discriminate by caste, so too should Kerala society be caste blind.

The most controversial lesson in the chapter involved a story entitled *Mathamillatha Jeevan*. *The Hindu* translated the story into English as such:

"After seating the parents, who had come with their ward, in the chairs before him, the headmaster began filling the application form. "Son, what's your name?"

'Jeevan'

'Good, nice name. Father's name?'

'Anwar Rasheed'

'Mother's name?'

'Lakshmi Devi'

The headmaster raised his head, looked at the parents and asked:

'Which religion should we write?'

'None. Write that there is no religion.'

'Caste?'

'The same.'

The headmaster leaned back in his chair and asked a little gravely:

'What if he feels the need for a religion when he grows up?'

'Let him choose his religion when he feels so.'⁴⁵⁵

⁴⁵⁵ Nair, Gouridasan C. "Tolerance Under Attack." *The Hindu*. June 26th, 2008.

24

മതമില്ലാത്ത ജീവൻ

സ്കൂളിൽ ചേർക്കാനായി കുട്ടിയോടൊപ്പം എത്തിയ രക്ഷിതാക്കളെ മുന്നിലുള്ള കസേരകളിൽ ഇരുത്തി ഹെഡ്മാസ്റ്റർ അപേക്ഷ പൂരിപ്പിക്കാൻ തുടങ്ങി.



“മോന്റെ പേരെന്താ?”

“ജീവൻ”

“കൊള്ളാം....നല്ലപേര്. അച്ഛന്റെ പേര്?”

“അൻവർ റഷീദ്”

“അമ്മയുടെ പേര്?”

“ലക്ഷ്മിദേവി”

ഹെഡ്മാസ്റ്റർ മുഖമുയർത്തി രക്ഷിതാക്കളെ നോക്കി ചോദിച്ചു:

“കുട്ടിയുടെ മതം ഏതാ ചേർക്കേണ്ടത്?”

“ഒന്നും ചേർക്കേണ്ട. മതമില്ലെന്ന് ചേർത്തോളൂ.”

“ജാതിയോ?”

“അതും വേണ്ട.”

ഹെഡ്മാസ്റ്റർ കസേരയിലേക്ക് ചാരിയിരുന്ന് അൽപം ഗൗരവത്തോടെ ചോദിച്ചു:

“വലുതാകുമ്പോൾ ഇവൻ ഏതെങ്കിലും മതം വേണമെന്നു തോന്നിയാലോ?”

“അങ്ങനെ വേണമെന്നു തോന്നുമ്പോൾ അവൻ ഇഷ്ടമുള്ള മതം തിരഞ്ഞെടുക്കട്ടെ.”

ജവഹർലാൽ നെഹ്റു

ജവഹർലാൽ നെഹ്റുവിന്റെ മരണപത്രത്തിൽ നിന്നൊരുഭാഗം:



“Mathamillatha Jeevan”⁴⁵⁶

The names of the parents imply that the boy, Jeevan, is the product of an interfaith marriage: “Lakshmi Devi” is a Hindu woman’s name and “Anwar Rasheed” is a

⁴⁵⁶ “Mathamillatha Jeevan.” (image). *Kerala 7th Grade Social Science Textbook* (Kerala Government Publication: 2007), 24.

Muslim man's name. The title of the story, *Mathamillatha Jeevan*, therefore reflects the problems associated with Jeevan's identity. *Matham* translates to "religion," while *illatha* is a negative suffix meaning "without." *Jeevan* is the Malayalam word for "life." However, in the story *Jeevan* is used as the boy's name. Thus, the title can be correctly translated as either "Jeevan, the Boy Without Religion" or "A Life without Religion." *The Hindu* titled their English translation as "Jeevan, the Casteless." Other translations included "Jeevan who has no Religion,"⁴⁵⁷ "Jeevan the Creedless,"⁴⁵⁸ and "Religionless Jeeven."⁴⁵⁹ This story became the focal point of the alleged "anti-God" sentiments in the textbooks, and sent public life in Kerala into a tailspin.

The Protest

In a public demonstration lasting three months, Christians, Hindus and Muslims took to the streets to protest the textbook. From June-August, 2008, the Kerala Pradesh Congress Committee (KPCC), Kerala Student Union (KSU—youth wing of Congress Party) and communal groups staged all out hartals, marches, and protests against the textbook. The SFI (Student Federation of India—communist group for college aged students) staged counter demonstrations in favor of the "secular" message of *Mathamillatha Jeevan*. Many of these demonstrations became violent. In late June, the KSU and SFI staged multiple massive demonstrations in the state capital, Thiruvananthapuram, sometimes simultaneously and often times

⁴⁵⁷ Devika "Memory's Fatal Lure: The Left, the Congress and 'Jeevan' in Kerala." *Economic & Political Weekly*. (July 26, 2008): 13.

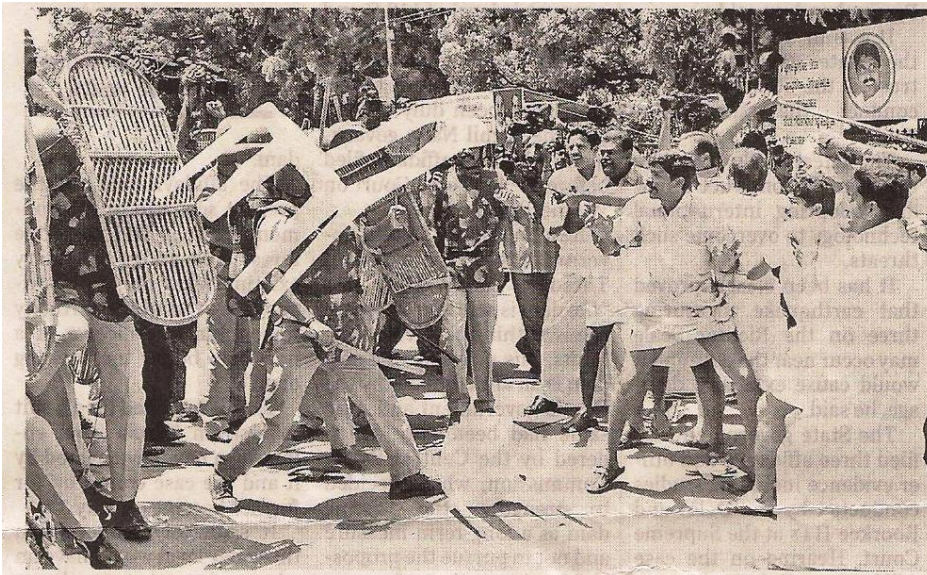
⁴⁵⁸ Devika 16.

⁴⁵⁹ "KPCC Select Committee Report on Textbooks in Schools." Trans. Tommathew T. Thomas. 2008.

ending their protests in the same location—the Secretariat on one of Thiruvananthapuram’s main roads. Clashes between protesters and between protesters and the police disrupted public life.

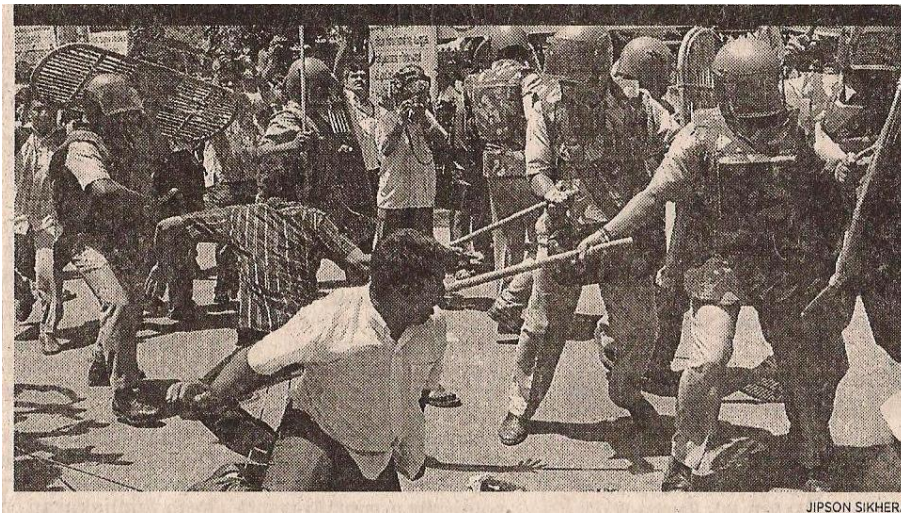


*Protest Time.*⁴⁶⁰



⁴⁶⁰Ratheeshkumar, C. “Protest Time: The police trying to disperse KSU activists after a march taken out by them to the Assembly complex turned violent on Tuesday.” (image). *The Hindu*. July 2, 2008.

*Improvised Weapons.*⁴⁶¹



*Street Fight.*⁴⁶²



Students Federation of India (SFI) protest.⁴⁶³

⁴⁶¹ Mahinsha, S. "Improvised Weapons: Youth Congress workers throwing plastic chairs and poles at the police during a confrontation in front of the Secretariat on Wednesday." (image). *The Hindu*. July 17, 2008.

⁴⁶² Sikhera, Jipson. "Street Fight: Two Youth Congress activists being lathi charged after being surrounded by the police in front of the Secretariat in Thiruvananthapuram when the Youth Congress activists who assembled in front of the satyagraha pandal, where Youth Congress president T. Siddique is on an indefinite fast, turned violent on Wednesday." (image). *Indian Express*. July 17, 2008.

⁴⁶³ "SFI Protest" (image). <http://www.sfikeralaejournal.org/> (accessed April 6, 2009).



SFI protest 2.⁴⁶⁴

KSU leaders also staged a highly publicized hunger strike. The group violently disrupted teacher's cluster meetings in Thiruvananthapuram, but refused to meet with education minister MA Baby until the textbook was withdrawn. In the Kerala Legislative Assembly, the textbook was hotly debated and the United Democratic Front (UDF—Congress led coalition) attempted walkouts. The state government held that opposition to the textbook was no more than an attack on tolerance and refused to withdraw the textbook.

In majority Muslim district of Malappuram, over 14,000 books were destroyed by protesters.⁴⁶⁵

⁴⁶⁴ "SFI Protest 2" (image). <http://www.sfikeralajournal.org/> (accessed April 6, 2009).

⁴⁶⁵ "MSF Activists Burn Textbooks" *The Hindu*. June 26, 2008.



Textbooks destroyed.⁴⁶⁶



Textbooks destroyed 2.⁴⁶⁷

⁴⁶⁶ “Textbooks Destroyed” (image). <http://www.sfikeralaejournal.org/video.htm> (accessed April 6, 2009).

But the communal front was arguably led by the Catholic Church. On June 23rd, Education Minister MA Baby blasted the Church leaders for the rising tensions claiming that they had become spokesmen for the UDF.⁴⁶⁸ He also stated that the Pope, then globally apologizing for priests involved in molestation scandals, should also apologize for the actions of Kerala bishops for their leadership in the textbook controversy. In response, over thirty-five bishops met and decided that Monday, June 30th would be the day of protest against the textbook. The Archbishops of the Syro-Malabar Catholic church issued one pastoral letter after another playing off familiar tropes where atheist indoctrination through education is seen in opposition to moral education offered by Christian private management. Cardinal Varkey Vithayathil, head of Syro-Malabar Catholic Church, issued a circular letter in late June that was read in parishes throughout Kerala. Cardinal Varkey's letter contended that the communist led government was trying to propagate a denial of religion.⁴⁶⁹ A month later, Archbishop Powathil issued a circular letter stating:

Education is one such means for atheistic governments to relinquish God and religion from the minds of youth. The Church cannot but interfere in the poisoning propaganda of the governmental authorities.⁴⁷⁰

The Catholic Church held that the Communist government must issue a full withdrawal of the textbook.

⁴⁶⁷ "Textbooks Destroyed 2" (image). <http://www.sfikeralaejournal.org/video.htm> (accessed April 6, 2009).

⁴⁶⁸ "Religious Leaders toe UDF Line: Baby. *The Hindu*. June 23, 2008.

⁴⁶⁹ "Textbook row: Church to observe 'protest day' today." *The Hindu*. June 30, 2008.

⁴⁷⁰ Perumthottam, Joseph. "July 28th, 2008 Circular Letter." Trans. Tommathew T. Thomas. *Madhyastan*. 81 no 1. (Changanacherry: St. Joseph's Orphanage Press), July 2008.

The Latin Church declared that fasting, prayer, adoration and candle processions would be conducted to demand the withdrawal of the textbook. Seminars were organized in Catholic churches, led by Romo-Syrian Fr. Paul Thelakkat.⁴⁷¹ The Romo-Syrian archdiocese of Changanacheri held a massive rally on July 28th in which over 25,000 faithful gathered to express their demands for withdrawal of the textbook.



*Pratheeshadhkal (Protest)*⁴⁷²

⁴⁷¹ "Latin Church plans high decibel protest in churches on Sunday." *The India Express*. July 26, 2008.

⁴⁷² "Pratheeshadhkal: Meeting organized by the Archdiocese of Changanachery, protesting against communistic and antireligious propagation in the educational sector" (image). trans Tommathew T. Thomas. *Malayalam Manorama*. July 28, 2008.



*Protesters from Saint Mary's Church, Kadayanikad*⁴⁷³

Oversees Indian Affairs Minister Vayalar Ravi, Archbishop Joseph Powathil, KM Mani (MLA), and Rev Dr. Mani Puthiyidam (Archdiocese spokesman) all spoke.

Protesters shouted slogans during the rally including:

Children of India, Christian Children
 Hear our voice as we say:
 We who created the educational institutions
 have a history of spreading the
 tradition of independence....
 If you try to bring us Communist ideology
 in educational institutions with public money
 we will make sure that you fail...
 Swords will be provided to the hands carrying writing pens...
 You will never succeed to increase membership in your party by
 poisoning tender brains.⁴⁷⁴

⁴⁷³ Thomas, Sonja. Protesters from Saint Mary's Church, Kadayanikad" (image). July, 28 2008.

⁴⁷⁴ This slogan and others were handed out to protesters by rally organizers in a document entitled "revoke Controversial Education Plan: Protest March, Public Meeting" trans. Tommathew T. Thomas. July, 28, 2008.

The protests became so heated that a teacher was killed in the street violence. Members of the Muslim Youth League protested outside of Kizhisseri GLP school and headmaster James Augustine was caught in the middle of a violent mob while he was attempting to attend teacher cluster meetings. Although KPCC and communal groups expressed sadness over James Augustine's death, they immediately informed the press that the protest would continue.⁴⁷⁵ The KPCC also alleged that Education Minister MA Baby entered the autopsy room and influenced the coroner's ruling in the cause of Augustine's death. These allegations resulted in long debates within the Kerala Legislative Assembly and calls for judicial probes. The debates within the assembly only increased media attention on the textbook row. In fact, the protest gained even more momentum and spread to other districts in Kerala after Augustine's death. Teacher meetings were disrupted in Allapuzha, the archdiocese of Verapoly began to hold parish meetings against the textbook, even more schools were closed due to hartals, and Thiruvananthapuram streets were filled with continuing clashes between protesters (both for and against the textbook) and the police.

The protest again pitted the religious populace against the academic left. The head members of the Sarva Siksha Abhiyan (SSA), an organization promoting universal education in India, called the protest against the textbook "unjustified." Rohit Dhankar, educationist from Rajasthan involved in the 2005 curriculum design, M. Sudhish, assistant State Project Director, Chattisgarh and Swati Bedekar, educationalist from Gujarat all supported the message of tolerance in *Mathamillatha Jeevan*.⁴⁷⁶ Historian J. Devika reminded readers in the English publication *Economic*

⁴⁷⁵ "DPI Seeks Report." *The India Express*. July 20, 2008.

⁴⁷⁶ "Textbook Row Unjustified, Say Academics." *The India Express*. June 26, 2008.

and Political Weekly: “There is nothing in the much derided ‘Jeevan Who Has No Religion’ that goes against the Kerala government’s publicly-proclaimed official position on religion and access to schooling.”⁴⁷⁷ Based on academic support, the communist led government continued to hold fast and not give into the communal forces by withdrawing the textbook.

However, because the fury over the content, the Education Minister asked communal leaders to have sit down discussions where all could locate the anti-God sentiments in the textbook, yet no such meeting took place. Protest leaders held fast to *their* position: full withdrawal of the textbook. As a result, the state government set up an expert committee to examine the textbook headed by academic historian KN Panikkar. Communal leaders refused to send representatives to the expert committee. Instead, they supported the KPCC’s (Congress led coalition party’s) rival expert committee, chaired by another noted academic historian, MGS Narayanan. By this time, most private institutions banned teaching the textbook anyway. The Kerala Catholic Bishop’s Council brought out their own workbook of the textbook for teachers on August 10th. The workbook was taught in all Catholic schools across the state. The government committee was swayed by public protest and took the KPCC’s expert committee’s suggestions into account. They suggested revisions to the entire chapter of the textbook—especially chapter two. The title *Mathamillatha Jeevan* was changed to *Viswasu Swathantriyam* (Freedom of Belief). The names in the story were entirely changed to “boy” and “parents” severely altering the religious and caste blind position the story was intended to promote. The excerpts of Nehru’s will was taken out and replaced with a speech he made on secularism. And a passage was

⁴⁷⁷ Devika, 16.

added to describe the caste and social reform work of Sri Narayana Guru. The protest, in short, was a success.

There are many similarities between the 1959 *vimochana samaram* and the success of the communal forces against the textbook in 2008. From 1957-59, the Catholic Church was extremely successful in stirring up communal opposition and inciting Christians to violence by alleging that the Communist government was attacking a minority way of life (chapter 5). So too was the Church successful almost 50 years later during the textbook controversy. As mentioned, textbooks often face opposition from communal groups for the way in which secular history and social sciences are taught. The combination of having a minority culture under attack *and* interpretations of how religion/caste should be taught through textbooks was extremely successful in uniting the Christian community as a whole against the Communist sponsored textbook. As such, Thrissur Archbishop Andrews Thazhath declared that the 7th standard textbook row was a second *vimochana samaram*. Changanasserri Archbishop Joseph Powathil stated at the 2008 All Kerala Catholic Almiya Movement Conference that the state government was attempting to repeat their actions of 1957, but that the state government should remember that the faithful revolted.⁴⁷⁸ Journalist Krishna Ananth likened the Church's campaign and Congress's violence surrounding the textbook to their communal uprising in the 1950's.⁴⁷⁹ Congress Opposition leader Oommen Chandy went as far as accusing the textbook itself as an attempt "to inject a distorted perception of the 'liberation struggle.'"

⁴⁷⁸ "Powathil Flays Govt." *The India Express*. July 21, 2008.

⁴⁷⁹ Ananth, Krishna V. "Lesson Row is a Lesson Learnt: a Text on Freedom Unleashes a Storm of Intolerance." *The India Express*. July 22, 2008.

Yet a closer look at the protest against the textbook reveals calculated communal attempts to draw similarities between the textbook controversy and the *vimochana samaram* in a post-secular society. What I mean by “post-secular” is the changing face of communalism in South Asia—one in which secularism has affected the ritualistic past of Syrian Christianity and the way in which difference from other Christians/religions is maintained. In Kerala today, moves away from ritualistic aspects of religion have resulted in more complex understandings of the umbrella term “religious minorities.” Evangelistic movements and pop-culture’s embrace of Syrian Christianity have become increasingly common. A revival/redefinition of communal identity has led to a change in communalism that is little dealt with. Simultaneously, the rise of self-financing colleges in Kerala and debates concerning minority status has made it abundantly clear there exists a large divide between privileged and oppressed Christians in the Kerala state. How are we to understand an alleged attack on a minority way of life considering the changes to minority rights in the 21st century and the changing face of communalism in South Asia? The following sections discuss the difficulties in creating a united Christian front today—decidedly changed from the first *vimochana samaram*—and ways in which a Syrian Christian identity is maintained through the ritualizing of female sexuality.

Minority Rights in the 21st Century

In the beginning of the new millennium, Kerala was facing a very difficult problem. While social welfare has been a platform for almost 50 years of both the Communist and Congress Party of Kerala, the capital to fund programs was

increasingly drying up. Since the 1970s, Kerala's budget has been propped up by Non-Resident Indian (NRI) remittances. We may recall the speed in which Kerala society embraced education and efforts to promote literacy and gainful employment in the 1950s. In a generation, many unemployed educated Keralites sought jobs overseas—in Europe, the US and in Gulf countries. Kerala's excellent primary education, health care, support for the unemployed, government initiatives and economy at large were sustained through NRI remittances. Mansions in villages, also known as “gulf houses” and a high standard of living demanded more and more remittances from overseas workers. However, many overseas workers did not have citizenship rights in their place of employment. In addition, family aspirations to send young college educated professionals outside of Kerala were being thwarted by a growing number of declined visas, a growing resentment of Kerala foreigners in countries of employment (especially the Gulf) and the effects of split families were taking a heavy toll on the Kerala population.⁴⁸⁰

The cultural norm of education and need to sustain a high standard of living led to an even larger demand for admissions into professional colleges—medical and engineering colleges. For many years now, the state has not been able to accommodate all students into government and private aided colleges. All colleges in Kerala were once run by government or with aid from government, yet the number of seats in ratio to the number of applicants cause many students to seek admission to colleges outside Kerala. But in 2001, a new phenomenon arose: self financing

⁴⁸⁰ In comparison with other Indian states, Kerala ranks first in rates of alcoholism, domestic abuse, and suicide. For effects of immigration on family life see Kurien, Prema. *Kaleidoscopic Ethnicity: International Migration and the Reconstruction of Community Identities in India*. New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 2002 and George, Sheeba. *When Women Come First: Gender and Class in Transnational Migration*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 2005.

colleges. Self financing colleges were schools started in Kerala by private management without aid from the government. They were met with appreciation from the population. Over 100,000 Kerala students were attending schools out-of-state per year while crores of rupees were leaving Kerala state to pay for their education. While other states were benefiting financially from Kerala student tuitions, Kerala's budget was reaching a busting point. Therefore, many politicians both from the UDF and the LDF supported self-financing colleges as a way to bring this revenue back into the struggling Kerala state. The new self-financing colleges were largely run by Catholic management as the Church had ample start-up funds in comparison to other communities/private management. These self-financing colleges began to compete with each other, and as a result, standards increased. Almost immediately, unaided private colleges gained a good reputation.

But they also provoked ire from the population through the fee structure and admission of students. Individual donations to schools, called “capitation fees” were rumored to be the deciding factor on student admissions. Donations to private management were not necessarily illegal—yet paying management in return for a seat in the college would be. There was nothing set up in the state machinery to distinguish between bribery and donations for self-financing college admissions. The Catholic Church vehemently denied any use of capitation fees in Catholic private colleges. In a July 2007 circular letter to the faithful, Archbishop Perunthootam stated

Our educational institutions are working not in terms of profit. To manage financial solution to the financially backward students, we have to make a fund through justifiable way. For that, we have to receive help from alumni and well-wishers. Money should not be a

criteria for admission and appointment. There should not be any activities in our institutions which affects the good name of the assembly. Catholic institutions should be alert about corruption and always should stand against exploitations.⁴⁸¹

Nevertheless, the state government stepped in to regulate fees in private colleges. In 2004, the Congress led coalition government passed *the Kerala Self Financing Colleges (Prohibition of Capitation Fees and Procedure for Admission and Fixation of Fees) Act*. However, “maladministration” and “lack of transparency” in self-financing professional colleges was still alleged to be a fixture in many private colleges. When the LDF (Communist led coalition) took office in 2005, legislation to regulate the self-financing colleges became priority number one.

During the debates concerning self-financing colleges and capitation fees, the definition of minority institutions and rights of minority management came under attack. This had a direct impact on the textbook controversy a year later. Two landmark Supreme Court decisions, *TMA Pai Foundation vs. State of Karnataka* (2002) and *PA Inamdar vs. State of Maharashtra* (2005) had given the LDF cause for new concern and a way in which to formulate legislation on the concept of “minority” in their attempts to curb the rising influence of Catholic run self financing colleges.

On December 31, 2002, an 11 member Supreme Court bench overturned *Unnikrishnan vs. State of Andhra Pradesh* (1993) which gave states some power in regulating admissions into private schools and allowed 50/50 reservations: 50% of the available seats are given by the private management and the fees are paid in part/in full by the students who receive the seats. The other 50% of admissions from the government/university lists and are known as “free seats” because these seats

⁴⁸¹ Perumthottom, Joseph. “June 29th, 2007 Pastoral Letter.” Trans. P. Sreekumar. *Madhyastan*. 80 no 1. (Changanacherry: St. Joseph’s Orphanage Press, July 2007).

have significantly reduced fees. But in *TMA Pai*, the court ruled that 50% of students paying fees would be tantamount to paying for the other 50% of students. The bench ruled this subsidizing unconstitutional. Additionally, the court came out against capitation fees, but found that private schools' fee structure were generally not corrupt:

The fear that if a private schools is allowed to charge fees commensurate with the fees affordable, the degrees would be “purchasable” is an unfounded one since the standards of education can be and are controllable through the regulations relating to recognition, affiliation and common final examinations.⁴⁸²

In other words, examinations based on textbook content and government recognitions/affiliation of private schools would ensure that the standards of private educational institutions were kept high. The bench repeatedly invoked secularism as a way for the Indian nation-state to help sections of Indian society with a “numerical handicap:” i.e. minority populations.⁴⁸³ As Dr. Ninan Koshy argues, the *TMA Pai* judgment invoked secularism as it pertains to protecting religions through state intervention.⁴⁸⁴ Minority rights as defined in *TMA Pai* linked secularism to merit based equality—all students regardless of caste and religion could have the same chance of succeeding in the high standards of minority self-financing institutions.

The case also defined a more clear definition of minority—one in relation to demographics of the state. Indian states are divided along linguistic lines. Therefore, “linguistic minority” denotes a minority within a state. The court argued that religious minority must be determined the same way because within Article 30 (1),

⁴⁸² “Judgment of Supreme Court in TMA Pai Case.” in Thundiyil, Cyriac. *The Hidden Agenda: A Critical Analysis of the Kerala Professional Colleges Act 2006*. (Mannanam: Sanjos Publication, 2006), 305.

⁴⁸³ “TMA Pai Judgment,” 259.

⁴⁸⁴ Koshy, “Minorities and Higher Education.”

religious and linguistic minorities are given equal footing under the term “minority.” Therefore, despite any kind of caste, race or class privilege, Syrian Christianity was officially understood as a minority religion because on a state level, Christians are only 20% of the population.

The second case, *Inamdar*, overturned the *Islamic Academy of Education vs. State of Karnataka* (2003). The *Islamic Academy* case ruled that unaided professional colleges should also make provisions for students from backward sections of society. *PA Inamdar* ruled the opposite, finding that nowhere in *TMA Pai* was there any justification for seat-sharing quotas/reservations in unaided private professional colleges. All private unaided management of self-financing professional colleges suddenly had the discretion to admit students with little state control. According to the court, “The right to admit students being an essential facet of the right to administer educational institutions of their choice, as contemplated under Article 30 of the Constitution, the State Government or the university may not be entitled to interfere with that right, so long as the admission to the unaided educational institutions in on a transparent basis and the merit is adequately taken care of.”⁴⁸⁵ The Bench held that even if the state's resources in providing professional education were limited, the state cannot force private unaided educational institutions to make admissions on the basis of its reservation policy to less meritorious candidates. However, *Inamdar* also warned against reverse discrimination: “The real purpose of Article 30 is to prevent discrimination against members of the minority community and to place them on an equal footing with non-minority. Reverse discrimination was

⁴⁸⁵ “Judgment of Supreme Court in PA Inamdar Case.” in Thundiyil, Cyriac. *The Hidden Agenda: A Critical Analysis of the Kerala Professional Colleges Act 2006*. (Mannanam: Sanjos Publication, 2006), 392.

not the intention of Article (30).”⁴⁸⁶ Thus, there was a growing understanding that provisions should only help minorities who were oppressed. However, the Supreme Court’s understandings of minority tend to see that minority in numbers translates to subordinate in power. Minority communities that are caste, raced and class privileged do not fit into this definition, and thus the court was unable to address how to guard against any type of reverse discrimination.

After these court cases, the Communist led LDF brought *The Kerala Professional Colleges Act (2006)*⁴⁸⁷ to the Kerala Assembly for debate. The basis for the act rested on *Imamdar’s* judgment where the court dissuaded institutions from reverse discrimination in their minority right to administer educational institutions. Among other provisions aimed at making admissions to self-financing professional colleges egalitarian (including a single window system of admissions), the act attempted to make sure that only oppressed minorities could benefit from Article 30 (1). Clause 8 of the act specifically tried to redefine “minority” by having it match three conditions. 1) the population of said minority must be less than 50% of the total population of Kerala, 2) the number of professional colleges run by these minorities shall be proportionally lesser than the number of professional colleges run by the non-minority in the state, and 3) the number of minority students in a minority college must be proportionally less than the number of non-minority students in all professional colleges in Kerala. So in essence, minority was defined by the population, by numbers of institutions, and by numbers of students in those

⁴⁸⁶ “Judgment,” 425.

⁴⁸⁷ Officially known as *The Kerala Professional Colleges or Institutions (Prohibition of Capitation Fee, Regulation of Admission, Fixation of Non-exploitative Fee and Other Measures to Ensure Equity and Excellence in Professional Education) Act, 2006*.

institutions. If in all three categories, the numbers added up to less than the non-minority, then recognition would be given by the state to the unaided minority professional college. The reasons for having all three conditions met would make certain sure that minority institutions would be benefiting disadvantaged minorities, and not minorities who may have any sort of caste or class privilege. As Education Minister MA Baby explained:

We gave a new scientific definition to what makes a minority education institution. Minority is something, and minority education institution is something else...In our legislation, what we state is that in the field of education, minority status can be given to a particular religious community or an institution run by a person belonging to a religious denomination only after examining certain ABC...Why? Because only if they are discriminated against...So studies prove, as against Hindus, more Christians are getting admission. So in the field of education, Christians may not be considered as a suffering lot. This is the point. Why there are minority protection clauses in the constitution? Minority protection is not to gain over majority. If they are suffering in comparison to the majority, there should be a protection. If they are not suffering, there is no special protection need to be given. Women would require some protection if they are not getting adequate representation. For example, now perhaps there is a good argument coming: will there be any protection for men in assemblies? No, why? They are already well represented! There is no requirement. Only because women are not getting sufficient representation in legislation, protective clause is being sought after. So similarly, for minority students also if they are sufficiently represented in medical and engineering colleges, there is no special minority medical college or minority engineering college for these students or for any community. So this is our very sound scientific argument.⁴⁸⁸

In MA Baby's explanation of the 2006 legislation, the definition of minority assumes a minority need always stay lower than the non-minority in number *and* in a vulnerable social position. The "scientific" definition that hinged on the Romo-Syrian community socially advancing at a slower rate and/or not increasing in number

⁴⁸⁸ MA Baby. Interview by Author. April 12, 2008.

of community members in comparison to the non-minority community did not sit well with the Christian community and the act was challenged by the Christian management. Additionally, the Kerala Catholic Bishops' Conference in held in June, 2008 released a statement encouraging Romo-Syrian women to have more children.

On January 4, 2007 the Kerala High Court struck down the act, finding that the state's provisions were unconstitutional as per Article 30 (1). The court also found that minority management was guaranteed, by both the Constitution and the Supreme Court, the right to determine their own fee structures.⁴⁸⁹ Yet because of growing protests on capitation fees and a heightened awareness of the caste and class differences between Christians, The Church officially and legally devised a system of admissions that went by the Supreme Court decisions by making the system transparent and taking merit into account. Legally, minorities could fill 100% of the seats in a minority unaided institution. The Catholic Church decided that admissions would be 50/50. 50% of the seats in a college would be from a management quota—most likely from the community of the minority management. The other 50% would be non-minorities/other minorities. Both sets of admissions were merit based, but decided differently than state admissions. Government colleges rely on the state entrance examination to determine merit of admissions. The Catholic Church took 50% from the entrance examination, and 50% from the qualifying examination upon 12th standard completion. “Tuition” or tutoring for the entrance examination and higher standards in private educational institutions gave students from privileged communities a distinct advantage in determining the “merit” of students admitted into

⁴⁸⁹ Krishnakumar, R. “Update: Court Fiat on Kerala Law” *Frontline*. 24 Issue 01. (Jan. 13-26, 2007). <http://www.hinduonnet.com/fline/fl2401/stories/20070126003403000.htm> (Accessed July 20, 2010).

unaided private colleges. Therefore, the LDF continued their opposition to the structure of admissions in private self-financing colleges. The Romo-Syrian community and Catholic leadership were irked and developed communal opposition to the Communist led ministry. As assembly member Alphons Kananthanam related:

I really think the Church has decided to be on a confrontation path with the Left...because Kerala government was not willing to accept the Catholic Church Christian community as a minority. See that is where the conflict came. Even the self financing bill/act we brought about in the assembly, which was passed by the assembly, clause 8 said that Christian community will not be minority community. Even though they did not mention “Christian,” the intention was very clear. Any community which has colleges more in number than any other community will not be a minority. Which means only the Christian community. Again, the same clause B says that “if from a particular community more students are studying in engineering colleges all across Kerala, then, you will not be a minority community.” See? The majority students in colleges are Christians. And therefore specifically intended to ensure that Christian community was not a minority community. So this is one clause that really antagonized the Catholic Church. Which again is from the point of view of the Church and believers. It’s a very fair thing to be antagonized. When the Constitution says you are a minority, when the Supreme Court has said that you are a minority, and then for you to go and say “it is not a minority,” it’s not a fair thing! So the Church is very angry, and legitimately I would say is angry.⁴⁹⁰

After *TMA Pai* and *Inamdar*, the Church had won a decisive victory on minority rights. But they then found themselves further constrained by competing definitions of “minority” in the state of Kerala. Even as the minority rights discourse seemingly encompassed all Christians within the state, the Communist led coalition’s definition challenged this assumption and laid bare the very fact that class and caste divisions exist among Christians.

On August, 12 2007, under Catholic direction, the opposition staged a large protest in Kottayam city against communist changes to definitions of “minority.” The

⁴⁹⁰ Alphons Kananthanam. Interview by Author in English. June 17, 2008.

protest became violent with reports of drunken men throwing rocks and hurting cameramen/journalists. Pastoral letters and denials were immediately released by the Catholic hierarchy disassociating themselves from the violence and reasserting their claim that the Communist Party was trying to encroach on minority rights. In comparison to the Textbook rally in July, 2008, the 2007 rally was an utter failure. While reported in Kerala's many newspapers, the issue of minority rights as it pertained to self-financing colleges left many Keralites ambivalent, including Romo-Syrians.

Now, everyone has education and everyone is aware of their rights. So Christians have their own schools and other communities have their own schools. But their [Christian management's] motives are for money...And the government wants three schools to every one Christian school, because that is the ratio of the population. After getting those schools government is making money of this from appointments and fees...but what they [government] are telling is also only partial truth, not full truth. Right now, the second generation of fathers [priests] what they are telling is also part truth.⁴⁹¹

What was apparent to many in the state was the rising cost of a college education, the shrinking of seats available for college students and the reality that only those sections of society with money would be able to afford a college education at a private institution. Thus, the Catholic hierarchy had a difficult time in rallying the troops against the LDF's attempts to regulate self-financing colleges.

Mathamillatha Jeevan and the textbook controversy, on the other hand, provided communal leadership with a government supported narrative where choosing no religion (or choosing religion later) was in direct opposition to protecting existing minority religions. That is, the Supreme Court interpreted Article 30 (1) of the Constitution as an assurance of the protection of minority culture. If, as the

⁴⁹¹ Mathai. Interview in Malayalam and English by author. Dec 11, 2007.

Catholic Church advanced, a religious identity was supranational, than government supported non-choice/delayed choice of religion could be read as anti-religious to individuals who were born into their religious cultures. In comparison to debates of the definition of ‘minority,’ the protest over the textbook was much more successful. Like the 1959 *vimochana samaram*, the textbook controversy seemingly united Christians across class, caste and racial differences when the 2007 demonstrations only seemed to exacerbate those differences. Therefore, I argue that there was something different about how minority rights was framed with the textbook controversy. To understand this difference, I will examine religious identities today and the ways in which differences between Christians function in the 21st century.

Religiosity

Syrian Christianity has undergone a profound shift in Kerala today. During the 1950s, secularism had changed Romo-Syrian Catholicism in Kerala most notably in the public space. Yet religious identity continued to have a big importance in everyday life as the “minority rights” discourse became such a salient feature of secular modernity. As Mathew argues: “*Community became active through communalism but communalism resulted in communalization by acquiring secular status symbols.*”⁴⁹² In other words, the communally based social movements of the early 20th century allowed the Romo-Syrian community to become extremely active in public debates and social/political issues. “Secular status symbols” for Syrian Christians was the ability to fight to defend their privilege in and through their

⁴⁹² Mathew, George. *Communal Road to a Secular Kerala*. (Delhi: Concept Publishing Company, 1989), 198. Emphasis his..

minority status that was to be protected by the secular nation-state. Thus, Syrian Christian women could take part in the *vimochana samaram* in and for their religion—while at the same time participating in the changing public sphere and attending marches clad in a *sari*.

Today, another shift is taking place. As J. Devika argues in “Memory’s Fatal Lure,” the political fervor and its relation to religion is different. In 1957, nine out of eleven Communists refused to take the name of God in the oath of office because they were proclaimed atheists—no such fuss is made today.⁴⁹³ Catholics have also changed their political views, and unlike the 1950s, many practicing Catholics are Communist. In fact, the CPM’s 2007 conference was held in the Christian stronghold of Kottayam district because of strengthening Christian membership. The *India Express* reported that 20% of CPM members are minorities, and of those minorities, there are more Christians than Muslims in the party.⁴⁹⁴ With this changing political/communal climate, religion is once again undergoing a shift in Kerala society becoming less ritualistic, acquiring pop-culture appeal and taking on new avenues of expression.

Christians throughout Kerala have today been experiencing a renewal of spirituality divorced from the religious ritual of the past through popular media, evangelism and alleged miracles. A very popular television series depicting a legendary Syrian Christian, *Kadamattathu Kathanar*, hit the scene in 2004. The series, directed by TS Saji and supervised by TS Suresh Babu, was loosely based on Syrian Christian folklore. The legend of Kathanar was passed down by word of

⁴⁹³ Devika, 15.

⁴⁹⁴ “Twenty Percent of CPM Members Minorities: LDF Convenor.” *The India Express*. February 13, 2008.

mouth and through *Aythiyamala*, a Malayalam book of mythology. According to Threshamma, an eighty-seven year old Romo-Syrian woman, Kathanar was a priest who lived before the advent of the Portuguese. He was captured by demons, learned their magic, and then escaped and returned to his home. He used his newfound magical powers to chase away evil spirits from farmland near a church. After driving out the demons, Kathanar sought refuge in the church. The evil spirit chased Kathanar and hit the church with such force, that a mark was left on the door. Pilgrims would come to the church to see the mark and renew their faith in Christianity.⁴⁹⁵ The St. George Orthodox Church of Kadamattom confirms Threshamma's recollection of the legend on its website.⁴⁹⁶ However, over the years, the Kathanar's church was left in ruins and finally closed in 1998.

The most popular Malayalam television channel, *Asianet*, had experimented with Syrian Christian based programming in the past such as *Samadhanam Nammodukoodu* (Peace Be With Us). These proved to be unsuccessful with the ratings, and were eventually dropped by *Asianet*. But the series *Kathanar* had a different approach. *Kathanar* took the idea of a priest fighting demons, added special effects, and embellished the legend with bi-stories to create a serial.

⁴⁹⁵ Threshamma. Interview in Malayalam by author. Sept 7, 2007.

⁴⁹⁶ "History." <http://www.kadamattomchurch.org/kathanar.html>



Kathanar fights a demon in the form of a serpent.⁴⁹⁷

The show was an instant success, and had a huge following from women of the Romo-Syrian community. According to Praveena Kumar, public relations for *Asianet*,

Female viewership normally attracts advertisers. Female products have the most advertising. If you want to advertise female products, females have to watch it. When we looked, there was a large female viewership for *Kathanar*. Females are the ones sitting at home and watching, frankly speaking. Kathanar's activities were of interest to them. So it became, it became a hit like anything. Then, the bi-stories. There are many bi-stories of *Kathanar*. Bi-stories were so interesting. Anywhere he goes, he is a savior. When you see Kathanar, he is just like Christ. Like Jesus Christ... When it was televised, it was the biggest hit in television industry. Then after a hundred/two hundred or more episodes the serial will come to a close. But we didn't stop it. Then we had enough interest to continue making stories. To make the stories, it was a simple plot: Kathanar will rescue. That was all. Witches were written into the stories. Kathanar would beat them.⁴⁹⁸

⁴⁹⁷ "Kathanar Fights a Demon" (image). Courtesy of *Asianet*

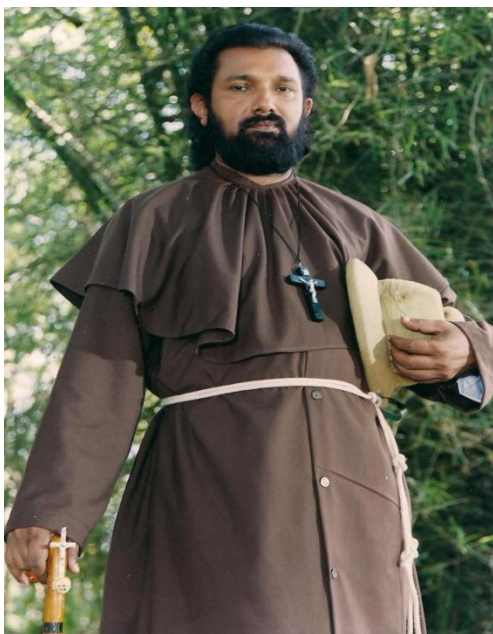
⁴⁹⁸ Praveena Kumar. Interview in English by author. May 2, 2008.

What is of interest here is that although Kathanar is likened in his godliness to Jesus Christ, Jesus does not have such interesting bi-stories. Therefore, stories of the bible were not as popular as the invented stories of Kathanar. The appeal of *Kathanar* ushered in a new wave of interest in Syrian Christianity. After the success of the serial, the Kadamattom church was opened and renovated in 2006. Pilgrims flocked to the church.



*Kathanar 1*⁴⁹⁹

⁴⁹⁹ “Kathanar 1.” (image). Courtesy of *Asianet*.



*Kathanar 2*⁵⁰⁰

Similar television programs followed *Kathanar* including *St. Thomas Sleha* on *Asianet*, *St. Antony* on *Surya* and *Madhava (Mary)* on *Surya*.



*St. Antony*⁵⁰¹

⁵⁰⁰ “*Kathanar 2.*” (image). Courtesy of *Asianet*.



St. Thomas⁵⁰²

Each had the same plot: a holy man/woman would defeat evildoers/evil. The distinctly Christian nature of the serials are apparent in these stills.

The serials coincided with the launch of the Syrian Christian channel, *Shalom TV*. In 2005, the channel debuted featuring prayers, mass, sermons and bible studies, devotional music, and footage from vigils and retreats. *Shalom* claims to be “truly Christian value based channel, caters to every cross-section of the society,” but its links to the Romo-Syrian Church are apparent. The channel has an association with Catholic channel, Eternal Word Television Network (EWTN). Devotional programs include, *Japamala* (rosary), *Kurishinte Vazhi* (way of the cross), *Karunakontha* (Chaplet of Divine Mercy), *Thirusannidhi* (adoration of the Eucharist) and

⁵⁰¹ “St. Antony” (image).

⁵⁰² “St. Thomas” (image).

Madhyasthaprarthana (intercession)—all distinctly Catholic prayers. It's associations with Syrian Christianity are also apparent, the majority of programming featuring Romo-Syrian masses and priests from the community. For example, the channel broadcasts *Vachanam Thiruvachanam* hosted by Romo-Syrian Fr. Sebastian Parayil, theology from the Romo-Syrian Alpha Institute and footage from retreats at Sehion, a retreat center patroned by Syro-Malabar Bishop Rev Mar Jacob Manathodathu. The Pentecostal Church of Kerala has a separate channel for their spiritual programming unrelated to *Shalom* called *PowerVision*. Thus, *Shalom* is distinctly for the Romo-Syrian community. Like the Syrian Christian based serials, *Shalom TV* is hugely popular with women in the Romo-Syrian community. Many Romo-Syrian households never turn the channel off. As the seventy year old Romo-Syrian woman, Alphonsamma, related to me, "it's my favourite channel, I have it on all day when I'm cooking, eating, and even when I lie down to take a nap."⁵⁰³

Syrian Christian programming and serials depicting the community are entirely new to Kerala. The programming reaches a large number of Syrian Christians. As *The Center for Development Studies* reports, 56% of Syrian Christian households own a television set, well above the numbers for other religions in Kerala.⁵⁰⁴ They provide topics for discussion between neighbours. *Kathanar* was especially popular among Romo-Syrian women and in its first season, many households followed the show without fail from week to week. *Kathanar* was nothing short of a pop culture phenomenon in Kerala—every single Syrian Christian

⁵⁰³ Alphonsamma. Interview in Malayalam by author, Sept 11, 2007.

⁵⁰⁴ 31% of Muslims, 40% of Ezhavas, and 43% of Latin Catholics own television sets. Zacharia, KC. *The Syrian Christians of Kerala: Demographic and Socio-Economic Transition in the Twentieth Century*. (New Delhi: Orient Longman Private Limited, 2006), 195.

household I visited had watched the show. Within a Romo-Syrian prayer group I attended, the serial *Madhava* (Mary) was discussed by group members as “a wonderful show with Christian values.”⁵⁰⁵ *Shalom* was even promoted by the parish Romo-Syrian priest during a *Mathra Jothies* (Romo-Syrian married mother’s group) meeting.⁵⁰⁶ The speed at which the programming has become popular within the community indicates a growing interest in a new sort of Syrian Christianity that redefines the identity of being Christian in Kerala. A sort of nostalgic pride has arisen in which an uncorrupted form of Syrian Christianity is celebrated. One common depiction in each of the new serials is Syrian Christian women in the traditional *chatta/thuni* and/or with *kunnika*. The costumes also depict a different religiosity in a pre-secular time period.



⁵⁰⁵ St. Thomas Prayer Group Meeting. Interviews in Malayalam by author. Jan 15, 2008.

⁵⁰⁶ *Mathra Jothies* meeting. Interviews in Malayalam by author, March 21, 2008.

“Woman in *chatta/thuni* on St. Thomas, *Asianet*”⁵⁰⁷

Yet this borrowing of the past through images is selective. While religiously dressed women are depicted, caste inequalities and restrictions on movements are not. While stories center on families, they are nuclear as opposed to the joint family structure of the past. Thus, part of the new aspects of religiosity is a selective choosing of the past and integration into the secular present. Syrian Christianity is not, as it once was, differentiated from other communities by being complicit in Brahmanical patriarchy. Instead, Syrian Christianity is lauded as being part and parcel of Kerala society free from such associations. The egalitarian nature of Christianity is therefore stressed.

The selective choosing of which sorts of values/religious expressions are depicted is telling of what I am calling post-secular religiosity. Today, faith is renewed not through expressing difference from groups through ritual, but in a post-secular world, through seemingly egalitarian means.⁵⁰⁸ New emphasis on the bible and individual spiritual healing run as a constant theme. Thus, caste, class and racial inequalities, although apparent in Syrian Christian everyday life, are washed over. *Religious community* is taking on another meaning—one in which participation in the new forms of religious expression are considered inclusive in the group.

The sudden popularity of evangelistic retreats and spiritual vigils are a testament to this change. Like serials depicting Syrian Christians and *Shalom TV*, evangelism is entirely new to the Syrian Christian community. In return for upper-caste status, Syrian Christians have historically not been interested in evangelizing non-Christians. Because of Syrian Christians’ high status in society, they clung to the

⁵⁰⁷ “Woman in *chatta/thuni* on St. Thomas, *Asianet*.” (image).

⁵⁰⁸ I say “seemingly” because difference is still maintained through endogamous marriages (discussed below).

caste system. This acted as an impediment to any evangelization efforts and simultaneously made them even more of a separate community.⁵⁰⁹ As Fuller explains, “Syrians stress their “Indian-ness” and Brahmin origins, they have never ruled over Hindus except, perhaps, temporarily and locally and they have developed no strong pan-Christian consciousness.”⁵¹⁰ The Syrians have historically been criticized by other sects of Christianity in their reluctance at re-evangelizing their own faithful. The Portuguese Latinization efforts stemmed from the belief that the Syrian Christians were unorganized lacked ecclesiastical guidance and Syrian Christian priests were unwilling to spread the Word even among their own faithful.⁵¹¹ As mentioned, Kerala has had more Western missionaries than any other state in India, and they largely come in an effort to reform the Syrian Christians. Yet despite this, Syrian Christianity has stubbornly held on to its uniqueness in and through religious ritual. From the time of the Synod of Diamper (1599), until the late-fifties, the Romo-Syrian mass was practiced in Aramaic. British missionaries viewed Syrian Christian ritual as inaccessible to the people and made massive efforts to change the liturgy to the vernacular, Malayalam. Still the Romo-Syrian hierarchy resisted reform and relied on ritual and tradition and other rituals. Rituals tied Syrians Christians to upper-caste Hindus. Tradition provided a genealogy of identity. Thus, in the early 20th century social reform era, Syrians constituted a specific social identity in and through their reliance on ritual. A caste, racial and class privileged identity that was given by being born into the faith from an endogamous union. The timelessness of

⁵⁰⁹ Zacharia, 74.

⁵¹⁰ Fuller, CJ. “Kerala Christians and the Caste System.” *Man*. 11. No 1. (March 1976): 58.

⁵¹¹ Houtart, Francois and Genevieve Lemercinier. *Genesis and Institutionalization of the Indian Catholicism*. Trans. Iolanda Rendel. (Louvain-la-Neuve: C.R.S.R.—Universite Catholique de Louvain, 1981), 60.

the identity was manifested politically in the religious minority identity—God given and supranational.

However, today, a profound shift away from ritual is occurring. The influence of Pentecostal churches in Kerala cannot be diminished in this change in religiosity. Pentecostal churches were established in Kerala earlier, but saw a jump in missionary activity and membership in the 1990s. The churches stressed a heavy emphasis on prayer, the bible and spiritual renewal. They “abhor rituals, Episcopal hierarchy and all kinds of mediators—including saints—between humans and God.”⁵¹² The Pentecostal faiths are attracting many from the Syrian Christians disgusted by ritual and the Church hierarchy which often times does not speak to the spiritual needs of the congregation. Indeed, many Romo-Syrian homilies at Sunday mass have been entirely replaced by the reading of pastoral letters and instructions on how the faithful should live their lives politically. From June-August 2008 in the parish church I attended, not one homily addressed the Gospel. Rather, a pastoral letter was read in its place. Pastoral letters are rarely spiritually based, but concerned with politics and the contentions over “minority rights.” In addition, pastoral letters use literary Malayalam—often inaccessible to those without a dictionary at hand. When asking a member of the congregation about the meaning of a certain pastoral letter, I was told “I didn’t understand. Most times I don’t really listen to the letters because I cannot understand their meaning.”⁵¹³

The Catholic Church has come down hard on the Pentecostal churches and alleged that the churches were being funded by US based churches, and are

⁵¹² Basheer, KPM. “Independent Churches Mushroom in the State.” *The Hindu*. Jun 17, 2002.

⁵¹³ Mary Kutty. Interview in Malayalam by author. Sept 19, 2007.

westernized and fundamentalist—the prayer services largely being conducted in English.⁵¹⁴ KC Zacharia explains that Pentecostal missionaries “are interested more in winning over members from Syrian churches than from non-Christian communities.”⁵¹⁵ Hence, the cause for concern from the Romo-Syrian hierarchy. In March 2009, the Kerala Catholic Bishops Council warned the laity about new sects of Christianity springing up in a Pastoral letter. The pastoral letter named the “Emperor Emmanuel Trust” in Muriad, “Amma” in Mala, the “Upper Room” in Kanjirappally, “Corner Stone,” “Spirit in Jesus” and “Atmabishekam” in Ernakulam and the “Heavenly Feast,” religious community as dangerous religious sects for Romo-Syrians.⁵¹⁶ In June, 2009, the Cardinal Varkey Vithayathil completely outlawed any Catholic from attending these sects in another pastoral letter. He stated:

Today there are many sects spreading teachings that are fundamentally opposed to the teachings of the Catholic Church. It is a sad fact that lured by these sects many have ended up in interpreting the Bible falsely, in neglecting the sacramental life and even in breaking off from the Catholic communion.⁵¹⁷

The Indian Pentecostal Church (IPC) responded by stating that the pastoral letters were just an attempt by the Catholic Church to retain members. KM Joseph, IPC president stated “Large number of Catholics are leaving for other new-life sects and this was worrying them as their very existence is in danger.”⁵¹⁸

⁵¹⁴ Basheer.

⁵¹⁵ KC Zacharia, 72.

⁵¹⁶ Vithayathil, Varkey. “Pastoral Letter” March 3rd, 2009.
http://www.kcbcsite.com/kcbc_pastoral_letters/pl_new_sects.pdf

⁵¹⁷ Vithayathil, Varkey. “Pastoral Letter May 25th.” [http://www.syromalabargw.net/syromalabargw/Portals/0/Pastoral%20Letter%20of%20Vithayathil%20\(2\).pdf](http://www.syromalabargw.net/syromalabargw/Portals/0/Pastoral%20Letter%20of%20Vithayathil%20(2).pdf)

⁵¹⁸ Ananthakrishnan, G. “New Prayer Groups Spread Abhorrence for Hinduism: Catholic Church.” *The Times of India*. June 6, 2009.

Despite the hierarchy's warnings of Pentecostal spiritual expression, it continues to appeal to a large number of Romo-Syrians, and especially to Romo-Syrian women. The Catholic Church has almost been forced to respond and address this change in religiosity by starting its own outlets for spiritual renewal: evangelistic retreats. The evangelistic retreat phenomenon within the Romo-Syrian faith started in a small village named Potta in the late 1980s. Fr. Mathew Naickomparambil initiated a prayer service in which group members allegedly experienced miracles and healings. The group swelled and eventually a retreat center was founded. The Divine Retreat Center offers day long retreats in different languages and six auditoriums for activities, lectures, songs, prayer. The retreats have anywhere from 200,000-300,000 participants.



In 1993, the Vatican approved the International Catholic Charismatic Renewal Services (ICCRS) for outreach. Yet it took almost ten years and pressure from the faithful to have it implemented in Kerala. In 2004 the Catholic Charismatic Renewal Services (KCCR) was approved by the Kerala Catholic Bishops with the intention of (among other goals) promoting evangelization. This includes re-evangelization of baptized Catholics and evangelization of non-Christians.⁵¹⁹ With the KCCR came the establishment of over ninety retreat centers officially sponsored by the Romo-Syrian Church. Among these are the Sehion Retreat Centre, whose activities are broadcast on *Shalom TV* and the Jerusalem Retreat Center of Trissur.



Retreat broadcast on *Shalom TV*.⁵²⁰

Retreats have become hugely popular with the faithful.

⁵¹⁹ “The Central Goals of Catholic Charismatic Renewal.”

http://www.kcbcsite.com/kcbc_commission_charismatic_movement.htm (accessed May 23, 2009).

⁵²⁰ “Retreat broadcast on *Shalom TV*.” (image). <http://www.shalomtv.tv/> (accessed June 28, 2009).

The effects of post-independence secularism on the faith led to the diminishing of ritual and tradition on the faith. The popularity of faith based movements today has led to the disappearance of customs once used to demarcate Syrian Christians from other groups. Further, the idea that “minority” encompasses all Christians is not taken wholeheartedly by Keralites as official protections for minorities under Article 30 (1) often only understands minorities to be socially disenfranchised. This would seem to suggest that difference—caste, religious, and racial—are being effaced for a more value based way of life. Indeed, it would seem to explain why the movement against the 7th standard textbook was so successful. Because of an attack on moral education that people from all castes, religious and racial groups desire, the populace united. Yet how are we to understand the continued differences between castes, religions and races in Kerala outlined in chapters 3 and 4? While these changes to Syrian Christianity and a minority identity have profoundly impacted social identities and “etiquette” towards social “others,” I believe a closer look at what exactly united the public against the textbook is necessary. Specifically, what exactly is “moral education,” and how was the textbook immoral/anti-religious? The answers to this question will reveal the ways in which the effacing of difference through new religiosity and re-working of minority rights is merely a *seeming* effacing of difference.

Religious Ritual and Moral Education

In the discussion of the textbook controversy, minority rights and the moral education of children became the face of the protest in a new era of religious fervor.

It marked a difference between political protest to protect the economic interests of the community (the self-financing colleges). Yet, there was an ‘elephant in the room’ when it came to discussion of anti-religious sentiments in the textbook: how the inter-caste/faith marriage of Jeevan’s parents—Anwar Rasheed (Muslim name) and Lakshmi Devi (a Hindu name)—factored into the outrage over the textbook. In this section, I discuss the interfaith marriage and its relation to amoral behavior. I argue that in the ritualizing of female sexuality, privilege is defended despite the seeming egalitarian nature of the new religiosity of Kerala Christians.

Marriage is compulsory for Romo-Syrian women. The low-workforce participation rate among Syrian Christian women in Kerala indicates an economic dependence on husbands. As per custom in the Syrian Catholic community, women have no economic fall-back option outside of marriage. Syrian Catholic women do not traditionally inherit land. As per the 1916 Travancore Christian Succession Act, they are given ¼ share in dowry. Extreme opposition to Dowry Prohibition Bill on from the Romo-Syrian community reveals the marriage imperative for women as it pertains to her economic prospects in life.

Shri EP Poulose: Under the Christian Succession Act, a daughter is entitled to a share in the properties of the family with the brothers in the ratio of one to four. With marriage the daughter severs all connections with the family and throws her lot with the husband’s family...If the dowry is altogether banned, the daughter faces the prospect of finding a suitor, who will be prepared to take her without actually knowing what is exactly her worth in terms of money or immovable property...Therefore, my submission is that the stage has not arrived when dowry in the Christian Community can be abolished without prejudice to the interests of the daughter or the son, for that matter of the future, the husband...But as it is the daughter will forego her share in the family properties once dowry is accepted, and in the middle class families the dowry exceeds the actual share of the woman, when the family properties are divided in the ratio of one to four

between the daughters and sons. So in the interest of the women, it is better to continue the present system.⁵²¹

Thus, it is in the best interest for women to marry as $\frac{1}{4}$ of the share through dowry is better than none. In 1986, Mary Roy, the mother of the Booker prize winning author Arundhati Roy, brought a case against her brother to challenge the 1916 Travancore Christian Succession Act. The Christian Succession Act was overturned, and now Christian women have the same rights afforded by citizens under the Indian Succession Act, 1925. Yet very few women in the community have fought for rights to natal property as it is seen as external to their traditions. It is the *Nayar* matrilineal Hindu women who inherit land and for the patrilineal Syrian Catholic women to inherit would be going against tradition and custom. The few women who have tried to claim their share have faced opposition from their families, the Syrian Christian community and anything from forged wills/documents and bias from the judges when in court.⁵²²

Legitimized marriage provides not only economic security, but also visibility for Syrian Christian women. Romo-Syrian married women can travel at night and long distances when accompanied by a husband. The Romo-Syrian faith has a social group only available to married housewives with children, *mathrajothies*. Indeed, women have historically been barred from taking part in any parish decision making bodies until recently. Even today, their participation in parish councils is low and limited to token representation. A. Phillips further argues that it is through a *socially accepted marriage* that Syrian Christian women become socially visible. Moral

⁵²¹ *Proceedings of the Kerala Legislative Assembly*. (March 1st, 1958), 301-2.

⁵²² Philips, Amali. "Stridhanam: Rethinking dowry, inheritance and women's resistance among the Syrian Christians of Kerala" *Anthropologica*. 45. No 2. (2003): 245.

behavior enacted through marriage gives women the limited freedom they subscribe to: “The ideal woman is not only the beautiful woman (fair, moral, healthy), but one whose sexual, erotic and disruptive sides are muted, concealed and contained within the secure confines of marriage and male attachment.”⁵²³ This “disruptive” side would include a woman who entered into a socially unacceptable mixed marriage.

Endogamous marriages are overwhelmingly the norm in Kerala and “love marriages,” or marriages that are not arranged by the prospective bride/groom’s parents, although increasing in number, are still frowned upon. I have touched how marrying within the community ensures believed caste and racial purity in chapter 4. Inter-faith marriages are taboo for these same reasons. As caste cuts across religious divides and Christian denominations, marrying outside of a religion may often be marrying outside the caste. As it is socially taboo to marry outside a religion/caste, it is interesting that the inter-faith marriage of Jeevan’s parents did not become a more visible part of the protest against the textbook.

In the KPCC committee’s recommendations concerning the textbook, it was argued briefly that the inter-faith marriage was a cause for concern:

Teaching the students of 7th standard about mixed marriage is very inappropriate. Many communities had to face painful episodes of mixed marriages, causing rifts in the communities. We do not need to teach 7th grade students about this. It may be appropriate for students who have reached maturity. There is fundamental mistake to minimize its consequence.⁵²⁴

The KPCC’s comment on mixed marriage ends there. It is somehow taken for granted that the reader will understand how/why mixed marriages are “painful

⁵²³ Philips, Amali. “Gendering Colour: Identity, Femininity and Marriage in Kerala.” *Anthropologica*. 46, No 2. (2004): 268.

⁵²⁴ “KPCC Select Committee Report On Textbooks in Schools.” Tommathew Thomas, trans.

episodes” and inter-caste/faith marriages cause “rifts in the communities.”

Participants in the discussion vehemently denied that inter marriage had anything to do with defending religion through protest even as mixed marriages are vilified in everyday interactions. According to a Changanasheri rally goer: “Mixed marriage is not where the problem is coming from. The protest is not about the marriage. It’s about the ideology,” while in the background, an unidentified rally participant is just as knowingly countering this by stating “But in actually, mixed marriage IS a problem.”⁵²⁵ It was not always that discussion of inter-faith/caste marriages were absent from political discourse. Kerala caste reformers including Sri Narayana Guru and his follower, Sahodaran K. Ayyappan, advocated for the abolition of untouchability, unseeability, and inter-caste marriage prohibitions. However, according to J. Devika, in all their trumpeting of social welfare schemes and reform, the left never could/did take on inter-caste marriage to the extent of Ayyappan’s teachings.⁵²⁶ They have been curiously silent on issues of inter-caste marriage even as women’s education, marriage ages, birth control and property rights became issues the left championed themselves as progressive.

Much has been written on kinship systems and the ritualized exchange of women through marriage by feminists. Most famously, Gayle Rubin’s “The Traffic in Women” describes a woman’s role in marriage as being the object of exchange between families. Critiquing Levi-Strauss and Marx, Rubin argues that this exchange gives men sexual access to women and genealogical status to families. In this transaction that is a cultural necessity, women do not have rights to themselves.

⁵²⁵ Devasia and unidentified protester. Interview in Malayalam by author. July 28, 2008.

⁵²⁶ Devika, 14.

Rubin further explains that the subordination of women in the exchange is a product of the relationships by which sex and gender are organized and produced. The asymmetry between the sexes constrains female sexuality in and through the traffic in women.⁵²⁷ In *Gendering Caste Through a Feminist Lens*, Uma Chakravorty discusses the exchange of women further through what she calls “ritualized female sexuality.” Endogamy is a crucial rule that social groups have created for the exchange of women. Chakravorty explains that South Asian women are often defined only by reproduction and married endogamous unions—making widowhood a state of social death for women. The believed purity of marriage practices yields the hierarchy of caste.⁵²⁸ Further, ritual and belief tie women as gift to her role in procreation:

Cultural beliefs, derived on the basis of field information, make it evident that what is being gifted as part of the kanyadan [the man bestowing the gift] is not just the daughter but her woman’s ‘quality’ and ‘thing’, her femaleness (*matr shakti*), her procreation power, which is thereafter shared by her sons and daughters.⁵²⁹

Thus, reproduction and married sexuality within castes for women (subordinated under men in and through the exchange) are what constrain female sexuality in the South Asian context. Since there is no function outside this version of female sexuality, it becomes an ideal to which many women subscribe. I have discussed in chapter 3 how women themselves encourage interaction in sex-segregated spaces despite the restrictions it has on mobility as a way to guard against unwanted sexual advances. Likewise, there is a self policing of women entering into mixed marriages

⁵²⁷ Rubin, Gayle. “The Traffic in Women: Notes on the ‘Political Economy’ of Sex” in *Toward an Anthropology of Women*. Rayna R. Reiter, ed. (New York: Monthly Review Press, 1975), 176-7.

⁵²⁸ Chakravarti, Uma. *Gendering Caste Through a Feminist Lens*. (Calcutta: Stree, 2003), 31.

⁵²⁹ Chakravarti, 31-32.

by equating “disruptive” sexual behavior to marrying outside the community. Prema Kurien notes in *Kaleidoscopic Ethnicity* that during her field research in Kerala, she was told of two Syrian Christian women who married outside their communities with “disastrous consequences.” According to Kurien, “community members used these two cases to deter youngsters who might otherwise have entertained the thought of marrying non-Syrian Christians.”⁵³⁰ During field research, I too was often warned with stories of women marrying outside the religion/caste and suffering personal hardships as a result. For example, while interviewing three Romo-Syrian women in *chatta/munda*, I was told of an inter-faith/caste marriage between a Romo-Syrian man and a Latin woman in the village. The husband’s family did not approve of the match, yet the wife came to live with her in-laws at her husband’s request. Soon after, the husband suddenly died in a motorcycle accident. The in-laws became increasingly hard on the young woman, physically and verbally abusing her to such a degree, that it was well known among the neighbors. The women explained that as the wife had the audacity to marry into “our caste” she deserves harsh treatment from her in-law’s family. “This is the danger of marrying outside the caste. Things like this can happen to you,” I was warned. The widow’s supposed licentiousness was then discussed as she supposedly used her good looks to lure the man into the marriage in the first place.⁵³¹

Many scholars have discussed ways in which a growing class-consciousness has led to the breakdown of caste barriers in Kerala. This would suggest that maintaining difference between castes/religions would have diminished through the

⁵³⁰ Kurien, Prema. *Kaleidoscopic Ethnicity: International Migration and the Reconstruction of Community Identities in India*. (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 2002), 23-4.

⁵³¹ Kocharotha. Interview in Malayalam by author. Dec 17, 2007.

20th century. For example, Anna Lindberg discusses how upper-castes were discouraged from join unions in the cashew industry because the membership comprised mostly of scheduled castes. High castes in the cashew industry joined unions anyways in an era where caste divisions were breaking down, and class identities were born.⁵³² Osella and Osella's anthropological work on masculinity argues that sex-segregation in Kerala has led to caste intermixing among young men. "Young men often appear to subvert or escape caste and, indeed, hierarchy, in their relations with each other... Within gangs, intense physical contact and sharing affirm egalitarian principles, breaking down social distance."⁵³³ Yet, this caste cooperation breaks down when the endogamous marriage imperative is taken into account. While it is true that a class identity was born in the 20th century and intermixing of castes occur—whether through reservations for scheduled castes/backward classes or through homosocial bonds, adulthood is punctuated by endogamous marriage. Anna Lindberg acknowledges that caste cooperation of workers usually does not factor into inter-marriage between communities.⁵³⁴ Osella and Osella also admit that the intermixing of castes in all-male spaces ends upon marriage as the cross community friendships disappear and men take on caste and gender hierarchies.⁵³⁵ I argue that it is through 'ritualized female sexuality' that moral codes shape and exacerbate the differences between upper-class, upper-caste, Aryan identities and lower-class, lower-caste Dravidian identities. Therefore, the hierarchal systems of oppression of the past

⁵³² Lindberg, Anna. *Modernization and Effeminization in India: Kerala Cashew Workers since 1930*. (Copenhagen: NIAS Press, 2005), 70.

⁵³³ Osella, Caroline and Filippo Osella. "Friendship and Flirting: Micro-Politics in Kerala, South India." *The Journal of the Royal Anthropological Institute*. 4 no 2. (June 1998): 190-1.

⁵³⁴ Lindberg, 13.

⁵³⁵ Osella and Osella, 201.

remains despite caste and religions intermixing in sex-segregated public spaces and despite value based religiosity away from ritualistic divisions.

As discussed, the rejection of religious ritual is changing the face of religion in Kerala and divisions between Christians once denied is becoming all the more apparent in political minority rights discourse. Once, prayer was in the monopoly of Romo-Syrian priests who had the knowledge of Aramaic. Today, prayer can be conducted without priests in neighbourhood family groups and in new outlets such as spiritual retreats. Once, being part of a Romo-Syrian community meant expressing difference from other groups through women wearing special clothing, refraining from proselytizing. Today, the (supposed) religion-less *sari* and *churidar* has replaced the *chatta/thuni*, evangelism has become popular, the idea of Syrian Christian purification has been lost and Brahmanical patriarchy held together by feudalism has evolved in capitalistic Kerala. However, it is telling which religious rituals have disappeared and which have actually stayed: ritual concerning marriage and reproduction have been preserved.

To marry within the caste/religion, all Romo-Syrian children must attend rigorous religious education training from lower primary to at least 10th standard (*vedapaadam*). *Vedapaadam* literally means “the lessons of the Veda” and is yet another way in which supposed Brahmin/Aryan origins of the Syrian Christians are ritualistically maintained today. Before marriage, both the bride and groom must obtain certification from the parish which *vedapaadam* was completed. Religious education is no joke in the Romo-Syrian faith. It is very strict. Children attend *vedapaadam* both on Saturdays and Sundays. They attend mass at least 45-30

minutes ahead of the congregation as part of *vedapaadam*, singing devotional songs. After mass, instruction lasts at least another hour. Priests and nuns in the parish ensure strict discipline at all times. In fact, in the parish I attended, the priest often resorted to corporeal punishment if children were late for *vedapaadam*. The tying together of completing *vedapaadam* with the sacrament of marriage only reinforces the endogamous dictates of the marriage union.

Romo-Syrians have strict laws of endogamy that do not include cross cousin marriages as customary in other communities of Kerala. Rather, Romo-Syrian women marry within the caste and outside the village to create kinship ties between Romo-Syrian families. The middle-man system, where a male family member seeks out male suitors from other villages to visit the eligible daughter also still prevails. As do the small rituals concerning courtship including the *pennukannal* (bride viewing) custom, where the potential groom and parents visits the potential brides house while being served tea and sweets by the potential groom. As Amali Philips notes, this custom ensures, for the groom's family, that the women of the household skin color is fair—denoting caste/race/moral purity.⁵³⁶ Engagement rituals including having the mass at the bride's church, the announcement of the dowry agreement, and compulsory donations to the church are all still intact.

The marriage itself is full of ritual that ties Romo-Syrians to upper-caste Hindu customs. The tying of the *minnu* is the same custom of marriage used by Hindus (*thalikettinu*). The veiling of the bride with the *manthrakodi* is the same as the Hindu custom of a *sari* given to the bride by the groom's family during the marriage ceremony. Ritual bathing and entering the groom's home with the right foot

⁵³⁶ Philips, "Gendering Colour," 263.

after marriage is also the same as Hindu upper-caste customs. Likewise, traditions around pregnancy and birth have their roots in upper-caste Hindu practices:

Ayurvedic medicines and therapy are given to Romo-Syrian pregnant women, the last two months of the pregnancy is spent in natal home, a mixture of gold and honey is given to the baby at birth to ensure the child has fair skin, and naming rituals of Romo-Syrian children are kept intact.⁵³⁷

Why is it that marriage rituals and customs surrounding female sexuality/reproduction have not changed while other rituals that stressed difference between communities (use of *chatta/thuni* and untouchability/unseeability) have? It is through this regulation of sexuality and reproduction that the caste, racial, class and patriarchal privilege can be maintained through a seemingly static system in secular India. In other words, it is through endogamous marriage that social position is enacted and difference from the “other” social position is maintained. As argued, for women this is especially true as visibility and channeled sexuality is only possible through marriage. Thus, the staticity of caste, race, class and religion is today maintained through in-caste/faith marriages. Rituals concerning female sexuality—marriage and childbirth—remains laden with all manner of symbolic difference from other communities. These rituals become that which defines the customs of the

⁵³⁷ The oldest son of the oldest son is given the paternal grandfather’s name. Many families have alternating names. The Theempalangad family tree of Kanjirapalli runs as such: Thomma Mathai’s (Thomas Mathew’s) son is Mathai Thomma (Mathew Thomas), and his oldest son is Thomma Mathai. Thus, through the generations, the name of the oldest son will be either “Thomma Mathai” or “Mathai Thomma.” In addition, middle names are traditionally the maternal grandmother’s name. So cousins with the same maternal grandmother will all have the same middle name. Even as Hindu or non-religious names have become popular, many families still baptize children with the traditional Romo-Syrian name. For example, the Ampalathumkal family of Changanasheri has the oldest son tradition of Varghese Bousaly/Bousaly Varghese (George Basil/Basil George). The oldest son of this particular family was named “Shagi,” a very common non-Christian name. However, his baptized name is Varghese Bousaly. This naming tradition not only denotes paternal lineage, but synergy with the past as Syrian Christian names are unique to the community and further marks the religion as distinct from others.

community and that which will never be outmoded or replaced. In other words, Romo-Syrian female sexuality needs to remain regulated through ritual because it is through such regulation that historically familiar codes of difference are officially enacted and used to maintain privilege and access to power.

Privilege is defended by policing errant sexuality. This often becomes sensationalized in the media further stigmatizing the errant woman who enters into a mixed marriage. Most notably, the country's papers are rife with scandals of intercaste/faith elopements and the family's attempts at returning the girl. Honor killings also become sensationalized stories that center on punishing the girl involved in an inter-faith/caste marriage:

Brutal killing then is the communitarian response to the oppositional agency of women who may attempt to renegotiate the traditional boundaries of their lives. Such women are given the death penalty with no qualms by their own families and communities. It appears that as the norms of the caste system and its marriage patterns are increasingly disturbed through social changes—upward mobility, caste assertion, changes in land and occupational structures, and political transformations—the virulence with which the control over female sexuality is asserted increases.⁵³⁸

Kerala is not immune as these stories often rock the community. In 2006, *The Hindu* reported Hindu priest, Melsanthi Viswamithran Namboodiri, was fired from Lord Siva Temple in Venniyur and beaten up allegedly by temple authorities for marrying an Ezhava woman.⁵³⁹ A Romo-Syrian woman I interviewed was excommunicated from her family—a very prominent Romo-Syrian family—due to her love marriage with a Hindu man.⁵⁴⁰ The widow I previously discussed did not have endogamous union and although she may attend Romo-Syrian mass with her in-laws, she is still a

⁵³⁸ Chakravarti, 159.

⁵³⁹ "Inter-Caste Marriage: Priest Loses Job" *The Hindu*. Aug 12, 2006.

⁵⁴⁰ Rosie. Interview in Malayalam by author. Sept 26, 2007.

Latin Catholic and looked down upon by the women of the community.⁵⁴¹ These are just a handful of many stories that have made mixed marriages “painful episodes” for communities.

The mixed marriage in *Mathamillatha Jeevan* results in no religion for the child and thus a lack of identity. “Jeevan who has no religion/caste” is the same as a “religion/caste-less life.” In a system where caste, race, class and religious difference is maintained primarily through ritualized female sexuality, inter-faith marriage is a threat. Choosing no religion because of a mixed marriage challenges the silences concerning social identities and divisions between identities. In Uma Chakrovarty’s words, a women entering into a mixed marriage, exhibits “oppositional agency” attempting “to renegotiate the traditional boundaries of their lives.” Although religiosity is changing and uniting Christians today under individual spiritual healing, and although “minority rights” have changed dramatically in the 21st century revealing many of the social differences between Christians, any fluidity between castes, races and/or religions is cut off and appears to be static because of endogamous unions. It is only when such divisions become taken-for-granted as natural that race, caste, religious and masculine privilege can remain intact.

⁵⁴¹ Kocharotha. Interview in Malayalam by author. Dec 17, 2007.

Chapter 7:
**Approaching the Concept of Difference: Women's and Gender Studies
 and South Asian Studies**

To place gender studies and area studies in critical dialogue would require a multichronotopic form of analysis, particularly in terms of the ways geographies are imagined and knowledge is mapped within academic institutional practices. It would ask us to place the often-ghettoized histories, geographies, and discourses in hopefully politically and epistemologically synergetic relations. It would require critical voices to look for ways in which variegated pasts and presents parallel and intersect, overlap and contradict, analogize and allegorize one another.⁵⁴²

In “French Feminism in an International Frame” Gayatri Spivak discusses the question “what can I do for the Third World woman?” She argues that feminist studies on the non-West that ask this question often only serve to reaffirm the subjecthood of the West. Additionally, Western feminist academics often assume a benevolent position, attempting to “correct” through supposed “superior” theory.⁵⁴³ In order for First World postcolonial scholars such as myself to learn about Third World women, we must understand that institutional changes against sexism in the Western World may mean nothing for women in the Third World—they may even harm women in the Third World.⁵⁴⁴ For Spivak, the First World feminist scholar must acknowledge her privilege. This privilege was not gained through luck nor was it owed to the First World feminist. At the same time, to the extent that privilege is acknowledged, it cannot then be thrown away. Instead, it can be used to understand the heterogeneity of the subaltern subject.

⁵⁴² Shohat, Ella. “Area Studies, Gender Studies, and the Cartographies of Knowledge.” *Social Text*. 20. No3. (Fall 2002): 67.

⁵⁴³ Spivak, Gayatri Chakravorty. *In Other Worlds: Essays in Cultural Politics*. (New York: Routledge, 1988), 135.

⁵⁴⁴ Spivak, 150.

As Spivak explains, because the world's privileged societies dictate the configuration of the rest, this is not an inconsiderable gift.⁵⁴⁵ Spivak's analysis of French feminism in a global context is extremely important to my dissertation and situates how I conducted research in India, how I read texts, and how I understand the disciplines of Women's and Gender Studies, South Asian Studies, and both disciplines' approach to studying differences among peoples.

The final chapter of the dissertation looks at the concept of difference and interdisciplinary scholarship in Women's and Gender Studies and South Asian Studies. The problems of both disciplines are placed in conversation with one another to better situate this dissertation. In three sections, I will describe the difficulties of studying caste, class, gender, race and religion within the Western academy by specifically examining both bodies of knowledges on differences, and the bodies of scholars who conduct such scholarship.

In the first section, I tackle the impossibility of studying difference in Women's and Gender Studies. I explain how Women's and Gender Studies began as a political project set out to change the misogyny embedded in the Western academy. However, the way in which differences between women (and between men and women) are introduced in dialectic fashion often assumes the centrality of the Western knowledge production in feminist thought. Critiques of this assumption, primarily brought by scholars of color, have led to the "difference revolution" in Women's and Gender Studies today which seemingly places differences at the center of analysis. However, I argue that differences often are treated as a vector of analysis—simplifying the multiple and varied experiences between peoples that shape political struggles and the ability to network beyond caste,

⁵⁴⁵ Spivak, 150.

class, race, gender, sexual, religious and even national boundaries. This has led to both bodies of color and bodies of knowledges on bodies of color to continue to have a tenuous relationship in Western feminist epistemology.

In the second section, I examine the impossibility of studying differences within South Asian Studies. I first trace how Area Studies programs, including the discipline of South Asian Studies, were created as a post WWII/Cold War policy to strategically “know” the non-West. Like Women’s and Gender Studies, South Asian Studies is plagued by its politicized foundations. Who studies the non-West and subjective interests in certain religions, regions, and texts over others shaped disciplinary trajectories. Additionally, the arrival of South Asian scholars to US academic institutions in recent years was simultaneous to academia’s commitment to diversity initiatives. This reality, I argue, has engendered correlations between “authentic bodies” and “authentic knowledge” from and about South Asia.

In the last section, I examine South Asian feminism and the bounded nature of studying a conglomeration of nation-states that is South Asia. South Asian feminists particularly examine the experiences of women within a religious community and/or how the state approaches women as an interest group through their religion. Because South Asian studies examines a specific geographic locale (and the diaspora from the locale), differences are discussed primarily through an examination and critique of the nation-state. In India, since personal laws are determined by religion and religious communalism continues to play an important role in politics, religion often times becomes the primary difference that is examined. Therefore, the secular nation-state and religion becomes especially important for feminist analyses. I contend that the

foregrounding of the nation-state hinders scholarship on differences, but at the same time makes feminist scholarship on differences from South Asian studies much less tenuous than feminist scholarship on differences from the West proper.

In this final chapter of the dissertation, I discuss the interdisciplinary framing of my dissertation and the literature that has influenced my work engendering a much needed dialogue between the fields of Women's and Gender Studies and South Asian Studies.

The Impossibility of Studying Difference in Women's and Gender Studies

Arguably, the primary principle that guided the institutionalization of Women's and Gender Studies (WGS) in the Western academy was to transform sexist academic research, canons and teaching embedded into the academy itself. The institutionalization of the discipline has indeed had an enormous impact the academy. The traditional disciplines in the Humanities and Social Sciences have in many ways taken on feminist analyses because of the institutionalization of feminist knowledge production. This is reflected in the plethora of disciplinary journals devoted to feminist scholarship—from *Feminist Studies in Religion* to *Gender and History*.⁵⁴⁶

Yet the academy itself is limited by its structure. This structure favors disciplinary knowledges and recognizes boundaries between disciplines. As a symptom of this, many WGS faculty members are not fully housed in Women's Studies Departments, but hold their tenure homes in the traditional disciplines. The process of transforming the academy through the politicized founding of WGS was not complete,

⁵⁴⁶ Other examples of disciplinary feminist journals include: Anthropology: *Voices*. Economics: *Feminist Economics*, Education: *Gender and Education*, English: *Women's Writing*, Political Science: *Women & Politics*, Psychology: *Feminism & Psychology*, Sociology: *Gender and Society*

instantaneous or even across the disciplines. It happened slowly discipline by discipline, sometimes having little impact on a discipline whatsoever. As faculty members come from their tenure homes to WGS with varying commitments to “feminist knowledge production,” this is bound to fracture the field:

When disciplinarity is the only institutional framework, even one that affirms creative borrowing, progress is made one discipline at a time; and uncertainties, unevenness, and time lags are inevitable. Thus the field of women's studies grows increasingly fragmented.⁵⁴⁷

At the same time, WGS’ politicized foundings continue to give it a certain type of marginality and distance from the traditional disciplines. The interdiscipline of WGS not only critiqued the misogyny inherent in the disciplinary based academy, but also the racism, homophobia, classism and other forms of oppression. Therefore, WGS continues to be a discipline that actively engages critical race theory, queer theory, poststructural theory and transnational feminist theory in a way that the traditional disciplines may not. This politicized nature of the discipline holds its transformative potential and its continued need in the academy.

WGS embraced (for the most part) poststructural theory which aided in the study of differences by making difference rather than sameness key to a radicalized way of thinking about identity. However, experiences of difference became valorized and idealized.⁵⁴⁸ In many ways, such valorizations have let “differences” become the core of feminist knowledge production. The fracturing of the field is sometimes attributed to the difference revolution in WGS. This can be seen through certain genealogies of feminist

⁵⁴⁷ Allen, Judith A and Sally Kitch. “Disciplined by Disciplines? The Need for an Interdisciplinary Research Mission in Women's Studies. *Feminist Studies. Special Issue: Disciplining Feminism? The Future of Women's Studies.* 24, No. 2. (Summer, 1998): 286.

⁵⁴⁸ Chow, Rey. *The Protestant Ethnic and the Spirit of Capitalism.* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2002), 134

thought in the Western academy. For example, working from feminist literary studies, Susan Gubar posits this history of academic feminism as such: 1) critique: undercutting the universality of male-devised scripts in knowledge production 2) recovery of the female literary traditions 3) the engendering of differences: bringing gender to bear on sexual, racial economic and regional differences.⁵⁴⁹ Parts one and two of this timeline assume homogeneity of feminist critique while part three reflects the fracturing of the field. Further, while parts one and two have tangible results, part three seems to leave feminist thought in limbo. If the fracturing and stagnation of the field is caused by the engendering of differences in feminist thought, then by relation, the transformative portion of the timeline is cast as white and Western. When the academy was not completely transformed by the institutionalization of WGS, but disproportionately and unevenly transformed discipline by discipline, the “engendering of differences” in this timeline often acts as the scapegoat for the stagnation of feminism. That is, the difference revolution in this timeline has kept feminism proper from achieving its political goal and has fractured the unified essence of WGS foundations. It can therefore be located as the problem within feminism.

Rey Chow responds to Gubar’s article in a chapter entitled “When Whiteness Feminizes” in *The Protestant Ethnic and the Spirit of Capitalism*. For Chow, Gubar’s narrative reveals Western white feminists’ reluctance to dislodge white women from their preferred status as representatives of alterity.⁵⁵⁰ Also responding to Gubar, Robyn Wiegman explains that academic feminism has been disciplined by the nationalist rubrics that identify Western European, British and US culture as the center and substance of

⁵⁴⁹Gubar, Susan. “What Ails Feminist Criticism?” *Critical Inquiry*. 24. No 4. (Jan 1, 1998): 882-884.

⁵⁵⁰ Chow, 179.

inquiry. Wiegman points out that because of these nationalist rubrics, Gubar's analysis wrongly assumes that White Women (academics) are the Feminists of Colors' critical destination.⁵⁵¹ Indeed, these sorts of timeline privilege Western thought as a benevolent entity that allows the space for differences to enter into feminist knowledge production—unaided by antiracist and anticolonial struggles. As Ella Shohat explains,

...monocultural feminism simply traces its formation back to a Western modernity pictured as devoid of all dialogue with ambient antiracist and anticolonial struggles. This narrative also simplistically suggests that postmodernism—seen alone and unaided by any critical thought “outside” of the imaginary space of the West—has opened up a space for diverse others. The implied openness of this narrative, paradoxically, reveals its own closedness. While it is a common wisdom in feminist studies to euphorically link modernity to the rise of feminism, it can be argued that the crisis of modernity in the wake of anticolonial and antiracist interrogation has also helped to shape a different conception of feminism itself, one that has begun to free itself from the white man's and the white women's burden of Enlightenment and its concomitant narrative of progress.⁵⁵²

This Western bias of WGS continues to pervade feminist research. As Kaplan and Grewal argue in “Transnational Practices and International Feminist Scholarship,” terms like “global” have come to mean “common difference.” Therefore, despite racial and national differences “global women” remains a reified category in Western academic feminism.⁵⁵³ In essence, timelines of feminist knowledge production that ends with the difference revolution attempt to periodize racism, which “is so problematic because

⁵⁵¹ Wiegman, Robyn. “What Ails Feminist Criticism: A Second Opinion.” *Critical Inquiry*. 25. No 2. (Jan 1, 1999): 375.

⁵⁵² Shohat, 72.

⁵⁵³ Kaplan, Caren and Inderpal Grewal. “Transnational Practices and Interdisciplinary Feminist Scholarship: Refiguring Women's and Gender Studies.” in *Women's Studies on Its Own*. Robyn Wiegman, ed. (Durham: Duke University Press, 2002), 71.

racisms are not, and never have been, about race alone. Racisms are never pure and unencumbered; they are, and remain, overdetermined.”⁵⁵⁴

This places bodies of color in the academy in quite a precarious position. As Rachel Lee explains, women of color “remain eminently useful to the progress narrative Women Studies wishes to create for itself.”⁵⁵⁵ With the difference revolution, syllabi construction for WGS courses changed to include a “race” week and entire courses were added to WGS curriculum requirements called “Women of Color,” “African American Women,” or “Muslim Women.” These courses are designed to destabilize whiteness, white students and indeed white instructors. As such, faculty of color are desired to teach difference courses within WGS departments. Rachel Lee calls this the “racial alibi” of WGS where there are “underscrutinized investments in colored bodies rather than in bodies of knowledge.”⁵⁵⁶ This underscrutinized investment in colored bodies reflects the very limits of the interdisciplinary space. When bodies stand in for difference, actually studying the complex histories between peoples can be forgone. As a symptom of this, White feminists need not study the non-west because of the sheer vastness of differences asking “how much can feminism really take on?” For non-Western feminists, the reality of academic knowledge production is very different. As Rey Chow explains, “Such an alibi is simply not acceptable or thinkable for those specializing in non-Western cultures. They, by contrast, must know quite a bit more than their own specialties—in the form of languages, histories and texts—in order to pass as credible

⁵⁵⁴ Stoler, Ann Laura. *Race and the Education of Desire: Foucault's History of Sexuality and the Colonial Order of Things*. (Durham: Duke University Press, 1995), 204.

⁵⁵⁵ Lee, Rachel. “Notes from the (Non) Field: Teaching and Theorizing Women of Color.” in *Women's Studies on Its Own*. Robyn Wiegman, ed. (Durham: Duke University Press, 2002), 89.

⁵⁵⁶ Lee, 83.

academic professionals”⁵⁵⁷ Scholars of color studying people of color are expected to “know” both the non-West and respond to Western feminist theory by asking “why can’t feminism take on more?”

As Wendy Brown argues, this alibi taken by white Western feminists robs Women’s Studies of much needed critique and growth through critical race theories. Brown blames academic feminism itself and claims that these difficulties in approaching difference have led to the “impossibility of Women’s Studies.” As she explains,

Theory that destabilizes the category of women, racial formations that disrupt the unity or primacy of the category, and sexualities that similarly blur the solidarity of the category—each of these must be resisted, restricted, or worse, colonized, to preserve the realm. Each, therefore, is compelled to go elsewhere, while women’s studies consolidates itself in the remains, impoverished by the lack of challenges from within, bewildered by its new ghettoization in the academy—this time by feminists themselves.⁵⁵⁸

This “impoverished” state is exemplified through the way in which critiques of how differences are approach stand in for difference itself. For example, Mohanty’s “Under Western Eyes” written in 1986 as a critique of Western feminist scholarship on the Third World women, has been translated into many different languages, widely cited, and used in many WGS syllabi. In this article, Mohanty argued for particularized analyses of Third World women with attentiveness to global economic and political processes. Yet her article often stands in for a marker of difference. As Mohanty laments,

I did not write “Under Western Eyes” as a testament to the impossibility of egalitarian and noncolonizing cross-cultural scholarship, nor did I define “Western” and “Third World” feminism in such oppositional ways that there would be no possibility of solidarity between Western and Third World feminists. Yet, this is often how the essay has been read and

⁵⁵⁷ Chow, 13.

⁵⁵⁸ Brown, Wendy. “The Impossibility of Women’s Studies.” *Differences*. 9.no 3 (1997): 83.

utilized...I am misread when I am interpreted as being against all forms of generalization and as arguing for difference over commonalities.⁵⁵⁹

These misreadings make it very difficult to go beyond critique and the inability to go beyond critique stagnates the discipline. As a result, the discipline becomes conservative. Misreadings of critiques of difference are defended, and the boundaries of the discipline are policed.

While Brown's attack on Women's Studies discusses the ghettoization of theory, it also points to the ghettoization of raced bodies within Women's Studies. Because of the realities of who teaches "difference" classes, this racializing of academic thought doubly displaces scholars of color within the discipline. As Rey Chow explains, studies on differences become a ghetto evacuated by white scholars. And when/if that happens, it could be delegitimized as a viable field of study. Further, the blame for WGS's loss of credibility could be located to people of color and their "acrimonious" identity politics.⁵⁶⁰ Founded as a political movement where structures of domination are supposedly critiqued and questioned, misappropriation of critique, bodies standing in for difference, and the privileging of Western feminists/Western feminist thought negates the transformative promise of the discipline.

The Impossibility of Difference in South Asian Studies

Area Studies, including Asian and South Asian Studies, was formed as a response to post WWII/cold war politics to "know" the enemy—the non-West. China and Russia and also the decolonized nations of Africa and Asia became regional sites of concern to

⁵⁵⁹ Mohanty. Chandra Talpade. "Under Western Eyes Revisited." *Signs: Journal of Women in Culture and Society*. 28 no. 2. 2002: 502-504.

⁵⁶⁰ Chow, 16-7.

the US. As the United States became a world superpower, the area studies grew exponentially and were supported because it aided in strengthening the U.S.'s military prowess and U.S. imperialism. Area Studies became "the peacetime information-retrieval machinery that complements the United State's self-aggrandizing foreign policy."⁵⁶¹ This specified scholarship on the non-West was a continuation of European imperialist and orientalist knowledge production.

Area Studies began with seemingly objective and infallible knowledge on non-Western cultures, peoples, traditions and histories and was characterized by:

- 1) Intensive language study
- 2) Field research in local language
- 3) Local histories, viewpoints, materials
- 4) Theory against detailed observation
- 5) Multidisciplinary⁵⁶²

Sometimes, the field had full disciplinary status. Other times, Area Studies thrived in centers which offered courses without degrees in conjunction with academic events.

Area Studies is divided into a conglomeration of nation-states from specific regions such as East Asian studies, Latin American/Caribbean Studies, South East Asian Studies and South Asian Studies. South Asian studies include the nations of India, Pakistan, Bangladesh, Bhutan, Nepal, Maldives, Sri Lanka and sometimes Afghanistan.

Area studies disciplines sported specialists in history, language, anthropology, economics, sociology, etc. But often times, these specialists don't speak to each other or necessarily cohere with one another despite being housed in the same departments. As a result,

⁵⁶¹ Chow, Rey. *The Age of the World Target: Self-Referentiality in War, Theory, and Comparative Work*. (Durham: Duke University Press, 2006), 14.

⁵⁶² Szanton, David. "Introduction: The Origin, Nature, and Challenges of Area Studies in the United States." in *The Politics of Knowledge: Area Studies and the Disciplines*. David Szanton, ed. (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2004), 4.

A commitment to this form of organization mean that area studies, despite its claims to be multidisciplinary, actually ended up supporting the retention of disciplinary boundaries, as it still does in the major area studies centers.⁵⁶³

Area Studies disciplines play to the dominant framework of the university system which favors disciplinary boundaries.

Additionally, scholars' subjective interests in the regions of study shapes the trajectory of Area Studies disciplines' knowledge production. Nicholas Dirks's article, "South Asian Studies: Futures Past" documents the history of the discipline and the way in which early Western scholars interests continue to shape the field today. As Dirks reveals, South Asian Studies began in the 1930s with Dr. W. Norman Brown at the University of Pennsylvania. Brown was a Sanskritist and, like other scholars in the U.S. studying India, he focused on Hinduism. Brown's work in establishing South Asian Studies in the U.S. academy and in supporting the American Institute of Indian Studies had a profound effect on the discipline:

Given his founding role in South Asian studies, as well as his own popular writings about South Asia, these views both established their authority on the weight of colonialist and Indological knowledge and worked to further establish, within the context of postwar/cold-war American liberalism, a whole set of fundamental "truths" about the essential nature of religious identity and ontology in the Indian subcontinent.⁵⁶⁴

Studies on politics or economics in the region relied on assumptions about the region gleaned from classical texts.⁵⁶⁵ The "Brahminization" of knowledge tended to ignore lower castes and other religions. Additionally, studies that relied on classical texts

⁵⁶³ Harootunian, H.D. and Masao Miyoshi. "Introduction: The "Afterlife" of Area Studies." in *Learning Places: The Afterlives of Area Studies*. Miyoshi, Masao and H.D. Harootunian, eds. (Durham: Duke University Press, 2002), 7.

⁵⁶⁴ Dirks, Nicholas. "South Asian Studies: Futures Past" in *The Politics of Knowledge: Area Studies and the Disciplines*. David Szanton, ed.

⁵⁶⁵ Dirks, 351-2

seemed to operate as unmediated by colonialism.⁵⁶⁶ Especially in light of the communal based violence of the Partition, such a focus on religion unmediated by the political is at odds with everyday life and politics in India. As Dirks argues, the study of religion is often politicized in South Asia and the Sanskritist/religious base of South Asian studies in isolation of politicized religion has “all too often exacerbated basic problems of knowledge.”⁵⁶⁷

Language instruction also presents a difficult problem within South Asian Studies. Language in particular is used as a tool to understand the non-West. Yet quite often, teachers of languages were regarded as least academic in institutions.⁵⁶⁸ Many language instructors operate as lecturers or non-tenure track hires in the academy. This is problematic because of who teaches languages. Early South Asian studies hires were not of South Asian descent. The exception to this rule was language instructors. As language instructors were considered lesser academics in relation to their white Western department peers, the race of language instructors became a factor in the hierarchy of South Asian Studies knowledge production. This division haunts contemporary South Asian studies disciplines.

South Asian Studies in the U.S. has been vastly changed by the increasing numbers of scholars from non-West. This change coincides with the 1965 immigration act, when non-Western academics were allowed to migrate to the US and be employed by the US academy. Today, area studies courses are increasingly taught in the U.S. by scholars of color. U.S. knowledge on South Asia now seems to be authenticated by

⁵⁶⁶ Natarajan, Nalini. “South Asian Area Studies in Transatlantic Dialogue.” *Comparative Studies of South Asia, Africa and the Middle East*. (27. No 3. 2007): 593.

⁵⁶⁷ Dirks, 361.

⁵⁶⁸ Chow *Age of the World Target*, 15.

South Asian bodies. As the beginnings of the discipline privileged U.S. interests in the region, white bodies and disciplinary knowledge over language study, these South Asian bodies teaching and researching in the U.S. are held in suspicion by “native intellectuals,” or South Asian scholars based in South Asia. The privileging of Western theory and bodies that act as tokens of South Asian-ness engenders suspicion over “authentic knowledge” from and about the region. As a result of this suspicion, theories of difference in the field of South Asian studies begins to revolve around the race and commitments of U.S. based South Asian academics as opposed to the complex histories between peoples in South Asia and the diaspora. As Harootunian and Miyoshi explain, “Too often the enunciation of cultural difference, as we see in current post colonial studies, slides sadly into claims of authenticity that often mimic the privilege area studies accorded to native knowledge.”⁵⁶⁹

Gayatri Chakrovarty Spivak’s work is especially important here. In an interview with three South Asian feminists at Jawaharlal Nehru University in Delhi, Spivak is questioned about her status as a Non-Resident Indian (NRI) intellectual, her use of First World theory and teaching in the US. Describing her status as an NRI as “politically contaminated” and setting up a categorical difference between First World and indigenous theory, the interviewers question Spivak’s scholarship vis a vis her own position. In response, Spivak says,

I cannot understand what indigenous theory there might be that can ignore the reality of nineteenth-century history...To construct indigenous theories one must ignore the last few centuries of historical involvement. I would rather use what history has written for me. I am not interested in

⁵⁶⁹ Harootunian, H.D. and Masao Miyoshi. 13.

defending the post-colonial intellectual's dependence on Western models: my work lies in making clear my disciplinary predicament.⁵⁷⁰

For Spivak, the difference between First World intellectuals, NRIs and Native intellectuals masks an even more important discussion on the difference between South Asian subalterns and their researchers. Spivak tells the interviewers that she and they have not learnt how to make themselves acceptable to oppressed women—the tribal subaltern, the urban sub-proletariat, the unorganized peasant—other than as a concerned benevolent person free to come and go.⁵⁷¹ For Spivak, this difference is much more difficult than the NRI/Native intellectual difference—a difference identified not by Spivak, but by her “native intellectual” interviewers.

Spivak's work is part of the Subaltern School of thought. The school revolutionized the way in which differences were approached in South Asia by researching “history from below” and attempting to add the complex histories between peoples into how differences are approached in South Asian Studies.

The Subaltern School

Edward Said's *Orientalism* was a pivotal text to the discipline of South Asian studies. Said's work examined how images of the non-West's difference from Europe—from monstrosity and barbarism to degeneration—fueled the justification for colonialism as an act of European benevolence. Orientalism allowed for European domination over the non-West through an “us” and “them” discourse that did not provide any space for voices from the Orient. Said also critiqued contemporary scholarly approaches to the

⁵⁷⁰ Spivak, Gayatri Chakravorty. “The Post-Colonial Critic” in *The Post-Colonial Critic: Interviews, Strategies, Dialogues*. Sarah Harasym, ed. (New York: Routledge, 1990), 69.

⁵⁷¹ Spivak, 68.

Orient and located these approaches in the history of colonialism. Said's work, in part, influenced the Subaltern School in the 1980s.

The Subaltern School attempted to re-route scholarship on South Asia in light of Said's *Orientalism* by studying "history from below." The school wanted to combat the elitism of bourgeois, upper-caste writing of Indian history and reveal the contestations, resistances and contributions of the lower-castes, Dalits, refugees, oppressed classes and tribals to Indian history. Previously ignored historical evidence needed to be uncovered and interrogated. The mode of inquiry quickly pervaded other Area Studies as "it has provided a framework within which to contest the dominant modes of knowledge."⁵⁷² Publishing essays in numerous edited volumes entitled, *Subaltern Studies*, authors such as Ranajit Guha, Gyan Pandey, Dipesh Chakrabarty, Shahid Amin, Partha Chatterjee, and Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, had a profound impact on the way in which the academy approached scholarship on the non-West and differences.

Yet despite the promise of the Subaltern School's approach to differences, scholarship from below remains regionally specific. Subaltern School authors, while invoking "South Asia," really focused on Indian history. More specifically, the authors focused on British colonial history and nationalist Bengal. This regional/temporal specificity cannot always be extrapolated to "Indian" or "South Asian" history. For example, Partha Chatterjee's often quoted essay, "The Nationalist Resolution of the Women Question" is actually quite regionally specific. The essay traces how state interest in uplifting the status of women disappeared during Indian nationalism.

⁵⁷² Lal, Vinay. "Subalterns, Rebels and Outcastes." <http://www.sscnet.ucla.edu/history/lal/subalter.html> (accessed July 6, 2010).

Chatterjee argues that in the formation of Indian nationalism, “women” were subsumed into a symbol of spirituality and used to create an impenetrable identity of Indianness.⁵⁷³

However, as J. Devika argues, Chatterjee's "women question" relies on an understanding of Bengali Indian nationalism and that his history of the image of “woman” for the nationalist movement does not apply to Kerala. During Indian nationalism, calls for the uplifting of women within Kerala communities did not disappear, but rather prospered. The state was often sought out to help transform the home and the family. For example, the matrilineal system of inheritance, dissolution of joint-family structures and primacy of the nuclear family was helped along by the state’s enactment of the 1925 *Nayar Act*, 1933 *Namboodiri Act*, and a slew of court cases that helped define female family members’ roles in the inheritance. State involvement in the transformation of the “inner domain” was the heart of caste and gender reforms and provoked a self-evaluation of caste and religious practices rather than an East/West comparison.⁵⁷⁴

Further, the Subaltern School and its impact on the academic left has made for a distinct view of religions and religiosity in South. This view is largely uncritical of minority religions. In line with the secular nation-state’s attempts to preserve minority culture, the academic left influenced by the Subaltern School assumes that minority in numbers translates to subordinate in political power. Thus, minority religions are often fetishized. Ajantha Subramaniam explains this tendency more fully in her book, *Shorelines: Space and Rights in South India*. Subramaniam argues that the subaltern studies project represents the exteriority of the subaltern through the structural logic of

⁵⁷³ Chatterjee, Partha. “The Nationalist Resolution of the Women’s Question.” in *Recasting Women: Essays in Indian Colonial History*. eds. Kumkum Sangari and Sudesh Vaid. (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 1990), 239.

⁵⁷⁴ Devika, J. “Negotiating Women’s Social Space: Public Debates on Gender in Early Modern Kerala, India” *Inter-Asia Cultural Studies*. 7, no. 1 (2006): 46.

religion. “What comes across most clearly within this framework is the need to delineate the world of subaltern enchantment from the mundane sphere of secular matters. We can see here the scholarly fetishizing of religiosity and its treatment as the autonomous domain of subaltern life.”⁵⁷⁵ Subramaniam’s own study on Mukkuvar Latin Christians reveals that there is no such distinction between the religious and secular.

Despite this, minority religions continue to be fetishized in scholarship on the subaltern. For example, Ashis Nandy’s article on the city of Cochin delves into the history of Jewish groups in Kerala as almost proof of the cities inherent cultural pluralism. Nandy’s uncritical eye towards minority religions in the region leads him to assert:

Despite the entry of modern categories and attempts to delegitimize older categories like caste, most Cochinis with whom we talked continue to see generic terms such as Hindus, Muslims, and Christians as representing confederations of live, identifiable communities. Even many who claim to have risen above the traditional divisions of castes and sects slip into the use of these divisions when off-guard. As a result, there is no minority complex in the majority community, as one finds in large parts of North India. The Hindus are a majority and the Muslims and Christians are minorities only theoretically.

Chapters 4 and 5 of this dissertation actually reveals a real “minority complex” within the majority populations of Kerala—especially when the Syrian Christians are revealed to have more in common with majority populations and are not in need of minority protections. Further, Syrian Christians in the state have defined minorities in the entire nation state making their minority status not merely a “theoretical minority.” Rather, in defining “minority,” the Syrian Christians are the literal embodiments of “minority.” Nandy’s uncritical view of minority religions in Kerala further homogenizes groups of people under their minority identities. Therefore, contemporary South Asian studies

⁵⁷⁵ Subramaniam, Ajantha. *Shorelines: Space and Rights in South India*. (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2009), 24.

scholarship on difference, although changed by the Subaltern School, continues to define “subaltern” based on regional specificities and on particular views of religious minorities which impedes actual analysis of researching “history from below.”

Feminism, Differences and the Indian Nation-State

Area Studies scholarship is bound by the concept of the nation-state which shapes the way in which knowledge is produced. The Indian nation-state approaches the concept of difference in a very specific way—namely, by making religious difference the primary difference between Indian peoples. This is especially because of the codification of religious texts in the development of personal laws. In India, a unified civil code for all Indian citizens does not exist. Personal laws (also known as family laws) including laws on marriage, divorce and inheritance are determined by religion. During British colonization, the Indian population was painted as ignorant of their religious tradition. In the case of Hinduism, knowledge was believed to be held in monopoly by Brahmin pundits who were seen as corrupt and self serving. Thus, British codification of religious personal laws was seen as a way to uncover the “truth” about religious practices. Colonial officials largely ignored actual religious practices, regional variations and certain interpretations in favor of unambiguous textual evidence to codify religious practices into personal laws.⁵⁷⁶ The heterogeneity of religions was therefore reduced. Further, the codification of religious personal laws in part justified colonization. British colonization could be painted as innocent—as not interfering with the family, traditions and home life of Indian natives. A separation was made between the public and private.

⁵⁷⁶ Mani, Lata. “Contentious Traditions: The Debate on Sati in Colonial India.” in *Recasting Women: Essays in Indian Colonial History*. eds. Kumkum Sangari and Sudesh Vaid. (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 1990): 96.

This binary relation wed together secularism, modernity, British colonization and the public on the one side, and tradition, religion, Natives and the private on the other.⁵⁷⁷

The impetus for the codification of Indian religions into personal laws often revolved around the status of Indian women. However, these debates were not necessarily about women, but about establishing authentic culture and tradition through a symbolic role of womanhood. “Women” became the grounds for the construction of Indian tradition defined through religion during British colonization.⁵⁷⁸ Codification of religious texts during British colonization therefore established a particular family structure that was both patriarchal and patrilineal and lauded women’s roles as wives and mothers. “The state” becomes of interest to Indian feminists because the codification of religious texts into personal laws “drew the family and significant areas of gender relations under the jurisdiction of the state.”⁵⁷⁹

In the aftermath of the communal violence of Partition, India retained these religious based personal laws. India’s brand of secularism ensured that religious divides were kept intact through special protections for religious minorities. It also ensured that any sort of move toward a unified civil code stood against “religious tradition.”

Therefore, in the name of minority rights, personal laws based on religion are often defended by both secularists and by leaders of religious communities. In retaining personal laws based on religion, the Indian nation-state also kept the divide between the

⁵⁷⁷ Many feminists have argued that public is enabled by private and there are blurred boundaries between the public and private. Marxist feminism in particular argue that it is only production in the private (by women) that allows for public production (by men). The boundary between the secular public and religious private was, therefore, not concrete but blurred time and time again with the colonial state’s involvement in “private” matters.

⁵⁷⁸ Mani, 118.

⁵⁷⁹ Chhachhi, Amrita. “Identity Politics, Secularism and Women: A South Asian Perspective.” in *Forging Identities: Gender, Communities and the State in India*. Zoya Hasan, ed. (New Delhi: Kali for Women, 1994), 82.

public and private alive. Indian feminists therefore have to contend with assumptions of tradition, the home and the ways in which the state can/cannot intervene into the private sphere on women's behalf.

Nivedita Menon explains that feminists confront the private in two ways; either by fighting for the rights to privacy or by arguing that the personal is political and the law should intervene on behalf of women. The first justifies, for example, the feminist arguments for a women's right to choose. The second, for example, justifies state intervention into the aborting of female fetuses. For the most part, Indian feminists take that second stance in an effort to bring about changes from the top down.⁵⁸⁰ As personal laws and "religion as faith" dictates women's everyday experiences, Indian feminists often critique state actions and/or call upon the state to intervene on behalf of women. Feminist scholarly research on differences in South Asia therefore often begins with detailed analysis both the state and religion.

For example, Shahnaz Rouse's work, *Shifting Body Politics*, explains that for women to claim citizenship, they must conform to religious cultural, social and sexual norms. Researching the role of the Pakistani state in women's lives, Rouse reveals the "clear homogenizing effect which produced national identity through a privileging of women's distinctness from men, of Muslims from "others." ⁵⁸¹ Yet at the same time, the state also differentiates among women. In what she dubs the "gendering of citizenship," Rajeswari Sunder Rajan discusses how the state constructs "women" primarily in their difference from men by formulating laws and policies specific to women. But also, the

⁵⁸⁰ Menon, Nivedita. *Recovering Subversion: Feminist Politics Beyond the Law*. (Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 2004), 208.

⁵⁸¹ Rouse, Shanaz. *Shifting Body Politics: Gender, Nation, State In Pakistan*. (New Delhi: Women Unlimited, 2004), 99.

state differentiates *among* women—between religious identities, housewives and prostitutes, ordinary and transgressive, and working and non-working women.⁵⁸²

“Women,” therefore, are understood simultaneously as a unified group and as differentiated by the state. This can be seen in the ways in which “Christian women” were homogenized during the *Vimochana Samaram* yet at the same time, Syrian Christian women as “dominant women” became the reference point for “other” women—casted, raced, and classed.

Religious conflicts in the nation-state and the effects of violence on women have made feminists further critique religion, the state and “women,” asking questions such as “What are the conditions under which women begin to define themselves primarily on the basis of a religious identity? Why have communal organizations succeeded in mobilizing women? Do communal and fundamentalist organizations create a sense of crisis to mobilize women around loyalty to the community and religious symbols?” and “what is the significance of minority identity for other social solidarities and the possibility of mobilizing women on gender issues?”⁵⁸³ Pivotal edited volumes such as *Forging Identities: Gender, Communities and the State in India*, and *Embodied Violence: Communalising Women’s Sexuality in South Asia* offer feminist insights on how communal violence reconfigures women’s experiences, facilitates the formation of particular identities and dissemination of specific ideologies and how communal violence positions women vis a vis their religious communities as well as the State.⁵⁸⁴

⁵⁸² Rajan, Rajeswari Sunder. *The Scandal of the State: Women, Law and Citizenship in Postcolonial India*. (Ranikhet: Permanent Black Press, 2003), 2.

⁵⁸³ Hasan, Zoya. “Introduction: Contextualising Gender and Identity in Contemporary India.” in *Forging Identities: Gender, Communities and the State in India*. (New Delhi: Kali For Women, 1994), viii.

⁵⁸⁴ Jayawardena, Kumari and Malathi De Alwis. “Introduction: Communalising Women’s Sexuality in South Asia.” in *Embodied Violence: Communalising Women’s Sexuality in South Asia*. (New Delhi: Kali for Women, 1996), xv.

Many of these works that look to how gender, religion and the nation-state function use interdisciplinary methods. In their use of varied texts, they are truly innovative. For example, Ritu Menon and Kamla Bhasin's *Borders and Boundaries: Women in India's Partition* is a feminist historiography of the Partition. Menon and Bhasin stress the importance of literary, autobiographical and oral historical evidence or "fragments" of textual evidence in reconstructing a feminist history of the Partition. By placing social history next to political history on the Partition, Menon and Bhasin try to reconstruct history from below.⁵⁸⁵ After conducting oral histories, the researchers:

went back to the records to find what we could of the women's stories there, as disaggregated data, memoranda, reports, official statements, government documents. We did this not because we wanted to corroborate what they said, but because it was important to locate their stories in a political and social context, to juxtapose the official version with the unofficial ones.⁵⁸⁶

This interdisciplinary approach allows the feminist historiographers to uncover the different voices of the Partition.

South Asian feminists have also understood religion and the state to complicate notions of women's agency. In *Appropriating Gender: Women's Activism and Politicized Religion in South Asia*, Amrita Basu explains that scholars have tended to focus on public policy and legal processes rather than the actual lived experiences of women in South Asia. According to Basu, "reflecting colonial, Orientalist assumptions about the privileged place of religion and of women's piety, scholars ignored the ways in which states, parties, and women themselves strategically appropriated gender to achieve

⁵⁸⁵ Menon, Ritu and Kamla Bhasin. *Borders and Boundaries: Women in India's Partition*. (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 1998), 8.

⁵⁸⁶ Menon and Bhasin, 13-14.

social change.”⁵⁸⁷ The articles in the edited volume discuss diverse forms of women’s agency to investigate how women construct individual selves and collective identities within religiously divided India. In the wake of the communal violence surrounding the destruction of the Babri Masjid in 1992 and the later election of the Bharatiya Janata Party in India—a Hindu nationalist party—many feminists began to question the idea that women’s agency was always restricted by religion. Indeed, in South Asia women are not always victims of communal violence, but sometimes perpetrators in the name of protecting their religion and/or their roles within a religious community. Tanika Sarkar and Urvashi Butalia’s edited volume *Women in the Hindu Right* questioned Indian feminists’ reliance on particular readings of “women’s rights,” “agency” and “women’s movements.” Essays in the volume discussed how the Hindu right has been able to mobilize large numbers of women and provide a sense of community for many women by clearly defining their roles within the domestic sphere.

While these seminal texts explore women, religion and the state—especially by focusing on gender and communal conflict—religion is almost reified as the primary experience of difference in the nation-state. When feminists confront other difference such as caste, it seems separate from these nuanced interdisciplinary feminist critiques of religion and the state. This is largely because caste is sutured to the Hindu religion. While some feminist research on caste does note caste divisions in Muslim and Christian communities, scholarship on caste within Hindu communities dominates. Take for example Uma Chakravorty’s *Gendering Caste Through a Feminist Lens*. She states that while caste pervades Muslim and Christian communities, caste is “best understood by

⁵⁸⁷ Basu, Amrita. “Appropriating Gender” in *Appropriating Gender: Women’s Activism and Politicized Religion in South Asia*. Patricia Jeffery and Amerita Basu, eds. (New York: Routledge, 1998), 3.

looking at its origins and elaborations through time with Hindu society as its reference point.”⁵⁸⁸ Scholarship on the Hindu right’s anti-conversion efforts also touches on the nature of caste and religious differences. Yet in line with the academic left which tends to fetishize minority religions, Christianity can be fetishized in these studies as scholars critique the Hindu right and sympathize with the desire for Dalits and lower-caste Hindus to convert to Christianity.⁵⁸⁹

This is not to say that feminist research on caste is lacking in its analysis. Two particular works on gender and caste have been influential for my dissertation: *Gender and Caste* and *Gendering Caste through a Feminist Lens*. *Gender and Caste*, edited by Anupama Rao, traces how alliances between feminists and anti-caste activists in South Asia are only a recent phenomenon. Treated as separate social reform projects, caste and gender were studied in isolation from each other during British colonialism. This held over into Indian feminism which tended to represent the interests of the upper-castes and excluded Dalit and lower-caste feminists. The volume works against this history by highlighting Dalit women’s activism and the intersections between caste and gender. As Rao explains:

The demands by dalit and other lower-caste women are not merely for inclusion but for analysis of gender relations as they are inflected by the multiple and overlapping patriarchies of caste communities that produce forms of vulnerability that require analysis.⁵⁹⁰

The volume grows especially from post-Mandal commission recommendations and debates surrounding reservations for both women and for Backward Class and Other

⁵⁸⁸ Chakravarti, Uma. *Gendering Caste Through a Feminist Lens*. (Calcutta: Stree, 2006), 2.

⁵⁸⁹ See Viswanathan, Gauri. “Literacy and Conversion in the Discourse of Hindu Nationalism” and Sarkar, Sumit. “Christian Conversions, Hindutva and Secularism” in *The Crisis of Secularism in India*. Rajan, Rajeswari Sundar and A.D. Needham, eds. (Ranikhet: Permanent Black, 2007). pp. 333-368.

⁵⁹⁰ Rao, Anupama. “Introduction” in *Gender and Caste*. (New Delhi: Kali for Women, 2003), 5.

Backward Communities.⁵⁹¹ As such, like Indian feminist scholarship on religion and the state, *Gender and Caste* therefore understands the important role of the Indian nation-state in determining how differences are approached.

Gendering Caste Through a Feminist Lens discusses gender and caste through two concepts; the ritualization of female sexuality and Brahmanical patriarchy.

Chakravorty explains that endogamy ritualizes female sexuality. Since women are crucial in maintaining the boundaries between castes, patriarchal norms ensure that the caste system can be reproduced. Brahmanical codes for women differ according to the status of the caste group with the most stringent control over sexuality reserved as a privilege for the upper-castes. Brahmanical patriarchy incorporates both an ideology of chaste wives who are valorized and a structure of rules by which caste hierarchy and gender inequality are maintained through both the production of consent and the application of coercion.⁵⁹² Scholarship on the intersections of caste and gender discuss how the replication of the caste system depends on sexual economies that seem to operate as timeless and unchanging through endogamous marriages. Sexuality, class and the sexual division of labor, and differences between women based on patriarchal gender codes are all important avenues of analyses in such scholarship and are part of a growing body of literature on caste and gender in South Asia.

Feminist scholarship on differences specifically in the state of Kerala has also grown in the last decade. Many of these works focus on Kerala's gender paradox. As mentioned in chapter 2, Kerala has high conventional indicators of gender development in the state—low infant and maternal mortality rates, high female literacy rates, later

⁵⁹¹ The Mandal commission was a government decision to implement quotas for Other Backward Communities (OBCs) for public service positions. The decision was protested widely by upper-castes.

⁵⁹² Chakravarty, 34.

marriage ages, and access to education and health care. Yet Kerala women have a low workforce participation rates, Kerala has the highest rates of violence against women including domestic violence, rape and incest, and many women adhere to and internalize patriarchal gender, caste, and religious codes. Recent feminist analysis tried to historically situate Kerala's gender paradox by examining transitions in Kerala society. For example, G. Arunima's historical work, *There Comes Papa: Colonialism and the Transformation of Matriliny in Kerala, Malabar c. 1850-1940* analyzes the dissolution of the matrilineal system and the changing roles for *Nayar* women in Kerala. Arunima discusses how debates over female sexuality and fertility in this era provided leverage for the alteration of matrilineal rights. The change from matrilineal to patrilineal inheritance led to a decline in women's autonomy within the *tharavadus*—the large estates of the *Nayar* caste. Yet the abolition of the matrilineal system was supported by many *Nayar* women entering into nuclear (as opposed to joint) family arrangements. Arunima also discusses the emergence of a caste consciousness through low-caste tenant right movements. As Arunima argues, caste was used to foster internal reform as a transcendent social category. The era ushered in new understandings of communal belonging that continues to shape gender roles in contemporary Kerala society.⁵⁹³ J. Devika's *Engendering Individuals: The Language of Reforming in Early Twentieth Century Keralam* similarly explores the shifting nature of gender roles in the early 20th century. Devika argues that the era is marked by the engendering of the Individual. Examining women's magazines, modern domesticity, the normalization of the nuclear family, the breast cloth movement and the works of fiction author Lalithambika

⁵⁹³ Arunima. G. *There Comes Papa: Colonialism and the Transformation of Matriliny in Kerala, Malabar c. 1850-1940*. New Delhi: Orient Longman, 2003.

Antharjanam, Devika argues that “specific sexual endowments of bodies were treated, explicitly or implicitly, as an important factor that determined the capacities that could possibly be generated in the natural body and the kind of disciplinary regimen it could be subjected to.”⁵⁹⁴ For Devika, Individualization and gendering occur simultaneously, and contribute significantly to conceptions of the “modern woman” and to a changing Kerala society.⁵⁹⁵

The Enigma of Kerala Women: A Failed Promise of Literacy, edited by Swapna Mukhopadhyay, examines the impact of these historical changes in contemporary Kerala. The articles examine women’s internalization of a patriarchal order, the erosion of fallback options for women outside of marriage, the plight of widows in the state, women’s lack of financial autonomy, and restrictions on women’s mobility in the public sphere. Additionally, the use of “women” as an identifiable interest group by the state is questioned and critiqued in the volume. For example, S. Irudaya Rajan and Sreeupa’s article “Gender Disparity in Kerala” argues that while the marriage age in Kerala is higher than the all Indian average, the average age is vastly different depending on caste and religious affiliation. Similarly, Sharmila Sreekumar’s *Scripting Lives: Narratives of ‘Dominant Women’ in Kerala* successfully delves into the different and complex histories between women in Kerala. Sreekumar examines how dominant women use the “sheer weight of their stipulated ordinariness to malign, exclude, appropriate, school and inferiorise other women.”⁵⁹⁶ Using a variety of texts, Sreekumar argues that the image of the dominant woman is only possible if she distances herself from the working-class,

⁵⁹⁴ Devika, J. *Engendering Individuals: The Language of Re-Forming in Early Twentieth Century Keralam*. (Delhi: Orient Longman, 2007), 25

⁵⁹⁵ Devika, 9.

⁵⁹⁶ Sreekumar, Sharmila. *Scripting Lives: Narratives of ‘Dominant Women’ in Kerala*. (Hyderabad: Orient Blackswan, 2009), 21.

lower-caste woman, who are seen to consciously flirt with sexual violence, failure and victimization. For this reason, one image of “woman” becomes dominant while others fall into categories of “aberrant” and “failed” women.

Transnational work on the region has also led to amazing feminist analyses of differences. Kerala has a large population of Non-Resident Indians in all parts of the globe—almost four million have migrated outside the state. A massive survey of 10,000 Kerala households in 1998 was collected, analyzed and examined in *The Dynamics of Migration in Kerala: Dimensions, Differentials, and Consequences* by Kunniparampil Curien Zachariah, Elangikal Thomas Mathew and Sebastian Irudaya Rajan. While this work examines ethnic communities and their migration numbers, the social consequences of that migration is not discussed. Prema Kurien’s *Kaleidoscopic Ethnicity: International Migration and the Reconstruction of Community Identities in India* attends to this elision through a sociological examination of the migration patterns of Mappila Muslims, Ezhava Hindus and Syrian Christians. Kurien argues that responses to migration are fundamentally different due to ethnic groupings and perceived boundaries between ethnic communities. For instance, Kurien examines differences of “status spending.” While wealth obtained through migrant jobs is often given back to Muslim religious organizations within the Mappila community, Syrian Christian families tend to amass family wealth and spend their earnings in their country of employment. Kurien’s work examines the way in which such differences continue to shape boundaries between ethnic communities, family and gender dynamics within ethnic communities, and educational and occupational expectations of migrants both at home and abroad.⁵⁹⁷ Similarly, Sheeba

⁵⁹⁷ Kurien, Prema. *Kaleidoscopic Ethnicity: International Migration and the Reconstruction of Community Identities in India*. New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 2002.

George's ethnography critically examines gender and class in the diaspora. George's *When Women Come First: Gender and Class in Transnational Migration* looks at Syrian Christian female nurses and their migration to the United States. These nurses often migrated before their husbands and children. Discussing work, home, community and the interrelationships between these spheres, George argues that "economic gains in the work sphere do not automatically result in gains in other spheres for women."⁵⁹⁸ Her feminist ethnography on the transnational migration of Syrian Christian women nurses offers a nuanced look at issues of class, religious and gender differences in South Asia and the diaspora. These works on the diaspora are beginning to resituate South Asian Studies reliance on the nation-state. In its attention to class dynamics, they also offer an alternate view on other social categories including religion. The recent work on Kerala and the diaspora have therefore provided new and exciting feminist analysis on differences and complex histories between peoples.

Concluding Remarks

Researching the lived experiences of differences among peoples reveals the complex histories among them. This can help to understand feminist organizing and networking in South Asia and beyond nation-state borders. It can also combat the sexist and racist knowledge production embedded in the academy. In this chapter, I have discussed both the promises of and problems with two interdisciplinary approaches to studies on difference: Women's and Gender Studies and South Asian Studies. Is it possible to have a form of analysis that examines differences without falling into the traps

⁵⁹⁸ George, Sheeba. *When Women Come First: Gender and Class in Transnational Migration*. (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2005), 4.

of racism and/or the primacy of religion in the nation-state? Is it possible to imagine, in the words of Shohat, “a multichronotopic form of analysis, particularly in terms of the ways geographies are imagined and knowledge is mapped within academic institutional practices?”⁵⁹⁹ In this dissertation, I have attempted to provide such a multichronotopic analysis of differences among peoples by especially examining simultaneous oppressions and subordinations based on race-, caste-, class-, gender- and religious groupings. My work draws from both Women’s and Gender Studies and South Asian Studies. I have used these inter-disciplines’ approaches to difference to argue that the powers that produce subjects do not only oppress, but are different in kind and may work to augment existing power structures. For example in chapter 3 I have made the argument that the change from religious-, caste-, and race- based women’s dress to the secular *sari* only masked the hegemonic structures and hierarchal systems of the past. Notions of the pureness of caste and race through the shade of cloth only morphed with the *sari*. To this day, upper-caste and Aryan privilege continues to be defended and to determine moral behavior by caste and racial affiliation. Using visual cultural analysis on dress, oral histories and an analysis of secularism in India, I have explained how the *sari* will continue to act as professional and respectable wear for women exactly because these privileges can operate as invisible through the *sari*’s very folds.

Using another method, historiography, I have re-examined the category of race in South Asia as a very real identity subject to social forces and acting as a way in which to understand and comprehend plural identities and group boundaries today. The terms “Aryan” and “Dravidian” are racial categories informed by a history of colonialism and mutated over the centuries by notions of religious origin and accepted communal

⁵⁹⁹ Shohat, 67.

histories. In chapter 4, I have traced the belief that Syrian Christians are upper-caste Hindu Brahmins converted by St. Thomas the Apostle in 52 AD, and thus a separate caste from Christians converted by Western missionaries. In turn, the Brahmins of Kerala, India are thought to be from the Aryan race that migrated from the north and imposed the caste system upon the Dravidian raced natives of South India. The split between Dravidian and Aryan races is thus simultaneously a caste and religious division. Complicating this is the way in which caste, race and religious divisions are maintained today—through the ritualization of female sexuality via endogamous (in-caste/in-faith) marriages. Further, divisions of labor based on caste play into a specific imaginary of race—dark bodies being suited for manual labor while fair bodies are to be protected. This chapter has especially examined how although the powers that oppress may be different in kind, the intersections between caste, sexuality, religion and class provide the working definitions of race and skin color in contemporary South India.

In chapter 5, I have continued an analysis of differences among peoples by understanding how Christians were homogenized under secular constitutional protections. While the concept of belonging often promises to erase differences between peoples, it may often produce new inequalities and foreclose any possibility of addressing them. This can be seen in the way “Christian” offered minorities a sense of belonging to the nation-state as religious minority citizens, yet homogenized caste, class and racial differences between Christians. Using archival and political science methods to examine the language of the 1957 Kerala Education Bill, legislative debates and government correspondence, and the 1959 political protest, I questioned the assumed subordinate position of religious minorities in the nation-state by examining the privileges of the

Syrian Christian community in Kerala's education business. Stemming from the work of chapters 3 and 4, chapter 5 has explained that differences between Christians are most palpable when "women's" involvement in the *vimochana samaram* is examined in depth. The experiences of low-caste Dravidian Christians and lower-class Christians differed (and continue to differ) profoundly from their dominate representatives: upper-caste, Aryan raced, affluent Syrian Christians.

In chapter 6, I have looked at differences between South Asian peoples through the evolution of the idea of minority rights, a new Christian religiosity and interfaith/caste marriages. In the previous chapters, I have argued that secularism operates as if religious divisions are primary, homogenizes minority religions, and offers only an empty promise of producing "equality" through protecting (assumed) subordinate populations. Further, caste, class and racial privileges were only redeployed and continue to shape the everyday lives of Kerala peoples. In chapter 6, I have shown that many minorities and non-minorities in Kerala today understand full well the problems with secularism and the entrenched social privileges of the ruling classes. Thus, the state government has introduced legislation aimed at redefining "minorities" and recent Supreme Court rulings have acknowledged the potential for reverse discrimination in secular constitutional protections. Additionally, "religion as faith" belief in Christianity has caused many Christians in the state to move away from religious ritual associated with privilege. Yet while some rituals that have defined group difference have disappeared (such as clothing practices) others continue to remain pronounced. The adherence to rituals concerning marriage, sexuality and pregnancy point to the continued entrenchment of patriarchal privilege—embedded into caste, race, class and religious identities. The successful

protest against *Mathamillatha Jeevan* and the continued outrage over interfaith/caste marriages from all faiths, castes, classes and races almost negates any sort of attempts at redefining “minority” and “privilege.” While a backlash against secularism flourishes, the continued reliance on ritualized sexuality and adherence to Brahmanical patriarchy undermines potential social change and feminist networking across caste, class, racial and/or religious divides.

In this dissertation, I have used the interdisciplinary frameworks provided by Women’s and Gender Studies and South Asian studies—often bridging and examining the gaps between these two modes of thought. Additionally, drawing methods from Political Science, History, Anthropology, Sociology, Religious Studies, discourse analysis and feminist theory, I have examined a variety of texts—from women’s clothing to political rally slogans, and from television serials to legislative assembly debates. The chapters of the dissertation used interdisciplinary methods to read these texts and to examine simultaneous privileges and oppressions. Through such interdisciplinary projects, we can better understand how differences between peoples operate and how social change can be enacted across group divisions.

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