



Beyond Monolithic Conceptualization of Muslim Societies: Matriliney and Muslim Women's Engagement with the Transformation of Kinship in the Malabar Coast of South India

Aleena Sebastian^{1*} 

National Institute of Advanced Studies (NIAS) Bangalore, India

Abstract. The legal and religious reforms during the colonial period have modified the property and residential rights of the matrilineal Muslim women of Malabar (North Kerala, India). However, how these women engaged with the transformation, through strategies, negotiations and contestations, seldom received visibility in the mainstream reform scholarship of colonial Kerala. As I have argued elsewhere, while the reforms attempt to foster new forms of gender relations, based on patrilineality and conjugality, the matrilineal women created an alternative space of their own. The entry of Muslim women into colonial education and the formation of Mahila Samajams or women's organisations in the early decades of the 20th century is indicative of this. In the backdrop of the narratives of senior matrilineal Muslim women from the Malabar Coast, the paper attempts to understand, how women articulated and engaged with the transformation of the matrilineal tharavad (joint household) in the colonial period.

Keywords: Matrilineal Muslim Women, Colonial Malabar, Reform and Gender, Strategies and Negotiations

Introduction

The matrilineal residence pattern in the matrilineal arrangement of the coastal Muslim communities of Malabar (North Kerala, South India) allows women to enjoy residential rights over the matrilineal joint household called tharavad. Women do not change their residence after marriage (Koya, 2004). They receive their husbands in the bridal chamber—a conjugal space, constructed within the matrilineal household for each married woman. Here, the descent is traced in the female line and the children of male members are not entitled to inherit the ancestral properties, as they are part of their mother's tharavad (Puthenkalam, 1977: 199). While matrilocality is observed to be the dominant feature of social organisation, changes are observed in the economic organisation of these communities. The land is found to be a minimal resource among the coastal Muslims of South Malabar where the joint household primarily devolves as the matrilineal property. But, among the landholding matrilineal communities of North Malabar, both the ancestral household and landed properties are descended matrilineally. Dislocated from trade and merchandise through colonial intervention, these communities have now entered new occupations and are emerging as business groups and professionals (Sebastian, 2016: 91).

Challenges were posed to the matrilineal kinship practices of coastal Muslims in the colonial period through legal reform and Islamic reformism, implicating consequences for women (Kunji, 1993; Kottakkunnummal, 2014; Sebastian, 2016 & forthcoming). With the decline of trade during the colonial period, the younger male members demanded the legal revocation of matriliney and aspired to dwell as patrilineal, nuclear familial units. Contesting matriliney as antithetical to Islam, the religious reformists attempt to replace the existing

kinship organisation by a uniform patrilineal system. The socio-religious and legal reforms not only attempted to foster new forms of familial relations in Malabar but also reflected male envisioning of family, marriage, property, and gender relations (Sebastian, forthcoming). Though women formed an important subject matter in the discourse on reform, their articulation of the gendered implications of socio-economic-religious and legal shifts on women's customary rights have not received centrality in the scholarship.

The marginality of women's narratives in the mainstream reform scholarship and studies on matrilineal Kerala Muslims does not suggest that women were passive receptors of the transformation. The narratives of senior matrilineal women from the Malabar coast reveal that contestations were posed, negotiations were sought and strategies were deployed by women in the colonial period to procure their property and residential rights. The entry of women into colonial education (by discarding the opposition of religious reformists) in the early decades of the 20th century and the formation of Mahila Samajams or women's organisations enabled them to create an alternative space of their own. It is also important to note that these women constituted a heterogeneous group in terms of their social positions, ideological affiliations, power relations, class positions and educational status. The diversity came to be visible more prominently in the post-colonial period with the emergence of several reformist groups, which drew women as its sympathisers in public forums.

Locating the transformation of Muslim matrilineal tharavads in the larger context of the socio-economic-religious and legal changes in the colonial period, the paper attempts to forefronts a gender nuanced examination of women's engagement with the transformation. The matrilineal kinship arrangement of non-Muslim communities like Nayers, Ezhavas and Thiyyas also underwent modifications during this period (Gough, 1961; Arunima, 2003; Abraham, 2006). While contextual specificities can be observed in their nature of kinship practices and mode of transformation, what commonly underlies is how gender, familial and social relations of these communities have come to be reformulated (Devika, 2006 & 2007). And this commonality forefronts the examination of matrilineal changes among the non-Muslim communities an important point of discussion here.

Gender and Transformation of Matriliney in Colonial Kerala

Refashioning of familial relations among the matrilineal communities along the lines of patrilineality and conjugality in colonial Kerala indicates the gendered nature of reforms. (Sebastian, forthcoming). At the level of the matrilineal joint household, modifications came to be observed in marital relations, property devolution and control over resource allocation. The gendered imaginations of social change were expressed in multiple ways, one of which was the younger male members affirming their independence from the traditional tharavad arrangement (Ibid.). It was also observed in the case of the matrilineal Nayar, Thiyya, Ezhava and Brahmin communities of Malabar and Travancore or South Kerala. One needs to see this shift in the wider context of the social change that has been taking place in the public sphere of colonial Malabar and Travancore since the last decade of the 19th century, which informed new ways of knitting familial ties along the line of morality, conjugality and caste solidarity (Menon, 1994; Jeffrey, 1994).

Legalisation of Sambandham and Refashioning of Marital Relations among the Nayers

Sambandham or marriage liaisons of Nambudiri Brahmins with the matrilineal women of Nayar tharavads were contested by the educated male members of Nayar communities in the colonial period on moral grounds. After the formation of Travancore Legislative Council in 1896, the educated Nayar men like Thanu Pillai attempted to introduce a bill in the legislative council which demanded for marriage reforms and partition of tharavad property (Saradmoni, 1999: 82-115). The major criticism in the bill centered on Sambandham liaisons which many young educated Nayar men perceived as an embarrassing custom that required intervention.

With the enactment of the Malabar Marriage Act of 1896, Sambandham was legalised (Abraham, 2017: 6). It included provisions for women and children to inherit the husband's property. The law also underlined that a divorced Hindu woman may claim maintenance rights only if she has refrained from adultery and remarriage. According to Arunima (2003: 128), the intervention of educated younger male members for legal reform especially in matters concerning family and marriage reflected their desire to extend superiority over the sexuality of women. Alluding to this view, Devika (2006: 47; 2007: 72-76) argues that the social trend in colonial Malabar seemed to favour monogamous marital unions through the creation of modern domesticity and conjugality.

i. Legal Intervention among the Matrilineal Ezhavas of Travancore (South Kerala)

Legislative interventions modified the familial relations of the Ezhava community of Travancore as well. According to the Ezhava Regulation presented in the Travancore Legislative Council in 1923 (Saradmoni 1999: 102), it is laid out that the unmarried daughters should be maintained by their fathers and after their marriage by their husbands. Legal reformulation of matrilineal inheritance in the line of patriliney was also demanded by a section of Ezhava men who were converted to Christianity in the second decade of the 20th century in Travancore (ibid: 103). Thulaseedharan (2004: 30) points out that the report of the committee which was constituted in 1920 on Christian Succession, applicable to the administrative division of Cochin, forefront the claim of the male members of the community that the tharavad would be 'doomed' if daughters are permitted to inherit the property.

As stated earlier, the transformation of the matrilineal tharavad of various communities in the 19th and 20th century needs to be understood as embedded in the socio-cultural-legal settings of colonial Malabar and Travancore. Legal reform not only brought changes in the familial relations of matrilineal communities but also played an important role in knitting communities along new identities.

ii. Knitting Caste Solidarity as a New Way of Belonging and Challenge to Matriliney

Under the new avenues created by the colonial bureaucracy and modern education, the matrilineal communities also attempted to reassert caste solidarity for economic mobility and social emancipation in the public sphere. In the context of the self-narrative writings that have been emerging in the late 19th and 20th century Kerala, Kumar (2016: 3) discusses that new forms of individual and collective belonging along caste and gender identities were expressed in the public sphere which offered new meanings in the changing socio-economic context. Transformations in the kinship organisation, economic patterns, political organisation, caste structures and marital forms need to be analysed with this shift. The entry of Thiyya elite into the urban spaces of Tellicherry coastal town in colonial North

Malabar with a distinct community identity can be considered as a case in point here (Menon, 1994).

The matrilineal Thiyyas who remained lower in their social and economic position to the Nayar tharavads in North Malabar underwent economic mobility with the arrival of Basel mission and convent education in Tellicherry in the colonial period (Menon, 1994: 65; Raghaviah, 1990: 55-60). Trading expeditions along the coast of Tellicherry in the colonial period also made it possible for many Thiyya tharavads to emerge as prosperous merchant familial groups on the coast. It enabled them to move away from the traditional occupation-toddy tapping. The cultural and religious life of the Thiyyas that was centered on the kavus or shrines came to be contested by the new Thiyya elite who began to form a distinct identity around temples in the coastal town of Tellicherry. According to Menon (1994: 44), the worshipping around shrines symbolised caste subordination for the Thiyya elite as these shrines were located on the lands of Nayar tharavads to which Thiyyas rendered a different kind of services. Hence, there has been an attempt by the Thiyya elite to replace the shrines through the construction of temples in the urban spaces of the coastal town of Tellicherry (Ibid. 67).

Construction of temples by the Thiyya elite followed a new wave of social reform within the community which stood in congruence with the ideologies of the Sree Narayana Dharma Paripalanayogam led by the Ezhava leader Sree Narayana Guru in Travancore in 1903 (Kumar, 2016: 7). Menon (1994: 67) puts forth that the higher social and caste mobility came to be perceived by them as being achievable only through the refusal of religious and social practices around the shrines which made them inferior to the higher castes in the society.

The reassertion of caste solidarities was also visible in the case of the Nayers and Nambudiries of colonial Malabar. Nambudiri Yogakshema Sabha was founded by Kuthur Manakkal Jyeshtan Unni Nambuthiripad in 1908 for consolidating the Nambudiris in challenging matrilineal practices among the community (Arunima, 2003: 165; Kumar, 2016: 7). The women's entry into the public sphere in the 20th century to engage with the legal and social reforms came to be vehemently criticised by the Sabha. According to the Sabha, the entry of women into the public sphere would make a divisive attempt to break the caste solidarity (Arunima, 2003: 169). What one could also observe in this period is the substantial role played by the print culture in the advocacy of different ideologies. For example, the Nambudiri Yogakshema Sabha had a periodical titled, 'Journal of Unni Nambudiri', which aimed to reach out to the Nambudiri (Brahmin) community. The partition of joint household, English education among the younger generation of the community and, reform in the clothing and lifestyle pattern of the Nambudiris were some of the dominant themes of the journal (Ibid. 165-171).

Attempts for legal reform of the matrilineal tharavad were also raised by the Nayers and it led to the consolidation of them through the formation of Nayar Samajam in 1906 (Kumar, 2016: 7). Nayar Samajam was converted to Nayar Service Society in 1914 under the leadership of Mannathu Padmanabhan, by encompassing the individual interests of sub-castes within the Nayers. The principle of impartibility tied to the matrilineal tharavad came to be contested by the Nayar Service Society (Jeffrey, 1994: 165). Managerial power of the Karnavar (the eldest male member in the matrilineal line) was also challenged through legal suits during this period and the same was taken forward by the Nayar Service Society in

their demand for the partition of matrilineal tharavad. With the enactment of the Madras Marumakkathayam (matriliny) Act of 1933, the jointly held property could be partitioned.

In the backdrop of the transformation of matriliney among various communities in colonial Kerala, the paper explores the reformulation of kinship practices among the Malabar Muslims. What one could infer from the earlier discussion is that the redefinition of familial relations within the joint household of matrilineal communities was shaped through patrilineal ethos and the reconstitution of the public sphere through the ideas of conjugality.

Malabar Muslims and Transformation of Matriliney in the Early 20th Century

Changes in the market relations and trade policies in the 20th century deteriorated the trade endeavors of the Muslim communities on the coast and it led to the downfall in the income of the ancestral tharavad (Sebastian, 2013 & 2016). The joint household thus failed to meet the expenses of all its members and these communities were reduced to middle-class or lower-middle-class categories (Osella and Osella, 2008: 322). Deterioration of the tharavad prompted the younger male members to demand partition of the joint property and to shift neolocal by acquiring the individual property. Their demands were initially contested by the Karnavar (the eldest male member in the matrilineal tharavad) as the partition would challenge the managerial power vested in the former. The Karnavars were accused by the junior male members for the exploitation of the tharavad property for the benefit of one's conjugal unit. The legal reformulation of the tharavad through the partition of the ancestral property and religious reformist intervention into the matrilineal arrangement, favoring patrilineal, patrilocal conjugal familial units contested the residential and property rights of women.

The Islamic reformist critique of matrilineal practices as an un-Islamic custom was contested by women in the colonial period by converting the matrilineal tharavad as waqf (religious endowment for charity) properties (Sebastian, forthcoming). This form of conversion of property not only helped women to negotiate the challenges posed by the reformist but also to secure their residential and property rights. A waqf tharavad is considered as the space of women until the death of the last female member and upon her death, the property is handed over for charity purposes.

Irrespective of the challenges posed by historically specific factors, the early decades of the 20th century witnessed the emergence of matrilineal Muslim women as convent educated. Women acquiring English education were more visible in Tellicherry (a coastal town in North Malabar) in comparison to Calicut (in South Malabar) and the reason can be assumed as the impact of Basel missionary activities in Tellicherry since the 19th century. The regional-specific colonial relations within Malabar can also be considered as another factor contributing to this variation. For example, the cordial relationship of the native merchants of Tellicherry with the British extended to the realm of acquiring European lifestyles and leisure patterns. The entry of their female children into colonial education must be seen in this context. The socio-political conditions in South Malabar were marked by the presence of Muslim peasantry agitations against the Hindu landlords and the British which subsequently led the South Malabar Muslim communities to stay aloof from learning both vernacular and English education (Dhanagare, 1977; Abraham, 2014). It had implications for the educational status of women in this region.

Contestation and Muslim Women's Entry into the Public Sphere in Colonial Malabar

The emergence of the Basel mission educational institutions in colonial Tellicherry in the 19th century played a prominent role in reshaping the engagement of women in the public sphere (Raghaviah, 1990: 55-60). The colonial education under the Basel Mission enabled the entry of matrilineal men into bureaucratic jobs. Their daughters emerged as convent educated withstanding the opposition from the orthodox Ulemas or religious leaders in the community.

"I joined a convent school managed by the Mangalore nuns in 1938 after the completion of my elementary education. As initially, I could not grasp the English language, I was given tuition at home by my father who had expertise in different languages such as Arabic, Urdu, Parsi, English, Kannada and Malayalam. He passed away before publishing an Urdu poetry which was translated by him in English.

I always ranked first in the convent school. I continued my education until I was married to my maternal uncle's son on 13th May 1943, at the age of 15. My husband and his tharavad have always supported my education. But I could continue my education only up to six months after my marriage. I was shy to attend classes after I became pregnant.

Since my tharavad was located far away from school, I used to have lunch at father's tharavad. Once, while on my way to his tharavad during the lunch break, some conservative men in a textile shop stood on my way, spat on the road, and commented, 'It seems the Moulavi's daughter wants to study!!!'. This incident was very hurtful to me and I complained to my father. Since then he instructed his tharavad members to provide me lunch at my school. Lunch was brought by them by the time I finished my prayer. In the convent school, I was given space to do my prayers.

In school, I also used to play throw ball. While playing, I would remove thattam or the headscarf. Once a relative happened to see me without thattam and she complained to my grandmother. But my grandmother stood by me and did not stop me from attending school. In those days, I was sent to the school in rickshaws pulled by men. In those days, while going through the public spaces, women of aristocratic tharavads were expected to be in Purdah. So, I too had to be in Purdah till I reached school. Once I reached inside the convent, I would remove the Purdah and be in uniform.

During those days, the Ulemas or the religious leaders were against women's education especially colonial education. They had issued fatwas (religious verdict) against my father for sending me to convent school" (91-year-old English educated Karnoti or eldest female member in a matrilineal line from an economically affluent matrilineal tharavad in Tellicherry).

The socio-political climate in the 20th century and its impact on different aspects concerning the affairs of women is put forth in the above narrative of a senior woman who hails from an economically affluent matrilineal tharavad in Tellicherry. Women in Tellicherry were able to access the public spaces of wider socio-political engagement in the early decades of the 20th century in comparison to the Muslim women in Calicut. The economic organisation of the tharavads of Calicut which was primarily centered on trade did not emphasise the importance of education of its members. Education was limited to the realm of learning to recite the Quran. While boys went to Othupallis or traditional religious educational system under the Dars system, female children were taught to recite the Quran within the tharavad itself. As mentioned earlier, the emergence of Muslim peasant agitations in the 19th century in the rural parts of South Malabar led to the projection of English as the language of the invaders by the religious leaders. They issued

fatwas against those who aligned with the British or sought colonial education. Thus, the political situations in South Malabar also played a crucial role in the educational status of the Muslim communities in South Malabar. Though religious reformists like Makthi Thangal encouraged vernacular and English education among the Muslim communities, gender parity was not ensured. Within the religious reformist discourse, educated Muslim women came to be conceptualised as dutiful wives and homemakers. However, women were not passive receptors of the reforms initiated through these religious and legal interventions. The formation of Tellicherry Mahila Samajam in the early 1930s provides a historical and ethnographic account of how women contested the androcentric reforms.

i. Tellicherry Mahila Samajam

The formation of Tellicherry Mahila Samajam in 1933 under the leadership of matrilineal Muslim women (who were mostly hailing from economically affluent and land-owning tharavads) in Tellicherry marked the beginning of a new phase of the socio-political engagement of women in the public sphere of colonial Malabar. They contested the processes of gendering embedded in the familial and marriage reforms put forth by legal and religious reforms. The wider courtyards of matrilineal tharavads were transformed into social spaces of political engagement, support systems and forums of debate by women. These wider courtyards which otherwise were only opened and accessible to men thus came to be occupied by women and their female supporters hailing from different class positions and religious communities.

“My grandmother Kunjachumma was a rich noble lady. She was the stapaka adyaksha (the first president) of Thalassery Mahila Samajam. The Samajam used to conduct literary classes for both men and women. Initially, people were reluctant to come to attend the classes. Hence, my grandmother and her colleagues used to visit houses and mobilise people. After Kunjachumma, I became the president. Under the leadership of Mahila Samajam, we facilitated the widow pension. These financial aids were distributed in the courtyard of our tharavad. The educated women of our tharavad who had expertise in English and Malayalam helped other women from different religious communities and varied economic backgrounds. Assistance was provided to fill official forms such as forms related to filing litigations in the court for property rights. We even helped women to write letters in Malayalam to their husbands who were in Malaysia and Burma for trade in those days [she smiles]. For women, Samajam also organised tailoring classes to make them economically independent” (91-year-old granddaughter of late Kunjachumma)

Various activities of the Mahila Samajam extended to non-matrilineal women hailing from different class positions. Literary classes, tailoring classes and cultural programmes organised under the leadership of Samajam opened avenues for women to take part in the public domain of socio-economic and political activities. The entry of women into the public sphere reflects the ways in which they contested the gendered norms imposed through reforms.

“The trade link with foreign lands and the European influence on the Tellicherry coast had its impact on the social life of men hailing from affluent matrilineal tharavads. They began to cultivate those values in the form of imparting education to their children including female children. Their daughters were sent to the convent schools. Female children could wear uniforms instead of the traditional clothes. Boys cropped their hair and wore trousers. They studied in St. Joseph's school in Tellicherry. The modifications in the

pattern of dressing were unacceptable to the conservative religious leaders. V. C. Kunjimayan, a reformist belonging to a merchant and landowning tharavad in Tellicherry was called a kafir or an unbeliever by the orthodox religious leaders for sending his daughters to study. Amina, the eldest daughter of Kunjimayan was married before the completion of her education. She later moved to Madras with her husband. She was a good tennis player as well. As a candidate for the Socialist Party, she contested in the Madras Assembly against K. Kelappan from the Communist Party in the 1950s. Though she could not win, the entry of women into the political sphere was very crucial during that period.

Ayisha, the second daughter of Kunjimayan completed her studies in Madras. After her marriage with a businessman named M. S. M. Rauf, she moved to Colombo (Sri Lanka). Later, she was elected as the Deputy Mayor in Colombo in 1952. Under her leadership, the first Muslim women's college named Zahira College was built in Colombo where she served as the Principal in the 1940s. After her engagement in the political and educational spheres in Colombo, she moved to Zambia with her family.

Haleema, the youngest daughter of Kunjimayan actively took part in the socio-political affairs of the Muslim women in Kerala, after the completion of her intermediate education. She is my mother" (Son of Haleema, 56-year-old).

Contestations offered by matrilineal Muslim women to religious and legal reforms became intense in the third decade of the 20th century through the emergence of women's organisations and newspapers (Hussain, 2012: 96). Print played as a medium of the proliferation of reformist ideas and it also came to be used by women to challenge the same reformist ideas. Women's writings in Malayalam (native language of Kerala) and Arabi Malayam (writing Malayalam language using Arabic script) in the early decades of the 20th century not only brought into the forefront the everyday life in the tharavad but it also contested how spaces were gendered and delimited to women. Malayalam magazines such as 'Muslim Vanitha' which was brought out from Thiruvalla in South Kerala under the editorship of Haleema Beevi contested the existing social norms which denied women the access to education, employment, and political participation. The magazine received challenges from the orthodox section in the community. Later the publishing of the magazine was shifted to Perumbavoor from Thiruvalla (Hussain, 2015: 42). 'Muslim Vanitha' was first published in 1938. In 1946, a Malayalam weekly called 'Bharatha Chandrika' was released with Haleema Beevi as the managing editor. The prominent religious reformist leader and founder of Muslim Aikya Sanghom, Vakkom Moulavi also has served in the editorial board of 'Bharatha Chandrika' (Ibid.).

Bridal Chamber as a Site of Contestation

The inheritance of landed properties and ancestral tharavad does not mean matriarchy or female rule. It entails dimensions of patriarchy. The reformulation of property rights through the legal and religious reforms of the 19th and 20th centuries had detrimental effects on the social position of women. However, the strategies exercised by women confronting the intervention of conjugality and patriarchal forms of gender relations within the tharavad forefronts an interesting dimension of the ways in which women contested the challenges of reform. Mammu (pseudonym), a 61-year-old male hailing from a merchant and landowning Muslim matrilineal tharavad in Tellicherry remembers how his grandmother challenged the Karnavar of her tharavad who forcefully got her into a marital relationship without her consent.

“My grandmother was married at the age of 18 to a man of 71- year-old. He died after six years of marriage. By then, she had three children: two sons and one daughter. The deceased husband was a Karnavar of his natal tharavad. My grandmother was also from an affluent landowning tharavad. The nephew of her deceased husband came forward to marry her after the death of her husband. This nephew already had a wife and children in another tharavad. Polygamous marriages were practiced during those days. However, my grandmother was not in favor of this marriage and she opined that he has come forward for this alliance because of her economic wealth. During those days, the marriage alliances were decided by the Karnavar and the consent of the younger members including females were not sought. Hence, she was married to the nephew of her deceased husband against her wish. Thus, he married his ‘Ammayi’ (maternal uncle’s wife)!. One cannot even imagine a nephew marrying his uncle’s wife today.

If the existing social norms allowed the senior members to arrange a woman’s marriage without her consent, she still had her space of contestation and this space of contestation to my grandmother was her bridal chamber [emphasis added]. The matrilineal system enabled matrilocal residence for women. They do not change the residence at the time of marriage like women in patrilocal social organisation. Matrilineal women of Malabar received their husbands at the bridal chamber. Separate bridal chambers were allotted to married women.

After the marriage, my grandmother refused to meet her husband in her bridal chamber and initiate the conjugal relationship. The agency she could exercise within the bridal chamber could not be challenged by her tharavad members including the senior male members. Her prolonged disagreement on the marriage that went against her wishes culminated finally when she decided to file a divorce petition in the court.

A Muslim woman of a matrilineal tharavad moving to the court for a divorce petition was a rare incident in the 1920s but my grandmother showed courage. In those days, the courts had been mostly receiving litigations related to property disputes. At the court she received support from her tharavad members as her second husband (who is also nephew to her deceased husband) argued that her properties belonged to his Karnavar’s (that is, her deceased husband’s) tharavad. You can see the paradox here. The male members of her tharavad who forcefully married her off came in defense of her in the court, when their claim in the ancestral property came to be challenged by a male (her second husband) from outside the tharavad” (a 61-year-old male from an economically affluent matrilineal tharavad in Tellicherry).

Dimensions of conjugality and matrilineality can be observed in the ara or bridal chamber. The matrilocal residence of women enabled the sustenance of the practice of ara sambradayam or the system of bridal chamber in colonial Malabar where the married women received their husbands in their bridal chambers. These bridal chambers constituted a dimension of conjugality. The religious and legal reforms of familial relations in the matrilineal tharavad subsequently strengthened the dimension of conjugality over matrilineality. Restructuring of power relations in the hands of male members also implicated consequences for the everyday experiences of women within the tharavad. The challenge posed by the grandmother of Mammu in the mid-1920s to the power holding male members of her tharavad enables one to understand how women enacted as strategizing agents by transforming the sites of conjugal relations into spaces of contestations for asserting one’s identity and selfhood.

Women's Writings and Socio-Political Engagement in the Third Decade of the 20th Century: An Organized Presence of Matrilineal Muslim Women in the Public Sphere

The third decade of the 20th century witnessed a much more organised engagement of matrilineal Muslim women. As discussed earlier, the formation of Mahila Samajam in Tellicherry was one among them. The public sphere came to be transformed into forums of debates by women hailing from matrilineal tharavads on issues of the educational rights and gender equality of Muslim women in colonial Kerala. It is important to examine the socio-political engagement of Haleema Beevi in this context. In a women's conference organised in Thiruvalla in 1938, Haleema Beevi argued that education was denied to women on the assumption that the inculcation of education by Muslim women is a sin. But women have contested these challenges and have come a long way as an educated and empowered section of their community. Haleema Beevi posed contestation to the claims of the orthodox section that educating women would result in the moral degradation of women. According to her, the educated women have learned to have a voice of their own; articulation of their own, and thus learning to assert themselves in the public domain (Hussain, 2012: 96)

P. G. Khadija and Maithin Beevi were the other prominent women leaders who played a crucial role in reshaping the Muslim women's initiatives in Kerala in the third decade of the twentieth century (Ibid.). Free education and compulsory primary education for Muslim girls, and employment for the educated women were some of the agenda put forth by the women's conference held in 1938. Thus, by contesting the religious and legal reform which marginalised the 'woman's question' to the periphery, these women's associations demanded from the state an equal position in the public domain. These various women's associations across colonial Kerala were in constant interaction with each other and constituted a larger collective to articulate women's issues. In an article written by Haleema Beevi, she points out that in the context of the women's conference organised in Thiruvalla, Haleema Beevi and others decided to form a women's organisation in Thiruvalla called Akhila Tiruvithamkur Muslim Vanitha Sanghom with several branches in Kerala. Haleema Beevi cites the existence of Tellicherry Mahila Samajam under the presidency of T. C. Kunjachumma whom she met seeking her opinion on how to organise women of South Kerala (Ibid. 97-98).

Though Tellicherry witnessed an organised engagement of Muslim women in the socio-political and educational sphere in the 1930s, similar initiatives by women were visible in the Calicut region only by the 1970s (Parappil, 2012: 384). M. M. Social and Information Centre which was operating under the chairmanship C. P. Kunju Muhammad played a crucial role in the formation of Calicut Mahila Sabha on 26th December 1972. P. M. Shiyali Koya served as the convener of M. M. Social and Information Centre during this time and the centre functioned under the management of Madrasathul Muhammadiya High School. Fathima Aboobacker became the first president of Mahila Sabha in Calicut while Khadija Khadar became its first secretary (Ibid.). The Mahila Sabha centered its activities on the issues related to the everyday life experiences of Muslim women in Calicut. This organisation was also able to reach out to Muslim women from lower economic class positions. Under the leadership of Calicut Mahila Sabha, Quran teaching classes, tailoring classes, typewriting coaching classes, financial aid for the marriages of economically poor Muslim women and education, and other community services were conducted (Ibid.). In the context of the educational services of Calicut Mahila Sabha, Parappil explains that the Sabha believed that it is important to work for the educational upliftment of female children

belonging to economically lower-class positions. Hence, the Calicut Girl's High School was adopted by the Mahila Sabha into its fold of financial aid. The female students of this school were given clothes and study materials for free by the Mahila Samajam (Ibid. 384-385).

The emergence of various Muslim women's associations and magazines in colonial Malabar transformed the public sphere into the sites of contestation between religious legal reforms, and the assertion of matrilineal women for selfhood and identity of their own. However, the contributions of these women into the socio-cultural and political spheres of colonial Malabar are not well documented. The challenges posed by many matrilineal women by transforming their bridal chambers into sites of contestations of patriarchy are yet to be explored. What the above narratives and historical analysis set forth is that women are not passive victims of structural change but can actively negotiate and determine the direction and pace of changes which go against their interest.

Colonial Kerala has witnessed women's entry into the social reform prior to the visibility of matrilineal Muslim women in the public sphere in the early decade of 20th century. These reformist movements were initiated by Christian converted women of Hindu lower castes like Channar in the mid-19th century. Kumar (2016: 4-5) analyses how the clothing patterns, food habits and hairstyles functioned as identity markers in terms of caste relations in colonial Kerala and the ways it came to be contested by the patrilineal Channar women of Travancore.

The caste practices which forbid the lower caste women from wearing blouses and melmundu or shawls to cover their breasts came to be challenged by Channar women. These apparels were considered as the caste markers of upper caste Hindu women. The conversion into Christianity was not just an adherence to a new faith but for Channar men and women, it was a path towards social emancipation from the caste related practices which encompassed all spheres of their everyday life including dressing pattern. Kumar argues that the conversion to Christianity allowed Channar women to cover their breasts wearing white jackets. This was enabled by the royal proclamation of 1829 (Ibid. 4). The reformation in the attire of women invited the wrath of the upper caste Hindu men which led to the Channar rebellion of 1858 (Ibid.5). While the Channar women could wear blouses and melmundu even after the rebellion, the royal proclamation which was passed a year later the rebellion indicated that Channar women cannot completely imitate the upper caste attires. The continuity of caste practices even after the conversion and the partiality of the ruling class towards the interests of the upper castes are evident in this case. It opens an important dimension of the ways in which gender, sexuality and caste interact, and reinforce each other (also see Nair, 1996: 157-186).

The transformation of the public sphere into sites of contestation between the male narrative of family, sexuality and gender roles, and women's position on it reflects the dimensions of power relations the public sphere came to entail in terms of gender, caste and class relations. Reformulation of the public sphere along the gendered hierarchies of power relations discounted the contributions of women which challenged the existing patriarchal social norms.

Devika contends that the women's magazines like the *Keraleeya Sugunabodhini* which were published in the late 19th century received much public visibility as it did not challenge the existing social order. Through its publications, the magazine attempted to disseminate the idea to its women readers that one should refrain from the political engagement and critique of religion (Devika, 2002: 3). While magazines like the *Keraleeya*

Sugunabodhini received attention, the Streesamajams or women's associations which contested the hegemonic formulation of the public sphere that neglected women's equal participation in the socio-political and cultural sphere came to be pushed to the margins. Unlike Keraleeya Sugunabodhini, these women's associations contested the reformist assumption that education for women is to transform themselves as good wives and mothers. According to Devika, in Chittoor Balika Sahitya Samajam, the women's activist Tachchattu Devaki Amma challenged the redefinition of the social roles of women through education by the male reformers as follows,

"It seems that giving the same sort of education to men and women is not appropriate...woman's duty lies in being Man's helpmate in the struggle for life, in easing his toil by her Womanliness. She must achieve victory through compassionate words and deeds. Not through competition" (cited in Devika, 2002: 7).

It is also important to highlight that these matrilineal Muslim women of colonial Malabar did not constitute a homogeneous category. They were diverse in terms of their class positions, land relations, colonial history, and social position. How women engaged in the public sphere were reshaped by their different ideological positions. This diversity came to be visible much more prominent in the public domain in the context of the emergence of several religious reformist groups in the 1940s and post-colonial period, and the integration of women into the socio-political activities of these reformist groups.

Concluding Remarks

The domestic and public dichotomy set forth by socio-religious and legal reforms came to be surpassed by the women of matrilineal Muslim tharavads in the third decade of the 20th century through the formation of various associations for women. This marked the initiation of a wider socio-political engagement of matrilineal women in the public sphere by redefining space, gender relations and social roles and, the contestation of the nature of reform which discounted women's perspective on family, marriage, inheritance and property rights. These women's associations extended its activities by also bringing non-Muslim women belonging to different social class strata into its fold by organizing different kinds of activities which provided them with economic security, educational empowerment, and support systems.

The engagement of women with the socio-economic religious and legal reforms needs to be understood by conceptualising matrilineal Muslim women of Malabar as a heterogeneous category comprising of different class positions and embedded in the regional specificities of colonial relations, land relations and political economy. This divergence seemed prominent in the early years of the post-colonial period with the mushrooming of various reformist groups and the subsequent allegiance of matrilineal tharavads towards different reformist trends. In certain cases, the same household had members having allegiance towards different reformist groups. The formation of women's wing by these reformist organisations played a crucial role in drawing many Muslim women of matrilineal tharavads into the reformist trends which also refashioned the public sphere along the reformist ideologies by discarding customary practices like matrilocality (which were perceived by reformists as *bid'a* or un-Islamic innovation). These reformist organisations extended their activities to the socio-cultural and political realm where women were also active stakeholders.

Today, the matrilineal women of Malabar hold divergent views on kinship practices, conjugality, female education, marriageable age of women, purdah and the political

participation of women. This heterogeneity observed in views of Muslim women must be analysed with a sense of historicity and, the context-specific transformation of the public sphere in colonial and post-colonial Malabar.

The ethnographic journey on the Malabar coast is a journey of exploration through its diversities. Malabar Muslims are embedded in the socio-cultural and political history of Malabar as diverse communities who have played significant role in different spheres at various junctures. In the context of the process of othering and essentialist political reformulations that the Muslim communities experience in South Asia and elsewhere in contemporary times, an exploration of the everyday practices of matrilineal Muslims of Malabar becomes relevant and put forth the possibility to challenge the essentialist claims. Like any other religious communities, matrilineal Malabar Muslims are also shaped by contextual specificities.

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