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*Mobility Towards Work and Politics for
Women in Kerala State, India: A View from
the Histories of Gender and Space**

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Abstract

In this paper, historical analysis and qualitative fieldwork are combined to question the belief that recent efforts in Kerala to induct women into local governance and mobilize poor women into self-help groups implies continuity with the earlier history of women's mobility into the spaces of paid work and politics. For a longer view, the histories of gender-coding of spaces and of women's mobility into paid work and politics are examined. In the twentieth century, while the subversive potential of paid work was contained through casting it within 'feminine terms', politics was unquestionably 'unfeminine space'. However, recent efforts have not advanced women's mobility in any simple sense. The subversive potential of women's mobility towards work in self-help groups is still limited. In local governance, unlike the experience of an earlier generation of women, the ability to conform to norms of elite femininity now appears to be a valuable resource.

Introduction

The promise of liberation through advancing women's mobility into the spaces of paid work and politics has been one of the features

* This paper represents an equal effort from the two authors. Our names are in alphabetical order and not meant to indicate the greater effort of one over the other. Part of this paper is based on our ongoing project 'Gendering Governance or Governing Women? Politics, Patriarchy, and Democratic Decentralization in Kerala State, India', funded by the IDRC, Canada.

that feminist discourse shares with enlightenment thinking. Feminists often tell spatial stories of containment in bounded space, of breaking out, and into forbidden spaces.¹ This is particularly pronounced in feminist utopianism, which celebrates women's 'breaking out', even their 'homelessness'.² However, there is also the recognition that metaphors of mobility may choke differences and unevenness between women. Also, metaphors of movement that challenge the linear narrative of progress that underlies stories of mobility have been evoked, for instance, when Gayatri Spivak points to 'a violent shuttling which is the displaced figuration of the "third-world woman" caught between tradition and modernization'.³

This wariness towards mobility metaphors probably indicates the oppositional thrust of feminist thinking; it may be a reflection of the feminist critique of development. Unlike romanticist narratives of development which highlight the teleological elaboration of immanent social laws through history, the narrative of development merely emphasizes dynamic change—promising a better state of affairs through moving beyond constricting ('traditional') spaces and practices. Feminist critiques of development which continue to share mobility metaphors have, however, revealed how actual trajectories of modernization and development have led to non-liberating forms of 'mobility' for women.⁴

Further exploration of the question why social and physical mobility does not necessarily lead to women's autonomy by feminist researchers, has often highlighted the importance of spatial perspectives. Development commonsense—particularly pronounced

¹ See, for instance, Gillian Rose, *Feminism and Geography: The Limits of Geographical Knowledge* (University of Minnesota Press, Minneapolis, MN, 1993); Caren Kaplan, 'The Politics of Location as Transnational Feminist Critical Practice', in Inderpal Grewal and Caren Kaplan (eds.), *Scattered Hegemonies: Postmodernity and Transnational Feminist Practices* (University of Minnesota Press, Minneapolis, MN, 1994), pp. 121–135; Susan Hanson and Geraldine Pratt, *Gender, Work, and Space* (Routledge, New York, 1995).

² Christine Sylvester, *Feminist Theory and International Relations in a Postmodern Era* (Cambridge Studies in International Relations) (Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 1994).

³ Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, 'Can the Subaltern Speak?', In Cary Nelson and Lawrence Grossberg (eds.), *Marxism and the Interpretation of Culture* (University of Illinois Press, Urbana, IL, 1988); Grewal and Kaplan (eds.), *Scattered Hegemonies*.

⁴ Marianne H. Marchand and Jane L. Parpart (eds.), *Feminism/postmodernism/development*, International Studies of Women and Place (Routledge, London, 1995); Doreen Massey and Pat Jess (eds.), 'A Place in the World?', In *The Shape of the World: Explorations in Human Geography*, vol. 4. (Oxford University Press, New York, 1995).

in a development-saturated society like Kerala—tends to ignore spatial perspectives that undergrid gender disparities. Kerala is a small state located in the deep-southwest of the Indian sub-continent. In the 1970s, however, Kerala shot to fame in international development circles for its specific trajectory of modernization, in which poor economic growth co-existed with remarkable achievements in social development—in literacy, health, longevity, and low birth rates. This precipitated a world-wide discussion on the replicability of what is called the ‘Kerala model’. The ‘Kerala model’ has been described as ‘...a *post facto* generalization of an experience historically evolved but promoted by public action (which *inter alia* includes socio-religious reform movements, a wide and active press, adversarial politics, etc) and is sustained by social demands’.⁵ The crisis of the ‘Kerala model’, in the wake of economic liberalization and globalization, is frequently discussed in its current social scientific literature.⁶ Since the 1970s, Kerala has witnessed accelerated migration to Arabian countries, the effects of which are currently being explored through cross-disciplinary perspectives. The widening of economic, political, social and physical mobility has been a key feature of Kerala’s experience of modernization in the twentieth century, during which a constant association between mobility and ‘progress’ was set up.⁷

Feminist work on gender and spatiality in India has explored the workings of spatial perspectives which mediate women’s mobility and perpetuate their subordinate status across diverse physical and social spaces⁸. In turn, how women negotiate gender-coded spaces in their everyday lives and spatial parameters matters substantially to the specific contours of women’s agency.⁹ Indeed, paying attention to the gender-coding of spaces alongside the expansion of women’s mobility goes beyond the common practice of explaining developmental

⁵ M. A. Oommen, ‘Introduction’, in M. A. Oommen (ed.), *Kerala’s Development Experience*, vol. 1 (Zed Books, New Delhi, 1996), p. xvi.

⁶ Darley Jose Kjosavik and N. Shanmugharatnam, ‘Integration or Exclusion? Locating Indigenous People in the Development Process of Kerala, South India’ *Journal of Development Studies*, 2 (2004), pp. 231–273.

⁷ Fillipo Osella and Caroline Osella, *Social Mobility in Kerala: Modernity and Identity in Conflict* (Pluto Press, London, 2001).

⁸ Seemanthini Niranjana, *Gender and Space: Femininity, Sexualization and the Female Body* (Sage Publications, New Delhi, 2001).

⁹ Lise Nelson, ‘Aretesania, Mobility, and the Crafting of Indigenous Identities among the Purhepechan Women in Mexico’ *Journal of Latin American Geography*, 5, no. 1 (2006), pp. 51–77.

modernity's failure to deliver the promise of liberation-through-mobility by referring to an 'unfinished agenda' centred upon the 'awakening of women's consciousness'.

Women belonging to communities that benefited from the high tide of reformism—the new elite—in early twentieth-century Kerala moved out of their homes to spaces of paid work, and into the emergent public and politics. This paper will reflect upon such mobility by examining the discursive gendering of the spaces between which women moved and the strategies of negotiation available to them. Finally, this paper questions the widespread, popular belief that two recent efforts in Kerala, to induct women into local governance, and to mobilize poor women in self-help groups, implies the extension of women's access to politics and the public. Through participant observation in *panchayats* and in-depth interviews with successful women *panchayat* presidents, an attempt is made to investigate how the new spaces of local governance and income generation are perceived, and work effectively as, gendered spaces. This may help to evaluate recent writings on political decentralization in Kerala which presume that the presence of large numbers of women within these spaces is evidence of greater autonomy for women.¹⁰ Spatial categories have underwritten caste and gender exclusion in Malayalee society (Malayalam being the major language spoken in Kerala, the people of Kerala are referred to as 'Malayalees') and continue to do so. For example, the derogatory term '*chanthapennungal*' [market women] refers to women who get their way through loud and vociferous argument—who work for their livelihood in market-space and reject feminine modesty. The *chanthapennu* is the very antithesis of *taravattil pirannaval* ('she who was born in an aristocratic homestead'). *Chantha* and *taravad* refer to fairly well-defined physical spaces with distinct caste/moral properties. The concept of the modern *grham* (home), designated the modern woman's space, differed considerably from these. The first-generation Malayalee feminists took advantage of the idea of the modern home to build arguments extending women's physical mobility to the public and disciplinary social apparatus without compromising the centrality of the home. In contrast, women

¹⁰ Patrick Heller, K. N. Harilal and Shubham Choudhury, 'Building Local Democracy: Evaluating the Impact of Decentralization in Kerala, India' *World Development* 35, no. 4 (2007), pp. 626–648; B. L. Biju, 'Public Sphere and Participatory Development: A Critical Space for the Left in Kerala' *Mainstream* XLV, no. 25 (2007). Available at <http://www.mainstreamweekly.net/article163.html> (accessed 23 September, 2010).

entering politics had to be necessarily ‘un-gendered’. However the recent developments mentioned above may not be simple continuities at all. Indeed, the complex reinforcement of gender norms which link women to altruistic mental qualities and familial relationships occurring through both the new opportunities for income generation and participation in local governance opened up to Malayalee women in the 1990s can be seen.

Paid Work, Politics and the Altruistic Feminine

In traditional Malayalee society, family spaces were named by caste and constructed through caste practices and gender norms. For instance, the Brahmin home was referred to as ‘*Illam*’ or ‘*Mana*’; the Nair homestead as ‘*Taravadu*’ or ‘*Idam*’; the homes of temple-castes such as Warriors or *Pisharady*, as ‘*Waryam*’ or ‘*Sharam*’ and that of lower castes as ‘*Kudi*’ or ‘*Chaala*’. In other words, a generalized notion of domestic space housing the family was absent. To a large extent spatial norms regulated the movement of upper-caste women. The confinement of Brahmin women to the ‘inner’, expressed through terms like ‘*antarjanam*’ (literally, ‘inner folk’, referring to Malayala Brahmin women) was carried over into the regulation of their movement outside, through such sartorial requirements as the large ‘veil umbrella’ (*marakkuda*) and the ‘cotton veil’ (*putappu*), and the presence of servants, male and female, when they went out.¹¹ Women in aristocratic Nair homes, too, were subject to spatial regulation, for instance, in the injunction that even the eldest woman should speak to the *karanavar* (the male head of the household) only from behind the door. Indeed, the observance of spatial regulations was often taken to be crucial in shaping feminine moral qualities found characteristically amongst the aristocracy—and hardly *vice versa*.

The new woman—the *grhini*—idealized in new early twentieth-century new elite reformisms, was linked to the *grham*.¹² The *grham* differed from the above-mentioned family spaces and public spaces such as the *chantha*. It was (a) unconnected to specific communities (as was the *Illam* or the *taravad*), and primarily the handiwork of the ideal woman; and (b) it primarily referred to a set of intimate

¹¹ Kanipayyur Sankaran Nambutiripad, *Ente Smaranakal*, vol. 1 [Memoirs], (Panchangom Press, Kunnamkulam, 1965).

¹² J. Devika, *En-Gendering Individuals: The Language of Re-forming in Early Twentieth Century Keralam* (Orient Longman, Hyderabad, 2007).

altruistic social ties. While the new *grhini* was frequently advised on how to rearrange space in the home, these arrangements had to remain strictly subservient to the fostering of altruistic family ties. Following from (a), the ideal *grham* would constitute a set of family ties, which could be set up well outside caste structures, norms and spatial regulations. Following from (b) it had to be animated by the 'gentle', non-coercive power of subjectification. The ideal woman, it was claimed, was marked by her ability to exercise such power effectively, to manage materials and souls within the household.¹³ The predominance of the task of maintaining altruistic family ties in the *grham* ensured that its material space could be imagined in multiple ways.

However, it appeared in the course of the twentieth century that increasingly modern-educated, new elite women were venturing into paid work.¹⁴ Economic and social change around these times seems to have been crucial in accelerating this trend. The Great Depression and changing agrarian relations and legislation abolishing the impartibility of joint family properties exacerbated the difficulties for land-owning families.¹⁵ The onset of the first phase of the demographic transition in Travancore and Cochin in the 1920s meant that families had higher burdens to bear. Changing marriage practices—and the dowry practices among matrilineal groups¹⁶—were another emergent pressure. At the same time, the governments of Travancore and Cochin were actively encouraging girls' schooling and their enrolment was steadily rising.¹⁷ Jointly, these pressures could have induced women, especially of groups which traditionally allowed girls literacy, and in which women's economic contribution was not always frowned upon, to enter the labour market.

This shift was not smooth. Women entered employment often on unfavourable terms. The history of Malayalee women's entry into

¹³ Ibid.

¹⁴ Ibid, pp. 175–191.

¹⁵ K. Saradmoni, 'Kerala Model: Time for Rethinking', In M. A. Oommen (ed.), *Rethinking Development*, vol. I (Institute of Social Sciences and Concept Publishers, New Delhi, 1999), pp. 159–174; Meera Velayudhan, 'Reform, Law and Gendered Identity', in M. A. Oommen (ed.), *Rethinking Development*, vol. I (Institute of Social Sciences and Concept Publishers, New Delhi, 1999), pp. 60–72.

¹⁶ K. Padmavaty Amma [1924], 'Malayalee Marriage Modified', in J. Devika (ed. and trans.), *Her-Self: Early Writings on Gender by Malayalee Women* (Stree, Kolkata, 2005), pp. 67–73.

¹⁷ Robin Jeffrey, *Politics, Women and Well-being: How Kerala became a 'Model'* (Oxford University Press, New Delhi, 2003), p. 94.

paid work in the early twentieth century is replete with attempts to restrict entry to married women on the grounds that married women's loyalties are divided.¹⁸ Second, many argued that women should not be permitted to do 'unfeminine' work, such as policing, or liquor selling.¹⁹ Whilst there were hints that women who chose employment were 'mannish', rejection of femininity was largely equated with moral decline—with greed, irresponsibility, sexual promiscuity and competitiveness. The rationalist feminist K. Saraswati Amma took these charges head-on through her short stories,²⁰ reminding her readers of the double standards at work here: women who carry the burden of morality in an immoral world are digging their own graves. This, however, was an uncommon response. The more common rebuttal was to deny that modern women sought such pleasures.²¹

The two major arguments forged by the first-generation feminists to meet the barrage of criticism against women's working and public selves took advantage of the conception of the modern home. The first was the claim that essential femininity was not so much associated with a specific space—the home—as with a form of power. Since such power was essential to all institutions of modern disciplining that shaped modern individuals, women's presence in all such spaces was more than justified. Thus, a woman could well realize her feminine potential without marriage or childbearing, simply as an agent of the 'gentle power' of shaping subjects in other disciplinary institutions—or in specific niches within institutions recognized as male spaces. The second argument linked women's work outside the home to their concern for the wellbeing of the family; thus when a woman sought paid work, it was mostly for the welfare and upward mobility of her family.

¹⁸ Devika, *En-Gendering Individuals*, p. 198.

¹⁹ Femininity and success in police duties appeared to be inversely proportional. Contrast, for instance, the representation of the successful unfeminine policewomen in Sundaram, 'Penpolice Geetha' [Song of the Female Police] (*Naradar* 1, no. 9 (1941), pp. 12–13) and the feminine but unsuccessful policewoman in Gopi, 'PC Kamalam' [Police Constable Kamalam], *Vijayabhanu* 4, no. 12 (1940), pp. 19–20. However, women needy for a steady job did not shy away from the opportunity. In 1968, an interview for five policewomen was held, for which 2,000 applications were received; 385 women candidates were called. The candidates, however, revealed to the reporter that they chose this job only because other options were absent (*Mathrubhumi*, 21 February 1968, p. 3).

²⁰ K. Saraswati Amma [1945], *Lokatinte Purogati* [The Progress of the World], In *Saraswati Ammayude Tirnahedutta Kritikal* [Selected Works] (D C Books, Kottayam, 2001), pp. 188–198.

²¹ B. Pachi Amma [1921] 'Women and Freedom' in Devika (ed.), *Her-Self: Early Writings on Gender by Malayalee Women*, pp. 52–60.

Not surprisingly, this latter argument proved far more popular. In the context of economic stagnation combined with rising consumption aspirations, several middle-class women participating in debates on women's work in later decades justified women's paid employment as a necessary contribution to the general family wellbeing, actually partly contributing it to the fulfillment of her housewifely altruistic responsibilities. A few demanded reciprocal concern from husbands, who were being helped by their wives.²² 'The foremost advantage from employment [of housewives] is that income increases,' wrote an author, Annamma Joseph, in a women's column of the *Malayala Manorama* in 1969, 'an increase in income means that their standard of living will go up. It is certain that the house will be happy and peaceful if there are no financial difficulties.' Besides, the working woman's 'mental culture', the 'development of her individuality', and 'experience in worldly matters' make her a more desirable and understanding companion to the husband.²³ At the same time, the tragic tale of the unmarried working woman used by her family, ultimately rejected by them, was repeatedly retold in literature and cinema. The desire to combine work and housewifery also seems evident in a survey conducted by the newspaper *Malayala Manorama* among women college students. The overwhelming majority wanted professional employment. Of the total sample, the largest share wanted to become doctors, citing 'the desire to serve' as the reason; others wished to become school teachers (22 per cent), college teachers (17 per cent), nurses (9 per cent), lawyers (6 per cent), engineers (4 per cent) and film stars (3 per cent). Only 5 per cent of the total sample reported the desire to be housewives. The survey also revealed an overwhelming preference for marriage, with 63 per cent preferring arranged marriages.²⁴

But though these arguments gained immense circulation in the Malayalee public sphere through the later decades of the twentieth century, this does not mean that the *ghrini* was unseated, nor did it mean that the social surveillance and spatial and temporal regulations upon working women ended. Indeed not, as present-day life in Kerala testifies.²⁵ The strong gender segregation of public spaces in Kerala,

²² For instance, Soma Krishna Pillai, 'Veettammamaar Vazhittiruvil' [Housewives at Crossroads], *Malayala Manorama*, 10 October 1969, p. 6.

²³ Joseph Annamma, Women's Column, *Malayala Manorama*, 6 July 1969, p. IV.

²⁴ *Malayala Manorama*, 19 September 1969, p. 6; 26 September 1969, p. 6.

²⁵ See, for instance, Osella and Osella, *Social Mobility in Kerala*.

frequently commented upon by visitors was, and is, one of the strongest forms of regulation upon the working woman.²⁶ Nor did these arguments ease the caste-tinged stigma upon certain occupations—for instance, nursing. It has recently been remarked that migration is built into the choice of nursing as a profession in contemporary Kerala; this may be read as a strategy adopted earlier by women to escape the stigma.²⁷ Also, practical issues of balancing the double burden reappear in public discussions throughout the twentieth century. Further, issues of the embodiment of women in public—their dressing, demeanour—were being raised in the 1950s. As Saraswati Amma pointed out, the widespread acceptance of the sari as the ‘decent dress’ of the middle-class, cultured, educated working woman seemed to be a hurdle in that it restricted their physical mobility hugely; the debate on ‘decent dress’ for women has been a continuous and bustling one throughout the 1990s.²⁸ Moral evaluations continued to classify work as suitable or unsuitable for women. Thus, the working woman in Kerala did not really exist in contradiction with the ideal feminine; there were arguments available which could justify her movement away from the home, strictly in terms of feminine capacities and concerns. However, while working women were certainly more exposed to public life, there were clear regulatory mechanisms that prevented their integration as fully fledged citizens into the public and politics.

While a fuller history of the shifts in the spaces of labour of women of marginalized communities in Kerala is yet to be written, it appears that women of the lowest caste groups, largely excluded from education, moved from feudal labour to paid agricultural and industrial labour, and the anxieties over ‘loss of gender’ were of no relevance there, as they were always projected as outside full femininity. However, Anna Lindberg’s detailed and careful account traces the gradual subsuming of working-class women under

²⁶ This is powerfully captured in a photo essay by Jipson Sikhera, ‘Gender Disparity in Kerala: Some Visual Images’, in Swapna Mukhopadhyay (ed.), *The Enigma of the Kerala Woman: The Failed Promise of Literacy* (Social Science Press, New Delhi, 2007), pp. 179–184.

²⁷ Sreelekha Nair, ‘Rethinking Citizenship, Community and Rights: The Case of Nurses from Kerala in Delhi’ *Indian Journal of Gender Studies* 14, no. 1 (2007), pp. 137–156.

²⁸ K. Saraswati Amma, ‘Purushnamarillaatha Lokam’ [A World Without Men], in *Saraswati Ammayude Tirnahedutta Kritikal*, pp. 973–990; see also Sharmila Sreekumar, ‘Scripting Lives: Narratives by Dominant Women in a Southern State’, unpublished Ph.D. Thesis submitted to Hyderabad Central University (2001), pp. 191.

domestic ideologies through the 1950s and 1960s.²⁹ The female work-participation rate fell steadily in Kerala throughout the twentieth century; no wonder then that recent efforts to draw below-poverty-line (BPL) women into income-generating activities have had to tread the ground of gender rather softly.

The movement into the public and politics, however, was more difficult to justify. The public was projected early as ‘male space’, but by the late 1920s, educated women were demanding entry, claiming to represent the group interests of ‘women’. Opposition was strong.³⁰ Social work, however, was claimed as ‘women’s space’, given its disciplinary nature. Gandhian ideology and its emphasis on feminine power worked heavily to justify women’s entry into nationalist agitation. By the late 1930s many Congresswomen, active in anti-imperialist agitation, began to shift into Gandhian social work. Many (Akkamma Cheriyan, for instance) left public life in the 1950s, discouraged by the severely competitive party politics. Indeed, the lack of match was evident in an appeal published in the *Malayala Manorama* in 1938, exhorting women to join the anti-government ‘Abstention’ movement in Travancore.³¹ The agitation was clearly an outcome of ‘divisive and redistributionist politics’, but women were invited to participate not as full members of the community but as domestic subjects, exerting their influence upon family members. The odds against women who demanded full presence in the political field were clearly high; the few women who stayed on often claimed distance from conjugal family life and procreation. Underwriting this was often the projection of oneself as a purely mind-centred subject, ostensibly devoid of bodily desire and need for family ties, whose re-productivity was in the public.³²

In the immediate post-independence decades, demands for redistribution were framed within a notion of (male) citizenship and people’s fundamental rights to land, health, education and a

²⁹ Anna Lindberg, *Experience and Identity: A Historical Account of Class, Caste and Gender among the Cashew Workers of Kerala 1930–2000* (Historika Media, Lund, 2001).

³⁰ Anna Chandy, contesting in the 1931 elections in Travancore, had to face a powerful smear campaign. See Editorial, *Nazrani Deepika*, 16 June 1931.

³¹ K. Gomathy, ‘Streekalum Nivarttanavum’ [Women and the Abstention Movement], *Malayala Manorama*, 20 April 1933, p. 3.

³² Annie Thayyil, a prominent woman politician of the 1950s, reminded her reader in an article that her childlessness did not indicate a wasteful, undisciplined life. ‘My books are my children,’ she wrote. ‘Your children will die. Mine will not. I will not allow people to forget me.’ Annie Thayyil, *Ee Kattukal Ninakkullataanu* [These Letters Are For You], vol. 4 (Kottayam, 1954), p. 38.

heavy emphasis placed on ‘public action’ that ultimately allowed a continuous expansion of welfare.³³ In other words, politics in these times was not only ‘divisive’ and ‘competitive’ but also anchored on a discourse of ‘people’s rights’, which had little place for feminine altruism that ‘healed’. For the few women who stayed in politics, a career there could not be connected in any way to the betterment of one’s own family. Indeed, women in politics, being free of the obligation to be altruistic, were often quite forthright about their desire for power and upward mobility in the political field. In her autobiography, Annie Thayyil retells her bid for political upward mobility, and how she was outplayed by Leela Damodara Menon.³⁴

The goals and methods towards political power varied for the Left and the non-Left in the 1950s. For the communists the route of dedicated mass mobilization and administrative skills was prescribed. On the non-Left, aspirants to political power had to be adept in building and breaking alliances, making decisions and choosing sides at opportune moments—in other words, respond shrewdly to ‘strategic opportunities’. Women politicians risked their gender when they aspired for either of these paths—but a few took up the challenge. In the Congress, Leela Damodara Menon is a good example. Active since the 1950s, she was one of the most successful women politicians in Kerala—she was a member of the Kerala State Assembly twice and of the Rajya Sabha once, and also the Indian representative at the United Nations. Her rise in Kerala’s political scene was, as she herself put it, in the shadow of her husband, the powerful Congressman Damodara Menon. Through her political career, Leela switched political loyalties, and effectively steered herself to power, attaining prominence in the debates around the first communist ministry’s education bill³⁵—and earned for herself in many quarters the name of a ruthless player, something reserved for male politicians. The charge of using ‘family connections’ applied well to her—and indeed, has been applied to almost all women on the non-Left who reached the upper-levels of politics in Kerala. This, however, was a way of affirming the ‘lack of morality’ of women in politics, a way of ‘un-gendering’ them. It may be necessary to note that women who were thus ‘un-gendered’ were

³³ Robin Jeffrey, *Politics, Women and Wellbeing*, (Oxford University Press, New Delhi, 2003).

³⁴ Anne Thayyil, *Idangazhiyile Kurishu* [Autobiography] (Kottayam, 1990).

³⁵ G. K. Leiten, ‘Education, Ideology, and Politics in Kerala’ *Social Scientist* 6, no. 2 (1977), pp. 3–21.

not automatically recognized as 'masculine'. Thus, Leela Damodara Menon, despite being highly successful, could never acquire the same public standing as that of K. R. Gauri Amma, the foremost woman communist politician in Kerala.

Gauri Amma emerged in and through the communist movement, as a successful woman leader who could play both the (equally masculine) roles of the political protestor outside the government, and of the decisive administrator inside. In the 1950s she publicly proclaimed that women did not really need 4 months of maternity leave, and that women should be appointed as bus-conductors, an exclusively male job.³⁶ The entry into politics of the other prominent woman communist leader of these times, Susheela Gopalan, was heavily mediated by the presence of her husband, A. K. Gopalan. However, despite being cast widely in the role of the 'comrade's wife', she did not feel obliged to couch her political ambitions and aspirations in altruistic terms; her later fame rested entirely on her own work to further the agenda of communist mass mobilization.

Admittedly, this 'honorary masculinity' to which women politicians lay claim was a fragile one. It was not as if they never faced allegations of immorality—'public womanhood' was always a term that could be loaded with undesirable connotations of sexual excess. However, most women politicians of this generation stood up against such allegations, and did not always take recourse in gendered moral ideals; nor did they cite understanding husbands or families necessarily. Rather, they drew upon their claim to gender-neutral public identity to shield themselves against the sexual double norm. Confident in their status as public people, women politicians often rebutted the allegations they faced as inevitable 'thorns' in the path towards attaining political power. As Mary Thomas Alakappilli declared at the inauguration of the women's wing of the Congress in Muvattupuzha in 1954: 'Those of us who ventured into organizational work were greeted with many bitter experiences. But we are still moving forward. We know well that political work is no bed of roses here.'³⁷ Risking the social privilege accruing from adherence to the feminine gender, then, was a heroic act, a sacrifice, which allowed one to move ahead in politics.

In contrast, for men, politics was stable home ground. The debate whether the ideal Man was to be located in the modern public, the spaces of employment opened up within modern institutions, or in the

³⁶ *Nazrani Deepika*, 28 January 1959, p. 3.

³⁷ *Nazrani Deepika*, 8 June 1954, p. 2.

space of capitalist production, beginning around the late nineteenth century, continued to be heard in the 1940s and 1950s. Indeed, the ideal masculine was frequently identified with the former two spaces, than with the latter, despite frequent appeals to young men to get involved in production. The history of the shifts in the notion of 'politics' in twentieth century Kerala—its several incarnations in sites ranging from debates in the nascent Malayalee public sphere of the late nineteenth century to the literary modernism of the 1960s—is yet to be written; however, there can be little doubt that this history would evoke as its not-so-invisible parallel, the history of mainstream masculine identity.

Feminine Altruism in the Public?

The 1990s saw important developments that have been widely interpreted to be extensions of these two forms of mobility. The 73rd and 74th Amendments to the Indian Constitution, which allowed 33 per cent representation for women in all three levels of the local self-governing institutions (LSGIs) including the leadership, were brought into force in the local bodies' elections in Kerala in 1995.³⁸ Second, women of the poorest sections of Malayalee society were organized into a state-wide self-help group network under the aegis of the State's poverty-alleviation 'mission', the *Kudumbashree*, which aimed to improve the economic wellbeing of families through women, directing them into micro-enterprises and thrift and credit activities.

The *Kudumbashree* is characterized as a 'women-oriented' poverty eradication programme, with women's empowerment as one of its major goals—one that is actively projected in the media. *Kudumbashree* places women from BPL households at the heart of the poverty eradication efforts of the state. It was begun in 1998 by the government of Kerala with the aim of eliminating poverty within 10 years. The present structure, however, began to evolve earlier, in 1991, when the Community-Based Nutrition Programme (CBNP) was initiated by the government of Kerala with active help from the United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF) to improve the nutritional status of women and children. The *Kudumbashree* is composed of Neighbourhood Groups (NHGs) which were federated into Area

³⁸ The number of women members in the Panchayat Raj Institutions (PRIs) now exceeds the 33 per cent reservation, as women also contest general seats.

Development Societies at the ward level, which were in turn federated into a Community Development Society (CDS) at the municipal level. These were formed exclusively of women from families identified as 'poor' through a non-income-based index. The success of the CDS model in the two districts of Alappuzha and Malappuram led the government of Kerala to scale up the strategy to include the whole of the state in 1998 still under the *Kudumbashree* banner, with the State Poverty Eradication Mission taking responsibility for its implementation through the Department of Local Self-Government. The *Kudumbashree* has since followed a multi-pronged strategy which includes convergence of various government programmes and resources at the community-based organization, efforts to involve the CDS structure in local-level anti-poverty planning, and development of women's micro-enterprises and thrift and credit societies. Indeed, it has been widely hailed and rewarded for its innovativeness and unprecedented out reach. While micro-credit is one among the many strategies initiated under the *Kudumbashree*, it has been gaining in importance and visibility within the programme.³⁹

As discussed earlier, though new elite women entered paid work, the *grhini's* position as the natural and desirable feminine role was hardly questioned. Indeed, as also mentioned earlier, hard manual labour was gradually projected as non-feminine, and thus non-elite women workers had little access to full femininity. The *Kudumbashree's* ideological success lay in that it subtly displaced the *grhini* to make space for the (still self-sacrificing but) income-earning mother. Some work that was deemed unbecoming of women, like scavenging (renamed 'Clean Kerala Mission'), or work that was formerly identified with women but is now looked down upon, like agricultural labour, has attained acceptability, if not respectability, as women's work—to a limited extent.⁴⁰ However, as has been noted

³⁹ At present, the *Kudumbashree* network consists of 183,362 neighbourhood groups, organized under 1,057 Community Development Societies; Sarada Muraleedharan 'Gender – *Swayampadhana Prakriya*' [Gender – Self-learning], presentation made at one-day workshop on Gender Self-Learning, 15 September 2007.

⁴⁰ An early review of the *Kudumbashree* observed that 'Women tend to select traditional products, which have very low profit margins', but some of the micro-enterprises challenged existing gender stereotypes, such as water meter repairing units by women and mason-groups; Jan Reynders, Sara Ahmed, Subhash Mittal, Hina Shah and Tapas Datta, *Banking on the Potentials: Kudumbashree: Kerala's State Poverty Alleviation Mission* (The Royal Netherlands Embassy, New Delhi, 2002), p. 29; However, according to a recent internal assessment, it was seen that low-income-yielding traditional industries continue to predominate; Muraleedharan, 'Gender – *Swayampadhana Prakriya*'.

elsewhere, the fact that it did not wander too far from prevalent gender arrangements and norms has been equally important.⁴¹

Given the above, our observation that *Kudumbashree* groups operate within an implicit set of spatial regulations and practices, which neutralize the transgressive possibilities of women's mobility into paid work, did not appear to be a coincidence. First, while women's mobility is actively justified, *Kudumbashree* activities, focused around the neighbourhood group, are often organized to ensure minimum breach of spatial location of women. Group meetings are conducted in the neighbourhood—and within 'respectable hours' so that women can reach home after the meeting before dark. The physical mobility of *Kudumbashree* women rarely crosses the limits of the district, and even when they are dispatched for training programmes, they always move in groups, and, often, the younger women are placed under the watchful eye of the older women. Indeed, in our focus group discussions with members of such groups, senior women's watchfulness over the younger women was often cited as a reason for the success of the group in micro-enterprise. One of the most successful organizers of *Kudumbashree* units in the Kodakara *panchayat* in the central district of Thrissur, a senior woman worker, recounted her efforts at group-building thus:

Initially men were very reluctant to send their wives for this activity. But they were convinced later that this was for a good purpose, and of course the *panchayat* supported it. However, they were still not very enthusiastic. Finally, I took the initiative going house to house—I am older than them, often old enough to be their mother—asking them to send their wives to the group and assuring them that I would keep a strict watch on them. This was what finally convinced them that their wives would be safe.

Interestingly, it was found that surveillance at the workplace and in the domestic realm was sometimes used in such a way that one was used to counterbalance the absence or weakness of the other. In a successful micro-enterprise unit in Thiruvananthapuram district, the secretary of the group complained to us that the group had run into serious trouble when some unmarried members of the group eloped and married men of their choice, once they had begun to earn incomes. She told us that the group had decided that they will admit only married women henceforth, to be saved of public censure.

⁴¹ J. Devika and Binitha V. Thampi, 'Between "Empowerment" and "Liberation": The Kudumbashree Initiative in Kerala' *Indian Journal of Gender Studies* 14, no. 1 (2007), pp. 33–59.

Second, the spaces opened up by the *Kudumbashree* are largely restricted to women, with the minimal presence of men, usually as representatives of the *panchayat* or the *Kudumbashree* mission—there is thus a clear relation of hierarchy between the women and the male representative of the state. Third, these spaces reproduce codes of respectable female embodiment. Such sartorial norms are also adopted by the *Kudumbashree* women—when they present themselves at public occasions organized by *panchayats*, they appear in garb signifying (upper-caste Hindu) Malayalee femininity, the so-called national dress of Malayalee women.⁴²

Observers have expressed the doubt whether ‘...even in the BPL category, there is a creamy layer for whom such enterprises appear to be little more than an opportunity for social interaction and togetherness’.⁴³ The possibility of upward mobility for poor women through *Kudumbashree* thus involves new spatial arrangements that minimize the transgressive potential of women’s movement outside the home, and this also defines inequalities within the category of BPL women. That is, these spatial arrangements suit the better-off among the BPL women, who, according to the elected representatives of the *panchayats* and some *Kudumbashree* staff, are in these groups in order to spend their free time, so that they are not ‘idle’. In contrast, poorer women participants have to ‘supplement income or the lack of it by looking for additional coolie work’.⁴⁴ This divide has also been confirmed by other research on women’s work in Kerala.⁴⁵

What appears most significant, however, is that the chances of women’s exposure to public life through their work outside the home are also minimized. While *Kudumbashree* women are a visible presence in most public functions at the local level, the space into which they have entered from within their homes can hardly be

⁴² Interestingly, the Dutch review team observed: ‘It is reported that *Kudumbashree*’s entrepreneurs’ groups sometimes come to the *Panchayat* meetings in their ‘uniform’, forming a block as poor women. *Gram Panchayats* apparently have complained about this, indicating their growing power.’ (Reynders *et al.*, *Banking on the Potentials*, p. 37). In our interviews, we were often told that the demand that *Kudumbashree* women wear the Kerala saree to meetings was often made by the *Panchayat* members, and sometimes actively resisted. Perhaps this sartorial demand was indeed a response to the *Kudumbashree* women’s reported attempt at self-assertion, observed by the review team! However, such norms are under review or abandoned in many *panchayats* following criticism in the public.

⁴³ Reynders *et al.*, *Banking on the Potentials*, p. 35.

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*

⁴⁵ Binitha V. Thampi, *Economic Role of Women and Its Impact on Child Health and Care: A Study in Kerala*, Ph.D. Thesis submitted to ISEC, Bangalore (2007).

characterized as 'public'. This has recently been admitted by the Mission itself, but this is also highly visible when the nature of the kinds of gatherings the *Kudumbashree* groups organize is considered.⁴⁶ The most common event organized by the women is the annual day. Interviews with *Kudumbashree* women have alerted us to the degree to which these events resemble not so much public events, as social occasions. The women most often emphasized the fun, dressing up, consumption (most often buying identical sarees and ornaments for the occasion), welcoming and felicitating 'honoured' guests, usually *panchayat* members and bureaucrats.⁴⁷ This is, of course, in sharp contrast with the experience of working-class women organized in trade unions since the 1940s, who were active participants, though rarely leaders, in public agitation.⁴⁸ It may also be crucial to recognize that the location of the neighbourhood group within social ties may indeed be functional to the working of the micro-credit and micro-enterprise mechanism, ensuring prompt repayment and group commitment to enterprise. This actually falls in line with the work preferences of the new elite educated women observed by researchers: work that is 'respectable' and closer to the home is preferred.⁴⁹ Women are thus not released into the public; rather, the distance between the space of labour and the space of women's immediate social interaction is blurred.

Gender and Public Acceptance: Successful Women *Panchayat* Presidents

The other major development in women's mobility in Kerala in the 1990s was towards local governance through the implementation of

⁴⁶ 'In the few regular meetings which the Review team was able to attend, we saw that after the money transactions discussion was limited to who needed loans or the planning of cultural festivals, but that there was no discussion on gender rights.' Reynders *et al.*, *Banking on the Potentials*, p. 36.

⁴⁷ This is not a recent development: 'Social issues, mainly social gatherings to be organized on any religious/national festivals are discussed but also individual problems that members are facing like serious sickness in the family.' Reynders *et al.*, *Banking on the Potentials*, p. 18.

⁴⁸ Anna Lindberg, *Experience and Identity*.

⁴⁹ Sumit Mazumdar and M. Guruswamy, *Female Labour Force Participation in Kerala: Problems and Prospects*, paper presented at the Annual Meeting Programme, Population Association of America, Westin Bonaventure, Los Angeles, CA, 30 March–1 April 2006; Lakshmi Devi, *Education, Employment and Job Preferences of Women in Kerala: A Micro Level Study*, Discussion Paper no. 42 (Kerala Research Programme on Local-Level Development, Centre for Development Studies, Thiruvananthapuram, 2001).

political decentralization. The 1990s have been widely regarded as an important period which saw the extension of popular democracy and the democratization of development in Kerala.⁵⁰ These efforts have also been widely praised as offering opportunities to social groups—especially women—hitherto marginal to politics and government, through reservations at local level.⁵¹ Especially, the efforts to induct women into local governance in the People's Planning Campaign (PPC) of the mid-1990s, and the efforts to mobilize poor women into self-help groups, imply continuity with the history of women's entry into politics and the public, which began in the early twentieth century. Thus, these developments are interpreted as extensions of women's access to politics and the public. The 73rd and 74th Amendments to the Indian Constitution, which allowed 33 per cent representation for women in all three levels of the local self-governing bodies including the leadership, were brought into force in the local bodies' elections in Kerala in 1995. The spaces opened up in this process were undoubtedly 'glocal'.⁵² As Mohan and Stokke have noted, this was part of a world-wide scalar reconfiguration of politics, the ongoing localization of politics mediated by institutional reform towards decentralization, and good governance. Studying the 'glocal' then involves empirical investigation of the operation of local forces and political and civil social activism within the glocalized political field.⁵³

This part of the paper is based on 40 interviews with successful women *panchayat* presidents in all three tiers—those who have won three consecutive terms, either as presidents, or as member first and later as president—and 20 with women politicians active in political party work at the state level across the political spectrum.

⁵⁰ Olle Tornquist and P. K. Michael Tharakan, *The Next Left: Democratisation and the Attempts to Renew the Radical Political Development Project – The Case of Kerala*, Report Series, no. 24 (Nordic Institute of Asian Studies, Copenhagen, 1996); John Harris, *Social Capital Construction and the Consolidation of Civil Society in Rural Areas*, working paper no. 00–16 (London School of Economics and Political Science, London, 2001); T. M. Thomas Isaac and Richard W. Franke, *Local Democracy and Development: People's Campaign for Decentralised Planning in Kerala* (Leftword Publishers, New Delhi, 2001).

⁵¹ Vanita Mukherjee and T. N. Seema, *Gender, Governance and Decentralized Planning: The Experience and People's Campaign in Kerala*, Paper presented at the International Conference on Democratic Decentralisation, Thiruvananthapuram, 20–23 May 2000.

⁵² A. Dirilik, 'Globalism and the Politics of Place' *Development* 41, no. 2 (1998), pp. 7–13; A. Escobar, 'Culture Sits in Places: Reflections on Globalization and Subaltern Strategies of Localization' *Political Geography* 20 (2001), pp. 139–174.

⁵³ Giles Mohan and Kristian Stokke, 'The Politics of Localization: From Depoliticizing Development to Politicizing Democracy', available at http://www.keg.lu.se/ngm/html/papers/paper_stokke.pdf (accessed 23 September 2010).

Our perception that these are 'successful women' is also guided by the fact that many of them have moved on from reserved to general seats. The fieldwork was carried out in 2006–7 and covered all districts of the State. The large majority were fielded by the Left Democratic Front, the coalition led by the Communist Party of India (Marxist) (CPM), by the CPM, or the other communist party, the Communist Party of India (CPI); a few were fielded by the rival Congress-led coalition, the United Democratic Front. Our interviewees were aged between 35 and 60 years; most of them were aged above 45 years. Caste-wise, most of our interviewees belonged to the upper castes or middle castes—Ezhavas, Nairs, Syrian Christian, and Muslims in Malabar—and a lesser number of Dalits (not many Dalit women have been successful outside reservation seats). Most of these women had middle-level educational achievements ranging from high school completion to graduation—it was found that the women *panchayat* presidents could be divided into two groups: 'the family connections group' and the 'retired government servants group'. Of these, the latter had fairly high levels of education and administrative experience/exposure to public institutions. The former often had lower levels of education but their family connections made up for that. It is worth noting that these women are not always proxies, and, even when they are, it does not mean that they are passive. There was also a group which had both advantages. Most of our interviewees were married women often with teenage and adult children.

Three major insights that emerge from these interviews may be worth pursuing. First, in examining their biographies, a common link was found: their previous public exposure was not of political agitation but of development activism, even though some did hold positions in party committees at the local level. Second, the majority of these women claimed to be from 'party families', families with a history of stable allegiance to a political party for two or three generations. This would mean that the ways in which these women are linked to their parties may differ significantly compared with the experience of first-generation women politicians. While for the latter entering politics often meant tensions in families and the labour of building up the parties, for the former, such pains are less intense. Both these have interesting implications, and point at distinct spatial configurations that may be further elaborated. Third, both groups pointed out certain conditions that may be largely accessible only to new elite women, such as the presence of the husband/male member as escort and guide, and

interestingly, access to cash. Both of these are linked to the women's need to maintain respectability in the local community.

The self-identification of women presidents as development agents and not politicians is all the more interesting when it is noted that in the discourse of the PPC (1995–6), the *panchayat* was consistently projected as a space of 'development' beyond divisive politics. This is evident both in the documents of the PPC as well as in the academic analyses of the PPC, which explicitly draw upon Robert Putnam's depoliticized version of civil society privileging social networks as the fundamental institutions in which the new *panchayat* is to function.⁵⁴ There is reason to think that since 1997, LSGIs in Kerala have not worked to deliver what may be called the 'liberal economic promise' of decentralization in Kerala. The 'liberal promise' was made in the wake of the perceived economic crisis in Kerala. Also important was the fact that the agenda of socialist welfare in Kerala, which included citizens' right to land as a productive asset (which is distinct from the provision of housing, a basic consumption resource) along with basic health care, education, and a minimum social security, which had been hegemonic since the 1950s, and which produced remarkable gains in health and education, has been steadily waning since the land reforms of the early 1970s. The decentralization experiment was projected as an attempt to avoid privatization; the LSGIs were also perceived as institutions which would integrate citizens into the market on terms advantageous to them. This was to be achieved through government support: by endowing citizens with adequate skill, initial capital, technical support, and other requirements, for the big initial 'push' so that citizens would enter the market as successful producers and not as workers receiving depressed wages.⁵⁵ Studies in Kerala's decentralization have shown that the successes of the experiment are largely in the provision of basic needs to the poor—in housing and drinking water—though there is apprehension regarding the sustainability of such provision. In contrast, productive investment by *panchayats* has been low, and the returns from such

⁵⁴ T. M. Thomas Isaac, 'Campaign for Democratic Decentralization in Kerala: An Assessment from the Perspective of Empowered Deliberative Democracy', available at <http://www.ssc.wisc.edu/~wright/Isaacpaper.PDF> (2000; accessed 23 September 2010); also see P. P. Balan and M. Retna Raj (eds.), *Decentralised Governance and Poverty Reduction: Lessons from Kerala* (Kerala Institute of Local Administration, Thrissur, 2006).

⁵⁵ Rashmi Sharma, 'Kerala's Decentralisation: Idea in Practice' *Economic and Political Weekly* 6 (September 2003), pp. 3832–3850.

investment have been poor. This has been a persistent feature of Kerala's decentralization, which continues to prevail; furthermore it has also been pointed out that individual beneficiary programmes tended to form the larger share of welfare projects in the *panchayats*.⁵⁶ The State's Economic Review for 2007 points out that the spending of the local bodies still follows this pattern: for the period 2002–7, LSGI spending in Kerala has been highest in the infrastructure sector (77.13 per cent), closely followed by the service sector (76.17 per cent), with the productive sector trailing at 60.53 per cent. The authors point out that this is 'because both block *panchayats* and municipalities gave priority to infrastructure development, and district *panchayats* and *grama panchayats* gave priority to the development of the service sector'.⁵⁷ Indeed, it can also be noticed that the formulated grant-in-aid for LSGs for 2002–7 is highest in the service sector compared with both infrastructure and productive sectors: 3399.42 crores against 1485.95 crores in the productive sector and 1615.69 crores in the infrastructure sector.⁵⁸

This, it is felt, may have significant impact on the manner in which political decentralization and the institutions created in and through it may be perceived. The functioning of *panchayats* as providers of basic needs should be viewed against the backdrop of both the above-mentioned phenomena: the rollback of socialist welfarist citizenship (howsoever limited) in which welfare included access to land as a productive resource, and the failure of the newly constituted institutions of local governance as supporting agencies strengthening the entry of citizens into the market as successful producers. Welfare is now highly individualized, targeting poor households rather than oriented towards the welfare of groups, and focused on the state's

⁵⁶ N. D. Gopinathan Nair, *People's Planning: The Kerala Experience*, Discussion Paper no. 16 (Kerala Research Programme on Local-level Development, Centre for Development Studies, Thiruvananthapuram, 2000); Jos Chathukulam and M. S. John, 'Five Years of Participatory Planning in Kerala Rhetoric and Reality', In *Economic and Political Weekly*, 7 December 2002; Sharma, 'Kerala's Decentralisation', p. 3841; N. D. Gopinathan Nair and P. Krishnakumar, *Public Participation and Sustainability of Community Assets Created under the People's Planning Programme in Kerala: Selected Case Studies*, Discussion Paper no. 60 (Kerala Research Programme on Local-level Development, Centre for Development Studies, Thiruvananthapuram, 2004); Patrick Heller, Shubham Choudhury and K. N. Harilal, 'Building Local Democracy: Evaluating the Impact of Decentralization in Kerala, India' *World Development* 35, no. 4 (2007), pp. 626–648.

⁵⁷ *Economic Review 2007* (State Planning Board, Government of Kerala, Thiruvananthapuram, 2007), Table 22.6, paragraph 22.23.

⁵⁸ *Ibid.*, Table 22.6.

consumption resources handouts. This conception of welfare appears now to be well entrenched in the state. For instance, recent struggles by Dalits for land as a productive resource—including the ongoing struggle by Dalits over land at Chengara—who were confined to the peripheries of the Left's socialist welfarist citizenship, have been dismissed by Kerala's mainstream Left as illegitimate.⁵⁹ Again, studies on the people's assembly in the lowest tier, the Grama Sabha, have pointed out the extent to which these bodies have been reduced to 'forums for wresting benefits', attended largely by welfare beneficiaries seeking government handouts.⁶⁰ A comparative study of *panchayats* in three Indian states—Kerala, Madhya Pradesh and Tamil Nadu—revealed that in Kerala, much more than in the other states, the poor approach the village *panchayat* to obtain help for housing, building latrines and for 'personal' matters, such as obtaining help for daughters' marriages or resolving disputes. The village *panchayat* thus may appear to be more 'intimate', with such issues predominating over civic issues in its everyday functioning.⁶¹ Together, all this allows the *panchayat* to be perceived as a non-political space, the space of development altruism—and therefore, by definition, demanding of 'feminine capacities' and thus to women as leaders/managers. The apparent acknowledgement of group interests in the PPC is watered down as groups continue to be conceived of in governmental terms.

In our interviews, successful women *panchayat* presidents frequently and unambiguously identified themselves not with local politics but with development activism. Those of this group, who held positions within local committees of political parties, were often relieved of those, or they were instructed to devote less time to local-level

⁵⁹ A. V. Jose, 'Origin of Trade Unionism among the Agricultural Labourers in Kerala' *Social Scientist* 5, no. 12 (1977), pp. 24–43; B. R. P. Bhaskar, 'Kerala Letter: Changing Grammar of Protest Stumps Political Establishment', 14 April 2008.

⁶⁰ Sharma, 'Kerala's Decentralisation', p. 3841; Nair, *People's Planning: The Kerala Experience*, p. 37; Padma Ramachandran, *Study of Decision-Making Process in Selected Panchayats and Municipalities under the People's Planning Programme*, Discussion Paper no. 68 (Kerala Research Programme on Local-level Development, Centre for Development Studies, Thiruvananthapuram, 2004); Centre for Socio-economic and Environmental Studies, Centre for Rural Management and SDC-CapDecK, 'Emerging Issues in Panchayati Raj in Kerala: A Study Report' (SDC-CapDecK, Thiruvananthapuram, 2003).

⁶¹ D. Narayana, *Institutional Change and Its Impact on the Poor and the Excluded: The Indian Decentralisation Experience*, OECD Development Centre Working Paper no. 242 (Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development, Geneva, 2005), p. 29.

political work. This is truly in contrast to the experience of women at the higher levels—who are allowed to hold both positions. It was found that women *panchayat* presidents often interpreted their parties' demand that they shift away from local party work as 'greater flexibility' or 'less submission to political pressures'—in fact greater mobility within the *panchayat*, the 'permission' to interact with people of different political persuasions and interests, though strictly limited to *panchayat* boundaries. In contrast, interviews with senior women politicians in the upper echelons of political parties revealed considerable tensions on this count: they experience much tighter party controls on interaction and movement. However, from our fieldwork, it appears that women heads of municipal and other urban governance institutions—and in *panchayats* where neo-liberal resource-extraction-based development is currently changing local equations rapidly—may not be able to draw so readily on the altruistic-feminine image for self-representation.

Women in Panchayat Raj Institutions (PRIs) generally tended to identify their role as 'fair distributors' of welfare benefits—and voiced their immense pleasure at being able to fulfill the function of overseeing such distribution. The interviewees tended to view the resources distributed not in terms of 'people's rights', or 'group interests', but as entitlements handed out to groups deserving uplift by the state. Given the emergent shape of LSGIs in Kerala as discussed above, this should come as no surprise. The relation of non-reciprocity between the state and these groups, and the shift of the aim of state welfare towards guiding citizens into self-help, then looks extraordinarily similar to the relationship of power posited between the ideal mother who disciplines through 'gentle power' and her children in the ideal modern family as imagined in Malayalee social reform of the early twentieth century.⁶² That 'group interests' are not acknowledged by the women themselves was also evident in the statements of some successful Dalit women presidents, who identified the prestige acquired through their representing of the whole *panchayat*, to flow to their families, and not to their communities.

The often-noted unevenness of welfare payments is not linked to the differential claims of different groups, or to the preferences of the local party committee, but to insufficiency of funds or to 'rigidity'

⁶² Devika, *En-Gendering Individuals*.

of rules.⁶³ The language of pacifism informs their perceptions of such ‘insufficiency’—very frequently, the tendency was to remind the interviewer that ‘those who missed out this time could be covered in the next’.⁶⁴ Indeed, a considerable number of these women do project their ‘natural’ affability, approachability, their capacity to be empathetic, as factors that have enabled them to be successful. To quote from one of many such accounts:

I’m happy and often satisfied by the fact that I could distribute the welfare benefits fairly across all sections of the *panchayat* community. However, it is true that the same amount of assistance cannot be extended to all needy members at the same time. As the resources of the state are limited, some of them have to wait till the next time, and I could convince them to do so. After all, most of the welfare recipients are women and hence I can pacify them and persuade them to wait.

Also fieldwork with women *panchayat* presidents from lower-caste Dalit and tribal communities—not always women who perceive themselves to be successful—reveals considerable tensions experienced by these women, who have to negotiate between meeting the expectations of their respective communities, whom they represent, and remaining faithful to (feminine) ‘fair distribution’. Particularly striking was one case of ‘fair distribution’, reported from a *panchayat* in Kozhikode district, in which the distribution of the Special Component Plan (SPC) fund to scheduled castes (SC) in the *panchayat* for renovation of houses aroused tensions, which led the *panchayat* president—an SC woman president herself—to implement ‘fair distribution’ by dipping into the *panchayat*’s own funds to distribute similar benefits to other castes. Dalit women are also handicapped in their relative lack of access to the new elite feminine ideal. Age, for instance, is a major factor—and most of our Dalit interviewees tended to be younger, many of them aged below 30 years. This pattern is confirmed by the data from the 2005 *panchayat* elections

⁶³ While some studies have found much less bias in beneficiary selection along political lines, and corruption, as well, in Kerala’s LSGIs, they do admit that a clear political affiliation to the ruling party is certainly an advantage. One study, a comparison between a Left-dominated and a non-Left-dominated *panchayat*, observed that party involvement at all levels was evident in the former, and while non-Left people were not necessarily excluded, the power to include or exclude lay overwhelmingly with the local party. Nair, *People’s Planning: The Kerala Experience*.

⁶⁴ It may be interesting to probe the experience of women PRI functionaries who have defied these tendencies; at this stage of fieldwork, we are unable to make clear statements on their experience.

in Kerala: Dalit women *panchayat* presidents tend to be around 10 years junior to their counterparts in the general category. This is important, given the fact that the cultural expectation on women to heed such hierarchies and defer to elders—not surprising given that their accepted location is within the family and community—holds strongly in Kerala too. Thus the disadvantage of caste is often intermixed with the disadvantage of age as well.

Their distance from political activism also assures that most successful women presidents mention efficient implementation as their key achievement. For their work does not involve pressurizing the government to yield concessions through agitation; indeed, some women linked their success in implementing the given welfare schemes and mobilizing additional funds directly to their relative exclusion from local party-life and even the public. The president of a *panchayat* in Kozhikode district made this explicit link:

We [women *panchayat* presidents] have gained good acceptance which is more than that attained by any male president. Since we have fewer responsibilities within our political parties, we get more time to attend to issues of local development. Besides, we comply better with government orders and guidelines in the implementation of development projects and are hence more efficient in the timely completion of these.

The implication of the above discussion is that women's newly attained mobility into PRIs has brought to the fore a certain 'feminine' agency, which, however, seems to be attained under the condition that women maintain a distance from the competitive world of local political parties. This seems to be underwritten by the projection of the *panchayat* as a space similar to the home, in need of 'feminine skills'. In contrast to mid-twentieth century Malayalee political society, in the new spaces of governance opened up through political decentralization in the mid-1990s, which are clearly inside of the local state institutions, 'femininity' appears to be a valuable resource.

However, the projection of the *panchayat* as 'feminine space' has apparently not been appropriated by all women who were interviewed, who nevertheless continue to access the discourse that constructs the 'good woman' in interesting ways. This was especially pronounced in the 'family connections' group, especially among those who are better educated and young, who perceive their participation as a career opportunity, a chance to acquire new and marketable skills, and not as political activism. This may indeed be connected to the fact that the members of the 'family connections' group who have

entered local governance are second or third generation, for whom this rarely signifies a decisive break of any kind. Family connections now seem to ensure much smoother entry, both at the higher, competitive levels and at the lower levels. Most women *panchayat* presidents enjoy considerable support from their families, especially husbands. The justifications of women's employment now seem to have gained greater application here. Many of them asserted that their mobility has brought gains not only in the form of an income, but also as greater acceptability for the family. To quote one of the most successful women *panchayat* presidents in Kerala, from the Alappuzha district: 'I have been successful for three consecutive terms and now everyone knows me. Though my husband is a local leader of the DYFI [Democratic Youth Federation of India], he is known after me. My children too get this recognition.' Furthermore, she views her long and successful career as a *panchayat* president not as a springboard to a higher-level political career or more intense political activism, but as valuable, marketable experience that could secure her employment:

By now I have learned all the rules and guidelines of the implementation of development projects. I have coordinated and implemented the development projects of various other government agencies. I know that my party may not give me another chance to contest as I have been here for three consecutive terms. Hence I need to find another job, and so earned a Master's Degree through distance education. I think I can work with an NGO [non-governmental organization] and the skills and abilities I have so far acquired may be utilized well there.

The conditions necessary to maintain a 'moral image' may indeed be available largely to the new elite women: this was particularly evident in that our interviewees took pains to stress that their husbands could support them almost fully, even giving up full-time work. This ensured that the women's physical mobility was ensured without any risk to their respectability. Equally striking was the point often made about how women in local governance were in need of greater amounts of cash than men as they often needed to spend more on safe transportation, on 'respectable' boarding, etc., when outside their homes. Importantly, they pointed out that unlike male aspirants, women could not really mobilize funds from private parties or even from party sources on their own without risking loss of respectability, and hence only women who could mobilize funds through respectable channels could really be successful. Many women presidents justified their work as Life Insurance Corporation of India (LIC) agents with

reference to the need for an income, in addition to the meagre sitting fee they received.

This is, however, not to argue that all 'successful' women *panchayat* presidents draw upon gendered altruistic ideals to characterize their work—there are interesting exceptions, which are important when the possibilities of moving beyond the dominant trope are considered, open to the new entrants. Two exceptional women worth mentioning are from central Kerala where the major coalitions—led by the CPM and the Indian National Congress—are more or less evenly matched. They rose to prominence as *panchayat* members active in a popular struggle to protect a major fresh-water body, the very lifeline of *panchayats* located around it. After becoming presidents, these women have continued to support the struggles and get *panchayats* to pass important legislation to prevent the degradation of the lake. The upward mobility of these two women seems to have been facilitated by two factors: the relative lack of near-total dominance of any one political party, and a popular struggle beyond political divisions. In their interviews, both these women did not hesitate to articulate critiques of the design of decentralization; also, they were not shy of political power and opposition from elements in their own parties. Predictably, such situations are relatively few at present. But given that environmental issues are beginning to have an impact on the lives of ordinary people in rural areas, and because political decentralization has had the unintended consequence of weakening centralized control of parties, such situations may increase in the future. Another interesting instance was that of a tribal woman *panchayat* president in the Wayanad district, who successfully mobilized the *panchayat* to fight off the building of a dam which threatened the whole village community. This district is one in which tribal people, despite being a sizeable portion of the local population, are woefully disempowered, and, therefore, it is not easy for a tribal woman to win widespread popular support. Her success has now allowed her to build a strong base in the *panchayat*, not dependent on the patronage of the local party elite.

Conclusion

In our interviews, a significant group identified as the source of their comfort within local governance the possibilities for deployment of feminine altruistic capacities; another tended to view the new spaces as similar to the spaces of paid work, valuable for the social mobility

it offered the family and the individual. In the light of our earlier discussion of gender and politics in twentieth century Kerala, this appears to be a major shift. Unlike earlier times when politics was indeed a space in which 'un-gendered' women could occasionally seize power reserved for men, the new spaces, which held out the promise of political empowerment for women, seem to be reinforcing dominant gender norms.

The shift is linked to the transformation of politics itself in the 1990s in Kerala, from the 'public action' mode in which welfare was claimed as 'people's [collective] right' through agitational politics, to the 'liberal' mode in which welfare is bestowed by the state through a state-centric civil society, and pegged on self-help and group interests. The thrust towards a liberal polity, very much part of the global phenomenon of 'third-wave democratization', could well have offered opportunities, however limited, to local groups hitherto excluded from politics. Group interests, however, continue to be interpreted in terms of governmental categories, which make it possible to project the *panchayat* as the space of altruistic redistribution. This is not to ignore the limitations of liberal polity or to argue that counter-hegemonic politics should be wholly reduced to a liberal variety, to securing group interests in the state; however, the critique of liberalism should not end up justifying exclusions. What is seen, indeed, is a double jeopardy: the limiting of politics to redistribution in terms of well-defined group interests, and the reduction of the inclusionary potential of the liberal framework, through treating groups as passive governmental categories. Moreover, conformity to elitist gender norms appears to be reaffirmed, rather than challenged in the process. When women bid to represent the local community, they have to project themselves as 'truly feminine', distanced from hard ambitions. The 'truly feminine', an effect produced in and through a set of attributes associated with a new elite social location, also indicates non-competitiveness and a non-divisive concern for the 'whole *panchayat*'.

In the new spaces of work, however, there seems to be continuity. Women who have entered these spaces have not by any means been released into a 'public'; indeed, they seem to have been relocated in a space bounded by the *panchayat*, and the bureaucratic structures of the *Kudumbashree*. This space still remains within the 'social', rather than the 'political'.

Thus it appears to us that the assumption regarding the expansion of women's mobility towards the public and politics of Kerala which informs much recent writing needs serious rethinking. Part of the

problem is caused by the grievous lack of dialogue between feminist critiques of development and politics and mainstream perspectives in development studies—which often involves disciplinary and methodological divides. Here an attempt has been made to highlight the efficacy of intergenerational comparisons, and interdisciplinary perspectives that combine historical and qualitative fieldwork-based enquiry, in recharging the debates around the effectiveness of political decentralization and self-help-centred development initiatives in expanding women's mobility into the public and politics.