

**CASTE, SEXUALITY AND THE PUBLIC
SPACE: A STUDY ON 'MORAL
POLICING' IN KERALA**

*A thesis submitted to the University of Hyderabad in partial fulfillment of the
requirements for the award of the degree of*

DOCTOR OF PHILOSOPHY

IN

HUMAN RIGHTS

BY

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DECLARATION

I, **Praveena K P**, hereby declare that this thesis entitled “**Caste, Sexuality and the Public Space: A Study on Moral Policing in Kerala**” submitted by me under the guidance and supervision of **Dr. Deepa Sreenivas**, Professor, Centre for Women’s Studies is a bonafide research work which is also free from plagiarism. I also declare that it has not been submitted previously in part or in full to this University or any other University or Institution for the award of any degree or diploma. I hereby agree that my thesis can be deposited in Shodganga/INFLIBNET.

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Further, the student has following publication (s) before submission of the thesis for adjudication and has produced evidence for the same in the form of acceptance letter or the reprint in the relevant area of this research.

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Abbreviations

CITU :Centre of India Trade Union

CMS :Church Mission Society

CPM :Communist Party of India (Marxist)

DBA :Dalit Bahujan Adivasi

GVP :Grameena Vanitha Prasthanam

KOL :Kiss of Love”

KPMS : Kerala Pulayar Maha Sabha

LGBT : Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, and Transgender

NCRB :National Crime Records Bureau

NSS :Nair Service Society

PIL :Public Interest Litigation

PRDS :Prathyaksha Raksha Daiyva Sabha

RSS :Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh

SJPS : Sadhu Jana Paripalan Sangham

SMF :Swathanthra Malsya Thozhilali Federation

T MV :Theeradesa Mahila Vedi'

SNDP :Sree Narayana Dharma Paripalana Sangham

SVSV :Sadhujan Vimochana Samyukta Vedi

M S M :Mahila Seva Mandal

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Chapter 1

Introduction: Situating Caste, Gender and Public Space in Kerala

This study tries to understand the non-identical contexts and meanings of “moral policing” in contemporary Kerala. Moral policing is a frequently used term by the media and social activists to draw attention to the control and forceful inhibition of individuals’ right to personal freedom in public space by another group of people that wields hegemony and power. The “moral police” acts as an agency to protect and save the ‘so- called morality’ of society through physical and verbal violence. The advocates of moral policing are predominantly men who exercise power in terms of their social hierarchy, such as caste and class, and they claim to be the bearers of social norms, interested in the maintenance of existing morality. They dictate the social behaviour of the people, and act as the protectors and saviours of the “moral” norms in society. The moral police interfere in ways that disrupt and curtail the freedom of expression and personal and social lives of marginalised groups, like women, Dalits, tribes, and LGBT communities.

In general, any intimate relationship between a woman and a man that is looked upon could be considered a moral policing issue. The authority of women's bodies and sexuality is implied through the control of their use of space. In response to women's need and desire to attend public spaces within and around educational institutions, colleges have implemented measures like discipline and surveillance, to give one significant example. The protective measures which are nominally in place to ensure women's safety work against the fundamental concept of a secure

public space. The areas are becoming more hazardous, masculinized, dehumanised, and off-limits.¹

On 24th January, 2009, a group of young men and women were attacked by the members of the rightwing outfit Sri Ram Sena at a pub in Mangalore for 'desecrating Indian culture by drinking and partying together. As a protest against this act, Nisha Susan, a journalist based in Delhi, launched a Facebook group called 'Consortium of Pub-Going, Loose and Forward Women 5th February, 2009. The 'Pink Chaddi Campaign (or, Pink Underwear Campaign) garnered wide attention and adopted a Gandhian, non-violent mode of protesting against the repressive extremist group, Sri Ram Sena's violence against women and their partners who chose to visit the pub. As part of this campaign, around 4000 pink underwear were dispatched by members of Pink Chaddi group and others from across the country to the head office of the *Sriram Sena*.

In 2005, dance bars were banned in Maharashtra by the coalition government of the Congress and the Nationalist Congress Party based on the claim that these were hubs of crime and 'immoral activities.' As a result of the ban, a large number of dancers, more than 75,000 by one estimate, were left jobless, many of them turning to prostitution, as per reports. The banning of bar dancers in pubs in Mumbai got enormous attention and became a discussion in activist and academic spheres. According to Shefali Chandra, the political party Shiv Sena, which is dominated by Brahman and Maratha groups, has a record of disrupting lesbian-themed films, attacking the idea/observance of Valentine's Day which is supposedly a corrupt western influence, and the most

¹Bijayalaxmi Nanda, Mahuya Bandyopadhyay, Nonica Dutta and Shadab Bano, "Women on Campus: Negotiating Spaces and Silences". *Economic and Political Weekly*, 46, no. 53(2011): 27.

"Women on Campus: Negotiating Spaces and Silences". *Economic and Political Weekly*, 46, no. 53(2011): 27.

recent opposition of the repeal of Section 377 of the Indian Penal Code, which criminalises certain sexual acts as unnatural offences. Growingly, the argument that homosexuality is a western import and not indigenous to India derives its legitimacy from defining sexuality in terms of local and foreign, native and western. The invisible and movable relationships between race, caste, and sexuality are where the patriarchal interests of Indian national culture thrive.²

In India, the question of morality is intimately related to the hierarchical and pyramidal structure of the caste system. Dr. Ambedkar observes that the family morality of India is a product of Hinduism, which accepted *Manusmruti* as the basis of their customary laws³. Uma Chakravarti also draws attention to the fact that Hindu society is known for its justification of strong social segregation, that has subjected women and people from lower castes to oppressive conditions of living. The basic concepts of Brahmanical social order are caste and gender hierarchies.⁴ Lower caste women, especially Dalit women, are viewed as merely ‘sexual subjects’ in the savarna dominated consciousness of the Indian public.⁵

The public sphere of Kerala is considered a rational, progressive one without any concerns of caste or gender due to its long-term engagement with the left political movement and enlightenment

² Shefali Chandra, “Whiteness on the Margins of Native Patriarchy: Race, Caste, Sexuality, and the Agenda of Transnational Studies”, *Feminist Studies*, 37, no.1 (2011):127-153.

³ B.R. Ambedkar, *Dr. Babasaheb Ambedkar: Writings and Speeches, Vol. 1*, (New Delhi: Dr. Ambedkar Foundation, 2014):27-28.

⁴ Uma Chakravarti, "Conceptualising Brahmanical Patriarchy in Early India: Gender Caste, Class and State", *Economic and Political Weekly*, 27, no. 14 (1993): 579-585.

⁵ M. N. Sanil, “Dalit Sthree:Brahmanic Sthreevadam, Snagharshangalude bhoomika Aaya Thozhil, Vidyabhyasam laingikatha, linganeethi enniva (Dalit Women:Brahmanic Feminism, Employment Education, Sexuality and Gender Justice).K. M Venugopal,ed. (Thiruvananthapuram: Sign Books, 2006),120-26.

modernity. However, the exclusion of lower caste communities from the dominant public sphere is a reality. Notwithstanding the progressive image of Kerala, the incessant violence against marginalised castes makes them feel under constant surveillance, as if they are in an invisible engagement with it. The Kerala public sphere is deployed around the dominant upper caste value system and adopts it as normative; thus, by its standards, a woman, a Dalit, or a transgender person is not recognised as a rightfully entitled individual.

This study primarily focuses on the question of caste and gender in the context of morality policing in Kerala as a dominating phenomenon that excludes or terminates Dalit women's subjectivity in the public sphere. In Kerala, moral norms are constructed through the channels of colonial modernity and renaissance. This 'modern notion' of morality has resulted in the idea of an ideal family. Society, as an extension of family, generates similar patriarchal as well as gender and caste prejudiced behaviours. Moreover, these power relations define the placement of women in the domestic sphere and men in the public domain.

The influence of colonial modernity facilitated the position of the lower caste men into a marginally upward position through the Renaissance, but at the same time it limited the mobility of lower caste women, even though the upper caste women, especially the Nair and Syrian Christian women, have been privileged from the reformation of their community through the enlightenment modernity disseminated by public institutions like the Christian churches, Hindu temples, educational institutions, and cultural organisations. However, it has been extremely hard for Kerala Dalits to engage with the phenomenon of modernity through anti-caste struggles alone because slavery and its consequences were so deeply reflected in their lives. Therefore, they struggled to attain membership in a society like Kerala, which was in the process of modernity in the early twentieth century. Dalits as a community were not formed in those periods; however,

they were scattered as different groups and searched for opportunities for a decent life. A large number of people who came out of enslavement had converted to Christianity in the central Travancore region.

Dalits who decided not to embrace Christianity continued in a life of slavery, such as bonded labour or other caste-based occupations customarily marked out for , such as bon.’ Simultaneously, compared to their counterparts who had converted to Christianity, their chances to aspire for human status were dismal. For instance, lower castes, like the Channars who embraced Christianity, had attained the right to wear upper clothes in the late 19th century itself. However, the Dalits, especially the women of the community, did not acquire those rights until the *Kallumalaisamaram* happened in the 1920s.

The lower caste women were forced to carry their caste identity by not wearing upper clothes, thus, marked by both caste oppression and gender oppression. However, in the mid-19th century, ‘The Channar Revolt Led by the Channar (Nadar) community, women who converted to Christianity led the struggle known as ‘led Channar revolt.’ It was the first engagement of the lower caste women for their right to cover the breast as a political claim in the public sphere of Kerala. Later in the early 20th century, Ayyankali led the rebellion of the women for freedom from caste symbols like the *Kallumala* (stone necklace) and other customary symbols of untouchability. Contemporaneously, educated reformist upper caste men led struggles that were widely recognised as progressive—for widow marriage, temple entry, intercaste dining, and intercaste marriage. It may be noted that the identity of upper caste men in Kerala has been represented as the bearers of social norms as well as reformist and progressive, notwithstanding the fact that lower caste women and men had initiated extremely difficult and risk-laden battles for their humanity during the same period.

The various caste groups in Kerala have engaged with colonial modernity in different ways. The dominant caste people introduced reforms within their community itself, and at the same time, the missionary discourse attempted to reform the lower caste communities in ways that would allow them to achieve a human position and shed off the bonds of slavery and inhumanity. However, both were entirely dissimilar engagements with modernity because the dominant caste communities had used modernity for forming and retrenching their community organisations. However, on the contrary, the lower caste people, especially the Dalits, could not reform themselves as a community. Thus, colonial modernity gave privileges like a patriarchal parenting consciousness to educated upper caste men as protectors of the ‘moral codes’ of Kerala society. Since the 1990s, various identities like Dalits, Adivasis, women, and sexual minorities have gained visibility in the social sphere of Kerala. This new engagement led to various discussions around the public sphere of Kerala society.

Statement of the Problem

The Indian Constitution ensures fundamental rights for its citizens to enjoy basic freedom. As I will argue in this dissertation, a dominant group in society, thus violating the very premise of the Constitution, violates basic rights like equality and freedom of marginalised groups. "Moral policing" is ultimately a violation of human rights, and persons/groups are persecuted and terrorised for their actions based on their caste, class and gender identities. Thus, this work will mainly focus on how caste oppression subjects Dalit women to scandal, salacity and bodily harm and determines their status and respectability in the public sphere.

In Kerala, widely known as a model progressive state, Dalits, women, Adivasis and sexual minorities are severely victimised by moral policing. In the Muthanga and Chengara land

struggles, the state used its power through agencies like the police to suppress the genuine rights of the landless Dalits and Adivasis. Simultaneously, a public sphere emerged where the dominant caste, mainstream media, and major political parties joined and emerged as a dominant voice in favour of the state. The state as well as the public sphere subjected the people who struggled for their basic rights to extreme violence. Habermas defines the public sphere as a sphere that mediates between society and state, in which the public organises itself as the bearer of public opinion.⁶ In the context of moral policing in Kerala, the bearers of so-called morality obstruct the democratic and free engagement that marks the idea of the public sphere. Habermas's theory of the public sphere helps us understand the issue of moral policing in a theoretical way. Kerala is considered an economically developed state in India; however, its dominant moral codes preempt any radical cultural transformation of society.

Kerala society has evolved through the process of engagement with the colonial modernity renaissance, which made "modern Kerala". However, the social structure that developed through modernity is not egalitarian because the reform movement emerged in Kerala at the hands of only a select group of western educated upper caste men. These reformist men accepted the superiority of western notions like rationality, progress, impersonal bureaucracy, and modernization in the public sphere. Paradoxically, they maintained their cultural superiority (based on caste and gender) in the public, private, and spiritual realms.

Objectives of the Study

⁶Jürgen Habermas, trans. Sara Lennox and Frank Lennox, "The Public Sphere: An Encyclopedia Article," *New German Critique*, no. 3 (1974): 50.

This thesis tries to analyse the intersectional dimension of "moral policing" in the public space of Kerala. It tries to critically examine the modernity and dominant public sphere of Kerala in order to trace the linearity of caste and gendered customary practices and the struggles against them.

This work primarily focuses on the analysis of the myth that Dalit women are inherently morally loose, an unwritten code that underlies many of our accepted practices. Thus, Dalit women are not protected by patriarchal moral norms, as they are not pure. This thesis enquires as to why caste purity, chastity, and virginity are the pre-given conditions of the morality of upper caste women and why such conditions are neither available nor applicable when it comes to the context of Dalit women. It will further examine the instrumental role of the reformist upper caste men in maintaining moral norms and how the hegemonic project through caste Hindu codes permeated through the *Manusmriti* has influenced the Kerala morality discourse.

This study also addresses the question of the untouchability and sexual exploitation of Dalit women (the simultaneous untouchability/sexual availability of Dalit women's bodies). The Sirasgaon⁷ and Chunduru⁸ incidents of violence against Dalits demonstrate the ironically connected relationship between deeply ingrained caste slavery and sexual exploitation, along with

⁷ The atrocity against five Dalit women in Sirasgaon is an example of the countless cases where sexual violence is used to humiliate Dalit women. Upper caste men assume the status of owning Dalit women's bodies. On December 22, 1963, in a Maharashtra village, Sirasgaon, five Dalit women were stripped naked by a group of upper-caste men and paraded through the village for the 'crime' of filling water from a common well. The village *sarpanch* and a policeman were part of the group, which speaks of the impunity of the men and the complicity of the state in the act.

⁸ On August 6, 1991, eight Dalits were massacred by the upper caste Reddys and Kapus in the village of Chunduru in Andhra Pradesh, as a culmination of upper caste anger and resentment against Dalits. Local policemen were complicit with the dominant caste groups in misleading the Dalits and perpetrating the violence against them.

the idea of purity in the sexually controlled/dominated body of the upper caste woman. It contextualises this notion and demands how Dalit women differ from other groups in their engagement with enlightenment modernity. What are the unique ways in which bodies and experiences of women from different social locations are organised within the caste system, and How is Dalit women's placement in the private and public spheres affected by the new systems of sexual servitude imposed on them? How might these be similar to or different from the sexual oppression of formerly untouchable women? How does the new order of sexual slavery of formerly untouchable women reflect on the so-called vibrant rational state of Kerala? How do the imbrications of sexuality, family structure, and community orientation, exclusion and invisibility lead to violence in the public sphere? Why is mob violence treated as a phenomenon deserved by Dalit women survivors/victims as opposed to an ethical concern for a civil society?

This study tries to understand the historic background of caste, slavery, and sexual oppression of lower caste women in the public space of India. It also seeks to reflect on the social construction of morality in the public and private domains of Kerala by analysing the present moral policing experiences of women from the lower castes in particular, simultaneously comparing and contrasting with similar experiences faced by women in general.

The study examines the nature and characteristics of organised mobs that impose moral policing and analyses the privileges of groups that emerge in a specific setting and period. Violence against Dalits, specifically Dalit women, does not generate the same kind of outrage or moral condemnation as does violation of human rights in the context of moral policing incidents. Furthermore, this study also tries to analyse the different trajectories of moral policing against Dalit women in their everyday lives.

Review of Literature

Indian Civil Society and the Public Space

In this study, a theoretical foundation for the concepts of "morality," "respectability," and public realm discourses is attempted. Several works have been produced on the public sphere in the Indian context, although they primarily concentrate on the literary and cultural public sphere. Public discussions, in which language and culture are largely dominant, are influenced by the media and literary works. Certain hegemonic inclinations render other cultural experiences illegitimate or mute in these domains. Social disparities constantly pose a threat to the equitable distribution of space. In Indian public life, some communities were rarely given any recognition. In the Indian context, it is certainly necessary to explore the connections between culture, politics, and society. Hindus of the higher caste had exclusive access to the public realm from the creation of the Indian public sphere. Those from the economically underprivileged lower caste and Dalit communities have extremely restricted access to and participation in the public domain.

According to B.R Ambedkar, the concept of true freedom is not merely political; it is also, economic, social, intellectual, and spiritual. He believed that the state as an institution must protect the rights of every person to life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness; the right of every class and caste to economic and political equality; and the right of everyone to enjoy freedom from want

and freedom from fear.⁹ His concept of civil, political, and economic rights for individuals gave the basic notions for rights in the Indian public sphere. Here, the question of the private and public spheres are very essential when it comes to women and public space. Therefore, I borrow the theoretical base from the European context in which the idea of the public sphere developed.

For Habermas, “the public sphere is conceptually a realm of our social life in which something approaching public opinion can be formed. He elaborates on the emergence of the public, private, and intimate spheres and the exclusion of some groups from bourgeois society. A portion of the public sphere comes into being in every conversation in which private individuals assemble to form a public society.”¹⁰

The public sphere proposed by Habermas was to be a space for discourse where "private persons" may discuss "public matters." Since there are no social or political safeguards for pluralism for the majority, private interests take precedence over those of the public interest in determining what is best for everyone. 'Private persons' were to discuss 'public matters' in Habermas' public domain, which was to be a discursive setting. The common good is decided by the incentives of private interest instead of public interest because there is no social or political guarantee for pluralism for the majority.

⁹ Madan Gopal Chitakara, *Dr. Ambedkar and Social Justice* (New Delhi: APH Publishing, 2002), 67.

¹⁰Jürgen Habermas, trans. Sara Lennox and Frank Lennox, “The Public Sphere: An Encyclopedia Article,” *New German Critique*, no. 3 (1974): 49.

Jurgen Habermas defines the public sphere as a terrain that mediates between society and the state, in which the public organises itself as the bearer of public opinion.¹¹ For the theoretical understanding of the Kerala public, I take the Habermasian idea of the public sphere, feminist critique of the public sphere, and Ambedkarite and other Indian theorizations of the same public as the theoretical basis for my study. Habermas questioned the public sphere, where the bourgeoisie dominates and makes public opinion impossible. He imagined a public sphere that is more participatory, modern, and democratic in character. As Habermas proposes, the public sphere is the bourgeoisie-dominated public sphere, which was symbolised by coffee shops, saloons, and table societies in eighteenth-century Europe. These spaces were important for democratic involvement. Habermas's work, *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere*, describes the bourgeois public sphere as a place where private individuals transcend their private preoccupations to come together as the "public" and form an interactive body of citizens engaged in rational-critical discourse addressing common goals. Social actors learn to exchange ideas and unite the public through communication.¹²

Habermas contends that the purpose of the public sphere is to balance power through reasoned discourse. Later, he transformed his conceptualization into the theory of communicative action, which defines action based on a shared understanding of circumstances that depend on the acceptance of societal norms as well as individual identities. In fact, the primary objective of Habermas's concept of the public sphere is the power of human communication to promote a more

¹¹ Jürgen Habermas, *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere: An Inquiry into a Category of Bourgeois Society* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1989), 49-50.

¹² Jürgen Habermas, *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere: An Inquiry into a Category of Bourgeois Society* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1991), 49.

reasonable society. Additionally, he argues that the public sphere is a phenomenon that is distinct from the idea of social order because it cannot be seen as an institution and most definitely not as an organisation. As a result, he redefines the public realm as a network for communicating information and opinions.¹³

A historical-sociological explanation of the birth, transformation, and destruction of the bourgeois public sphere can be obtained in *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere*. It uses information and techniques from sociology, economics, law, political science, and social and cultural history in an endeavour to understand the conditions, architecture, purposes, and internal conflicts of this key area of contemporary society. The liberal public sphere emerged as a space between civil society and the state, where critical public dialogue on topics of general interest was institutionally protected, given the specific historical setting of an evolving market economy. In opposition to the hidden and bureaucratic practises of the absolutist state, the emergence of the bourgeoisie gradually replaced a public sphere in which the ruler's power was merely represented before the people with a sphere in which state authority was publicly monitored through informed and critical discourse by the people.¹⁴

The feminist criticism of Habermas's idea of the "public sphere" foregrounds the exclusion of women's agency as citizens. In addition, it analyzes the discourses in public spheres restricted to deliberation about the common good, thereby making private interests or private issues always

¹³ Mayengbam Nandakishwor Singh, "Jürgen Habermas's notion of the public sphere: a perspective on the conceptual transformations in his thought," *The Indian Journal of Political Science* 73, no. 4 (2012): 633-642.

¹⁴ Jürgen Habermas, *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere: An Inquiry into a Category of Bourgeois Society* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1991), xi.

undesirable. According to Nancy Fraser, researchers including Jon Landes, Mary Ryan, and Geoff Elley argue that Habermas's approach idealises the liberal public sphere. They contend that the official public realm is substantively composed of a number of substantial exclusions, notwithstanding the rhetoric of publicity and accessibility that it relies on.¹⁵

Fraser points out that Habermas's analysis of the bourgeois conception of the public sphere emphasises its claim to be inclusive and open to all. In fact, one of the primary meanings of this idea is the concept of free access. However, because of their assigned gender status, women of all classes and races were prohibited from official political participation. She also observes that the Habermasian notion of the public sphere masks the domination of those marginalised by gender, class, or ethnicity. Unevenly privileged social groups often create unequally admired cultural trends in stratified societies. To cite Fraser:

This conception assumes that a public sphere is or can be a space of zero degree culture, so utterly bereft of any specific ethos as to accommodate, with perfect neutrality and equal ease, interventions expressive of any and every cultural ethos.¹⁶

However, it is important to note that such assumptions may pose a challenge, as Fraser points out. This is because societies are stratified in a manner wherein certain groups have access to an unequal share of power and therefore develop cultural styles that are valued differentially in society. In such circumstances, subordinated groups face further marginalisation of their cultural

¹⁵ Nancy Fraser, "Rethinking the Public Sphere: A Contribution to the Critique of Actually Existing Democracy," *Social Text*, no. 25/26 (1990): 56–80.

¹⁶ Nancy Fraser, "Rethinking the Public Sphere: A Contribution to the Critique of Actually Existing Democracy". 64.

contributions through informal forms of pressure. This negatively impacts their everyday life contexts and their negotiations with the formal settings of the public sphere.¹⁷

As a result, strong informal forces that marginalise the contributions of members of oppressed groups both in everyday life and in official public spaces have emerged. Moreover, the particular political economy of the bourgeois public realm amplifies these tensions instead of reducing them. Nancy Fraser also talks about the importance of multi-publics where people from different social groups engage in debate or dialogue. She also coined the term “interpublic relations” to signify the discursive interaction between different publics.¹⁸

According to John L. Brooks, black people appeared in public on their own terms to defend their collective identity and sense of self-ownership. Through an engagement with diverse positions in the public sphere, he indicates a more expansive theoretical position: counter publics of all kinds are structurally or constitutionally disadvantaged and, by definition, will construct a language of collective voice and identity.¹⁹ Brookes observes that while Habermas provided a comparatively simple story of “open rational discourse tightly bounded in social space and time,” bounded in social is a far more complex and ambiguous picture filled with edges, boundaries, and hidden places.

¹⁷ Nancy Fraser, “Rethinking the Public Sphere: A Contribution to the Critique of Actually Existing Democracy”. 64.

¹⁸ Nancy Fraser, “Rethinking the Public Sphere,” 60-66.

¹⁹ John L. Brooke, “On the Edges of the Public Sphere,” *The William and Mary Quarterly* 62, no. 1 (2005): 98.

Rajeev Bhargava notes that the Indian public sphere differs from the European public sphere in experience and trajectory. India, like many other postcolonial societies, is closely linked to European modernity. Therefore, the cultural interactions between the public spheres of Europe and India are closely related to the experience of modernity in Europe. India's modern public life is expected to have a variety of distinct characteristics; hence, the modernity that pertains to it is distinct from western modernity.²⁰

Bhargava also draws on Farhat Hasan's arguments to support his claim that civil society and the “public sphere” existed in pre-British India. The assertion is based on the rupture between the spatial and temporal disjunctions of history. Mainly in the legal-sacral setting, at the place of worship, the public sphere emerged. Apart from the prayer gatherings, this place served as an arena for establishing the legitimacy of political authority and represented at least a minimal level of involvement on the part of the ruled. Hasan also draws attention to how ceremonial, oral, and written forms of communication are interpreted, all of which highlight the vibrant public presence. These public spheres extended to the market places, where literature and art were popular topics of discussion, but they lacked an egalitarian atmosphere. Though the women were allowed in the marked places, their involvement was limited.²¹

Amir Ali observes that the Indian public sphere has evolved from a colonial public sphere to a popular national public sphere, subsequently becoming an entity with a predominantly Hindu

²⁰ Rajeev Bhargava, “Introduction,” in *Civil Society, Public Sphere and Citizenship: Dialogues and Perceptions*, eds., Rajeev Bhargava and Helmut Reifeld (New Delhi: Sage India, 2005), 35-37.

²¹ Farhat Hasan “Forms of civility and publicness in pre-British India,” in *Civil society, public sphere, and citizenship: Dialogues and perceptions*, eds., Rajeev Bhargava and Helmut Reifeld (New Delhi: Sage India, 2005): 84-105

nationalist influence. It demonstrates the refusal to admit cultural diversity and the failure of India's public sphere to represent a plurality of cultures. Additionally, it made the space inaccessible to members of minority groups and led to their exclusion from it.²²

Partha Chatterjee has discussed the emergence of private and public space in the colonial context. He observes that nationalism confronted imperialism by creating its own domain of sovereignty within colonial society. In this formulation, the upper caste women were part of the spiritual/inner domain, while the men of the community could participate in the colonial/outer public sphere on the path of material progress. This split can be identified as inner/outer, spiritual/material and home/world. The nationalist ideology thus also posited upper caste women as bearers of spirituality, thus distinct from women from lower castes. Chatterjee further argues that “new patriarchy”²³ was distinct in the sense that it sharply conceptualised those “who were coarse, vulgar, loud, quarrelsome, devoid of superior moral sense, sexually promiscuous” and positioned them as subjects of brutal masculine physical oppression.²⁴

According to Neeladri Bhattacharya, the public sphere that developed in colonial India cannot be thought of as a uniform, consensual, or unitary domain. It has many subcategories. This segmentation no longer represents the modern public's past or the early phases of its development; rather, it now characterises the public as a whole and identifies its cultural diversity and

²² Amir Ali, “Evolution of the Public Sphere in India,” *Economic and Political Weekly* 36, no. 26 (2001): 2419.

²³ Partha Chatterjee, *The Nation and its Fragments: Colonial and Postcolonial Histories* (Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1993), 127

²⁴ Partha Chatterjee, *The Nation and its Fragments: Colonial and Postcolonial Histories* (Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1993), 127.

polyvalence, and highlights the constant risk of violent splits. Further, he says, in contrast to Habermasian publics that celebrate freedom, the colonial public sphere of India does not involve the vocabulary of freedom. The colonial state attempted to establish legitimacy for its rule through sanctioned public rituals, performances, and literature. The public sphere has evolved into a contested space. While colonial rulers used it to extend their influence, Indians attempted to wrest control so that they could use it to discuss their history and heritage, define their identities, and challenge the very foundations of British rule.²⁵

Gopal Guru holds the view that the Indian public sphere as a complex realm that is not balanced in terms of caste, class, gender, or religion. He raises the impossibility of Dalit citizenship in a Hindu-dominated public sphere; therefore, he problematizes the idea of inclusion and exclusion by highlighting how the dream of equal citizenship rights eludes Dalits. He also brings out how Dalit women are merely represented through reservation in the Panchayat or Mandal and thus projected as if they are part of the public sphere when there is no substantive inclusion. Further, he points out that Dalit citizenship in India is exiled, as the notion of purity and contamination permeates Indian society, significantly destroying the possibility of intimacy. Due to this ideology, the lines between the private and public spheres are being erased, social discrimination is freely moving from one area to another, and secular concepts like citizenship are continuously undermined.²⁶

²⁵ Neeladri Bhattacharya, "Notes towards a Conception of the Colonial Public," In *Civil Society, Public Sphere, and Citizenship: Dialogues and Perceptions*, eds. Rajeev Bhargava and Helmut Reifeld (New Delhi: Sage India, 2005), 153–156.

²⁶ Gopal Guru, "Citizenship in Exile: A Dalit Case," In *Civil Society, Public Sphere, and Citizenship: Dialogues and Perceptions*, eds. Rajeev Bhargava and Helmut Reifeld (New Delhi: Sage India, 2005), 262–276.

Thomas Blom Hansen says different Dalit publics are marked by distinctive symbols, festivals, and gathering places that honour a shared experience of stigmatisation. According to Hansen, shared experiences of stigmatisation and a common struggle for recognition bring the public together. This cannot be understood through the dominant idea of the public sphere, which is relegated to the network of institutions, texts, and linguistic performances. The assertion of constitutional rights organises the ethos of the Dalit public sphere, which stands in sharp contrast to the cultural and social hegemonic ideals of the caste Hindus. Therefore, Hansen terms them as the ‘counterpublics’ directly challenging the naturalised caste order.²⁷

In several regions of India, autonomous and independent public spheres have developed because of the long tradition of Dalit writing and modes of civic engagement. Those that have historically been disregarded by upper-caste mainstream academics and intellectuals. Neera Chandhoke explores another dimension of civil society and public sphere engagement. She states that society itself is riddled with power equations of all kinds—those of patriarchy, class, caste, and religion. In this context, she believes that one must look at the issues of large-scale displacement and denial of basic rights for Tribal and Dalit communities happening all over India. She observes:

We can, in effect, think of various spheres of human interaction in terms of the *different* ways in which human beings make their own history. Therefore, we can, speaking purely theoretically, refer to different sets and kinds of interactions in the household, the economy, civil society, and politics. What, however, should be resisted is that these sectors of human

²⁷ Thomas Blom Hansen, “Whose Public, Who’s Authority? Reflections on the Moral Force of Violence,” *Modern Asian Studies* 52, no. 3 (2018): 1082.

activity do not constitute each other or that they are marked by an exclusive and discrete logic that differs from site to site for such interactions.²⁸

Singh reflects on the character of the Indian public sphere towards the rights of minorities. He observes that the Indian public sphere does not take into account the plurality of cultures. The deliberations are governed by the voices of the dominant culture. He looks at the dominant notion of the Indian public sphere with its inherent caste nature and its deliberate exclusion of class, gender, caste, and minority issues from the public sphere. According to Singh, there is no socio-political protection for the pluralism of the masses, and as a result, the “common good” (as referred to by Habermas) is directed by the motivations of powerful private interest groups.²⁹

K. Sathyanarayana states that recognition is the major challenge faced by Dalits in the mainstream public sphere. In the context of Telangana and Andhra Pradesh, the public intellectuals, writers, poets, activists, and students belonging to the Dalit community formed themselves into a distinct group. The conception, reception, and retention of modernity among different social groups in India vary depending on the structural advantage offered to each by historical conditions. Unlike dominant castes, for the lower castes, democracy came first as a modern value. It created new areas in the real world for their emancipation as equal citizens. He suggests that the social visibility of dalits as a public course did not begin in the 1970s, even though Dalit movement began during that time. The Dalit intelligentsia experienced a new visibility in the 1990s. This was due to the Dalit

²⁸ Neera Chandhoke, “The ‘Civil’ and the ‘Political’ in Civil Society,” *Democratization* 8, no. 2 (2001): 8.

²⁹ Shashi Ratnakar Singh, “People and the Public Sphere in India,” *Social Change* 39, no. 2 (2009): 270-280.

literary movement and the socio-cultural organisations, that allowed for sharp critiques of spaces. This also led to new forums and spaces coming up so that the Dalits could articulate a new politics.³⁰

Partha Chatterjee observes that because colonialism and the history of modernity are intertwined, we have never quite been able to accept the idea that there is a universal space of free speech that is unrestricted by racial or national disparities. It has been assumed that, given the intimate relationship between contemporary knowledge and modern regimes of power, we would always be its consumers and would never be taken seriously as its producers of knowledge. This is the reason why we in India have been attempting for more than a century to turn our attention away from this fictitious idea of universal modernity and create a space where we may design our own modernity.³¹

For women in general, colonial modernity was a project that marked their space between the private and public, and various factors determined their entry into the public sphere. Maitrayee Chaudhuri points out how a process of refashioning gender norms in the name of "culture" and "refinement" by the emergent Indian middle class went hand in hand with the process of recasting women as cultural symbols. Reformers and nationalists attempted to "refine" Indian women, motivated by the notion that the culture and gender standards of the Victorian upper class were a

³⁰ Kusuma Satyanarayana, "The Dalit Reconfigurations of Modernity: Citizens and Castes in the Telugu Public Sphere" in *Dalit Studies: New Perspectives on Indian History and Society*, eds., Ramnarayan S. Rawat and Kusuma Satyanarayana (Duke University Press, 2016):163.

³¹ Partha Chatterjee, *Our Modernity* (Rotterdam & Dakar: Sephis, 1997), 24.

good example to strive for. Often, it meant imposing dress and behaviour norms that would “train, improve, and nourish the gentler and nobler qualities of heart,” as well as “genteel norms” and “domestic virtues.”³²

Women’s Sexuality, Agency and “Moral Policing”

There have been several studies on Dalit women, specifically on the issue of sexual violence against them. However, studies on institutionalised violence like forced sex work and other sexual labour by Dalit women can be taken as a major source for the genesis of hypersexualizing Dalit women's bodies. As a theoretical foundation for this thesis, I have drawn on research on Black women's sexual politics because several examples from my study indicate that Dalit women face many experiences similar to those of Black women. In Dalit women's experiences, hypersexualization of their bodies/identity is routinely prevalent. As I have mentioned earlier, in India, colonialism and European education, in association with the emergent middle class discourse, created certain norms drawing from Victorian morality.

According to Foucault's theory of sexual repression, since the emergence of the bourgeoisie in the eighteenth century, sexuality emerged as a purely pleasurable pursuit. Consequently, sex was viewed as a personal, practical activity that should only be engaged in between a husband and wife for the purposes of reproduction. Sex outside these boundaries was not only forbidden but also suppressed. This meant that there was a concerted effort to make extramarital sex unthinkable, immoral and horrifying, in addition to efforts to prevent it. Marriage was the only setting where

³² Maitrayee Chaudhuri, *Indian Women's Movement: Reform and Revival* (India: Radiant Publishers, 1992), 31-32.

sexuality was permissible. In his work *History of Sexuality*, Foucault discusses puritanical sexual repression-the idea that anything sexual must be suppressed in order to be modern and civilized³³.

There was a silence in academia on sexuality in the Indian context until the late 1990s. Mary E John and Janaki Nair point out how the conspiracy of silence surrounding sexuality in India, whether it be in political and social movements or academic circles, makes us blind to the many contexts in which "sexuality" has been deeply ingrained for a long time. Sexuality has a substantial presence in fields such as law, demography, and medicine. "Sexuality," as John and Nair argue, connotes a manner of treating sexual relations and their realms of legality and illegitimacy through institutions and practises rather than biological geniality. Since feminist activism for women's rights to their bodies and lives has increased, sexuality has taken centre stage in political groups and scholarly discourse. For a very long time, women's rights to their bodies, the patriotic norms of honour, and their sexuality were completely devalued and repressed. Women are the bearers of the brutal scars left by society's destructive stereotypes of caste, ethnicity, and nationalism. The middle-class upper caste looks at her as the embodiment of the lines between licit and unlawful sexual behaviour and the moral compass of the country. Woman is the foundation upon which concerns about modernity and tradition are built.³⁴

Sexuality has always been a critical topic in moral policing against women. Shailaja Paik observes that Dalit and African American women, respectively, have each been subjected to double exploitation as "women" by Dalit and non-Dalit and African American and White males. Both

³³ Michel Foucault, *The History of Sexuality: An Introduction*, vol. I, trans. Robert Hurley (New York: Vintage, 1990), 124

³⁴ Mary E. John and Janaki Nair, *A Question of Silence?: The Sexual Economics of Modern India* (New Delhi: Kali for Women, 1998), 1-7.

communities have high rates of sexual exploitation and rape, which the dominant race/caste groups deploy as tools to undermine Dalit and African American women, whose positions expressly correspond to the caste and racial systems. They are raped, not just, because they are "women," but because they are "Dalit and African American women." The combination of caste, race, and gender underlies the complexity of sexual violence. Paik posits a "margin to margin" framework for understanding Dalit and African American women's experiences and struggles. According to her, such a framework would be meaningful, given the shared history of patriarchy and the ways that Dalit and African American women have been silenced by women from the dominant caste or race. She uses the margin-to-margin framework as an overlapping of seemingly different margins in an attempt to construct new knowledge that would enable political solidarity and consciousness-building against social injustice. Furthermore, she contends that by focusing on the unique historical encounters, special situations, inconsistencies, and links between the marginalised "Dalit of the Dalits"—Dalit women and African American women—meaningful struggles and solidarities can be forged.³⁵

Sexual Politics and Identity

The nature of sexual politics becomes significantly more intricate and layered when one considers overlapping issues of race, class, or gender. As Black feminist scholarship works to unpacking the complex histories associated with the Black female body, it has become clear that it is important to look at sexual politics in conjunction with race. Patricia Hill Collins set the stage as the pioneer academic focusing on Black sexual politics in the context of African American culture. In *Black*

³⁵ Shailaja Paik, "Building Bridges: Articulating Dalit and African American Women's Solidarity" .*Women's Studies Quarterly* 42, no. 3/4 (2014): 74-75.

Sexual Politics: African Americans, Gender, and the New Racism, she discusses the many nuances that comprise the intricate nature of sexual politics in North America: the body, sexism, racism, gender roles, ideology, and even how it relates to the HIV/AIDS epidemic. Collins concedes that since the colonial archive, racism has been alive and visible in everyday life, particularly for ethnic minorities. However, this present-day racism, she argues, permeates our consciousness more subtly through social outlets like television and music. The pervasiveness of media sends conscious and unconscious messages regarding the Black body and suggests ways that are acceptable to interact with it. This new racism also serves as a tool for imposing sexual beliefs that may spread among Black people, furthering their sense of insularity and "foreignness."³⁶ Collins is one of several academics who expressly mention how the use of the sexual form has been severely hampered as a result of the slave era with regard to the erotic body. In reality, black women who were held as slaves were not regarded as human beings but rather as objects used only for labour and reproduction. Institutionalised rape and prostitution were made acceptable by white male power over the body, which was also linked to the image of a willing, subservient object for consumption.

According to Collins, the sexuality of Black women is a systemic issue that frequently involves the state and the enactment of legislation. It is not a personal concern for Black women. Collins goes on to discuss the relationship between the sexuality of Black women and the racial power structure.

³⁶ Patricia Hill Collins, *Black Sexual Politics: African Americans, Gender, and the New Racism* (New York: Routledge, 2004), 44

Mireille Miller Young observes that Black women were slaves in the past and have been stigmatised as possessing primitive sexuality and as unattractive to white men. The mythology surrounding Black women has been dehumanising, indicating that these women were so hypersexually oriented that they coerced white males into having sex when the latter were disinclined. In this humiliating framework, enslaved Black women used their sexual powers over unwitting white men. Young points out that in the United States, black women's recognition is built on the "ontological concepts of sexual deviance." Therefore, hypersexuality becomes a disciplinary mechanism in the lives of black and women of colour, that is hard to escape.³⁷

Theories of Intersectionality

The term "intersectionality" was created by Kimberlé Crenshaw to express the various ways that race and gender interact to shape Black women's experiences on a range of levels. Her goal is to demonstrate that many of the problems Black women face can be classified by race or gender. Racism and sexism as they are currently defined are so linked that examining the racial or gender elements of those experiences separately makes it impossible to understand the implications.³⁸ Crenshaw provides us with many examples of violence faced by women of colour to substantiate this proposition. Further, she uses the term "intersectionality" to unpack how women of colour are

³⁷Mireille Miller-Young, *A Taste for Brown Sugar: Black Women in Pornography* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2014), 9.

³⁸ Kimberlé Williams Crenshaw, "Mapping the margins: , identity politics, and violence against women of colour," *Stanford Law Review* 43, no. 6 (1991): 1244.

located in relation to overlapping systems of subordination as well as on the periphery of feminism and anti-racism.³⁹

According to Crenshaw, racism and sexism are present in popular conceptions of rape. Critics and campaigners have drawn attention to racist and sexist stereotypes of rape over a long time. These initiatives have brought to light how rape depictions in American society are embedded in racial and gender hierarchies. These efforts to combat racism and sexism have benefited people of colour and women who share a common environment, but scant attention has been paid to the specific gender and racial dynamics that affect women. Black women have gained some benefits politically from antiracist and anti-rape movements; however, many antiracist and feminist critiques are too narrowly focused and thus have given rise to a rhetoric that is unfair to Black women.⁴⁰

Respectability politics, as defined by Evelyn Higginbotham, is a continuum of actions and attitudes that replicate dominant norms as well as a strategy for constructing a counter-narrative to unfair perceptions of oppressed groups. Black women in the early 20th century used the "politics of respectability" to counter preconceptions that they were "immoral, childish, and unworthy of respect and protection by portraying themselves as courteous, sexually pure, and frugal."⁴¹

³⁹ Kimberlé Williams Crenshaw, "Mapping the Margin: Intersectionality, Identity Politics, and Violence Against Women of Colour, Public Nature of Private Violence," *Stanford Law Review* 43, no. 6 (1991):244.

⁴⁰ Kimberlé Williams Crenshaw, *Mapping the Margin*: 1266.

⁴¹ Evelyn Brooks Higginbotham, "African-American women's history and the metalanguage of race," *Signs Journal of Women in Culture and Society* 17, no. 2 (1992): 251-274.

Moral Policing and the Indian Public

In the context of Indian public space, the masculine power of moral policing needs to be critically examined. Men from the dominant castes have appropriated the Indian public sphere as their prerogative. As a result, it can be observed from various instances of moral policing that a crowd of men who believe themselves to be the protectors of Indians carry out acts of violence and control against women and other marginalised groups. It can be said that such vigilantism is an expansion of India's current public sphere.

According to Flavia Agnes, women's bodies are the site of the honour of their communities; thus, the rape of a woman becomes an instrument of the defilement of an entire community. The use of rape as a tool of terror and subjugation in situations involving caste, class, and communal conflicts, as well as state-sponsored and custodial rape by police, the armed forces, and the paramilitary, have all been the subject of theoretical debates and practical interventions. Rape has been a method of preserving and nurturing the social hierarchy of power relationships in a gendered society, going beyond the claim that it is a conscious process of intimidation by which all men keep all women in a state of fear.⁴²

Uma Chakravarti In her work, It is now widely acknowledged that the *streedharma* (duties of woman), also known as the *pativrata'* dharma (duties of chaste woman), was a rhetorical strategy to maintain the social control of women, particularly chastity. The *streedharma* was unmistakably

⁴² Flavia Agnes, "Law, ideology and female sexuality: Gender neutrality in rape law," *Economic and Political Weekly* 37, no. 9 (2002): 844-847.

a conceptual device for socially regulating the biological aspect of women, as laid down by Manu and developed and reiterated by *Tryambaka* in the *streedharmapaddhati*. Women are biological beings that are akin to wild or untamed nature. The biological woman, however, can be transformed into a social being in whom the biological has been controlled via the practice of *streedharma*: Contrarily, there is a systemic inversion in the Kali age specifically, where women engage in unrestricted behaviour discarding *streedharma* and abandoning all values.⁴³ Chakravarti argues that the Brahmanical Patriarchy, which controls all power relations in Indian society, is the root cause of the oppressed status of women in India.

According to Smita M. Patil, when focusing on the prevalent communitarian ideas about Dalits' sexuality, it is important to understand the socioeconomic position of Dalits in caste-ridden Indian society. It is also crucial to comprehend how Dalits interpret their own sexuality in specific ways. Oppressed classes need to be situated as a group of people with a distinct history from dominant groups and with a different psychological makeup.⁴⁴

Rekha Raj observes that proponents of moral policing, especially in its violent manifestations, are almost invariably from higher caste- class groups. This is a result of the masculine crisis that their own community structure has caused. Malayalee society has historically endured numerous forms of “taming.” Taming has had distinct effects on men and women in different ways, just as social

⁴³Uma Chakravarti, “Conceptualising Brahmanical patriarchy in early India: Gender, caste, class and state,” *Economic and Political Weekly* (1993): 583.

⁴⁴ Smita M. Patil, “Reading Caste, Gender and Sexuality in Dalit writings,” *Intersections: Gender and Sexuality in Asia and the Pacific* 34 (2014), <http://intersections.anu.edu.au/issue34/patil.htm>

justice has had different effects on a range of groups at different times. As a result, the control over the body and the power that comes with it have varied from one community to another.

Sanal Mohan observes that while the notion of colonial modernity implies that non-European societies have experienced a comparable colonial and social transformation that European societies have undergone, there is a large difference. The phenomenon of modernity encompasses all social groups and ascribes universal values to them.⁴⁵ Mohan adds that Dalits may connect with modernity since it would appear to be a tradition to them in the absence of a tradition of their own that was valued. It would not be out of place to say that Dalits turned modernity into tradition because they were able to redefine agents and subjects in the context of colonial modernity by placing new people in those places.⁴⁶

According to Dilip Menon, the use of religion by Indian intellectuals as a means of self-fashioning, social understanding, and public critique is one of the unique characteristics of colonial modernity. In India, the late 19th century is seen as the time when nationalism first emerged and people began to envision a national community. Menon points out to the Malayalam novels of the 19th century written by lower-caste novelists to discuss colonial modernity, self-fashioning, and the central role of religious imagination in situating the social self. Citing Sandria Freitag, he points to the lack of

⁴⁵ Sanal Mohan, *Modernity of Slavery: Struggles against Caste Inequality in Colonial Kerala* (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2015), 8-9.

⁴⁶ Sanal Mohan, *Modernity of Slavery: Struggles against Caste Inequality in Colonial Kerala*, 141.

integration of the alternative realm, or the counterpublics, within the British structures.⁴⁷ To cite Menon:

This realm's imagined communities were not those of national identity, and may even have been antagonistic to it. In contrast to an arena dominated by political speech. The other arena represented a space of "localised, familial and fictive kin-based activities, frequently articulated in terms of religious and familial resonances."⁴⁸

According to J. Devika, the modern educated men in late nineteenth century Malayalee society were to be bound together for the purpose of forming a 'general' or 'public' opinion, to form a nascent public sphere in Kerala. This space itself cannot be seen because of the conscious demands of modern-educated groups. It presupposes the prior transformation of social ties, and the shaping of new institutional arrangements, which reshaped the entire context of social communication. However, it was certainly the space in which new forces strove for hegemony. The challenge to the older order was frequently made in terms of an image of society in which gender-difference figured as the fundamental principle underlying the ordering of human beings in contrast to the established social order that privileged birth and inherited status. Here, Devika tries to conceptualise the formation of the modern Malayalee through an invisible agenda of Malayalee patriarchy in the Renaissance project.⁴⁹

⁴⁷ Dilip Menon, "Religion and Colonial Modernity: Rethinking Belief and Identity," *Economic and Political Weekly* 37, no. 17 (2002): 1663.

⁴⁸ Dilip Menon, "Religion and Colonial Modernity: Rethinking Belief and Identity," 1663.

⁴⁹ Devika Jayakumari, "Negotiating women's social space: public debates on gender in early modern Kerala, India," *Inter-Asia Cultural Studies* 7, no.1 (2006): 43-61.

Rekha Raj points out that the idea of a Malayalee personhood imbued with traditional values and qualities has been established as a result of the political history of Malayalee society. The Kerala Renaissance is the source of such conditioning, which introduces new ideas about the family, morality, beliefs, rituals, and sexuality. The norms of marriage, the nuclear family, and monogamy were either forced upon the Malayalee community or were rendered to them. The public space in Kerala is not merely a combination of caste, class, and patriarchy; it constructs an “other” of the positive reformist image of the upper caste Malayalee man. In Kerala society, such a paradigm of the normative Malayalee man is centred and entrenched.⁵⁰

According to Carmel Christy, Kerala still struggles with unequal power relations in terms of the access to and organisation of public space. She examines how gender and caste dynamics work in cinema, media, and law.⁵¹

The above discussion indicates the critical academic studies emerging on the subject of Dalit groups, Dalit women and public space in India. Unfortunately, the issue of Dalit women in relation to the public sphere largely appears to be centred on violence against them. There are many studies being produced on sexual violence against Dalit women; in our mainstream, it is significant that the discourse of mainstream feminism has not engaged with the required seriousness with the issue of Dalit women as an integral part of the women's question. Therefore, Dalit women scholars have

⁵⁰ Rekha Raj, “Thettukal: Kandupidichava, Kandupidikkathava” (Wrongs: Found and To Be Found). *Mathrubhumi Weekly* (2012): 19.

⁵¹ Carmel Christy K J, “The Politics of Sexuality and Caste: Looking through Kerala’s Public Space” in *Kerala Modernity: Ideas, Spaces and Practices in Transition*, eds., Satheesh Chandra Bose and Shiju Sam Vaughese (Hyderabad: Orient Black Swan, 2015): 126-145.

contested and questioned the existing knowledge of women in academia and feminist discourse, drawing their disagreements from the framework of intersectionality.

Significance of the Study

Each person is given citizenship rights (Articles 5–11) and basic rights (Articles 12–35) under the Indian Constitution, including the rights to equality, liberty, protection from exploitation, freedom of religion, and cultural and economic rights. The law prohibits discrimination of any kind against citizens based on their place of birth, race, caste, religion, or other characteristics. However, it is important to examine, situated as we are, more than seventy years after the Constitution was adopted, how far India's public realm has been influenced and enhanced by the liberal spirit of its constitutional provisions, institutional safeguards, and language of rights.

There are very few studies focused on caste and gender questions in the context of moral policing in the academic domain, although several activist voices and writings have engaged with the issue. Therefore, this study will analyse the historical links between such issues and how they emerged in the public sphere as a product of colonial modernity, the Renaissance, and caste and gender relations in Kerala society. In addition, this study tries to explore how the dominant moral norms are constituted and enforced, and relations of power determine the boundaries of Kerala public sphere from a subaltern point of view. This study will examine the role of the state in the deployment of moral policing against the less powerful groups (women, Dalits, sexual minorities, and Adivasis) in society. In addition, it will probe at the silence of the state on the violence against such marginalised groups and the state's ambivalent position on the emerging resistance of the unprivileged sections of society. Further, it attempts to demonstrate how the state and its agencies are caste, class, and masculinity-embodied institutions.

The present study is relevant in the current academic context because there are so many studies carried out on “moral policing in Kerala” from a journalistic and non-academic perspective. People from different sectors face moral policing based on their day-to-day experience in the public space, especially women who are working at specific times and spaces; for instance, women in the cinema industry, theatre, and informal sector who have to work beyond the given time (working hours) for disciplined work. The present movement of women against structural oppression in the art field, emerging from their own standpoint, is a significant development in the political domain. In the ‘#Metoo’ cyber campaign in academia and other spheres has been significantly spearheaded by Dalit women, notwithstanding their lesser visibility. During this campaign, Dalit women spoke out of the specific and continuous forms of moral policing and sexual harassment faced by them in social media, thus forming a new public, however fragile.

I will also explore the semantic and operational definitions of sexual morality, which is popularly referred to in vernacular Malayalam as *sadaacharam*⁵². The configuring and reconfiguring of this abstract concept in the regional public sphere will help explain the dynamics involved in reproducing the individual self/body as a central object in discourses of progress. Here I use the terms “sexual morality” and “moral policing”, as they interfere and intervene in the lives of women in the lower caste, especially Dalit women, and the formal and informal regulatory

⁵² In Malayalam, the phrase “*sadacharam*” refers to sexual morality. This phrase refers specifically to a person's morality. A person's moral character, or *sadaacharam*, is a quality that can help them gain respect from others. In addition, these ideals frequently have to do with having control over one's own body and behaviour. The Sadacharam Act covers untouchability, female oppression, and other inhumane practices that still exist in society. It was directly tied to people's behaviour in contemporary readings. Chattambiswamikal wrote a book titled “Sadaacharam” or the model codes. He was a reform-minded Hindu saint who wrote against the caste system.

apparatuses involved in creating an imaginary idea of their (hyper) sexuality. Several incidents in the recent past have highlighted how Dalit women's self-respect and respectability are precariously positioned, and are at risk through subtle or overt policing. This thesis aims to explore how Dalit women are re-produced as inhuman/subhuman objects through the dominant ideology surrounding their sexuality and agency. They are portrayed by the Brahminical patriarchy as absolute sexual objects, and such narratives hold appeal for the popular sensitivities of Kerala.

Moral Policing and the Cyber Public

One of the major aspects of this study involves looking at the social media impact of the moral policing of Dalit and other lower caste women. Social media, or cyber response, is an integral part of the current Indian public sphere. Cyberbullying is one form of harassment against women and other minoritized groups. In the context of my thesis, I would argue that the social media public sphere mirrors characteristics similar to the existing physical public sphere. In other words, the social and power relations of the community or the state are reproduced in the virtual public sphere. As a result, cyberbullying against women, especially Dalit women and LGBTQI communities, is often normalised in cyberspace. I would like to examine how Dalit women are located in cyberspace in India and whether their voice, agency and representation finds any space.

Methodology

This study is based on feminist research methodology with an interdisciplinary approach to understand the caste-gendered question of moral policing in Kerala. As an interdisciplinary work, this dissertation draws from several fields of inquiry and from several sources. Primary data is

collected from newspaper reports. The newspaper reports are collected for identifying the incidents of moral policing. Further, this research draws on the government archival reports on slave trade in Travancore princely state, to understand the condition of women during slavery in Kerala. Moreover, I have used the knowledge that I have acquired during my engagements in Dalit feminist movement, especially discussions with Dalit women leaders in Kerala to substantiate this work. I have also conducted personal interviews with survivors of sexual violence and assaults related to moral policing, and as a feminist engagement, I have tried to protect the identities of the interviewees (on their request). My own engagements with Dalit feminist activism around contemporary issues that have animated the Kerala public sphere have allowed me to formulate this research. The secondary data has been acquired from books, journals, magazines, web sources, movies and other visual media sources. A Dalit feminist standpoint has allowed me to read against the grain of hegemonic conceptualisations of moral policing and sexual agency of Dalit women. Theoretical works on intersectionality have been a major part of this thesis; linking the caste-gender question is directly to the issues of moral policing.

Chapter Schema

The first chapter provides an introduction to the topic “caste moral policing and the Kerala Public” in general. This chapter also elaborates on the statement of the problem and objectives of the study in detail. Moreover, this chapter provides an account of the review of literature, chapter structure, chapter organisation, and methodology for this study.

The second chapter would constitute the historical background of the formation of morality from colonial modernity to the present from a Dalit feminist perspective. This chapter maps the characteristics of the Indian public sphere from the colonial period to the present. This chapter

also examines how the Indian public sphere deals with people from various cultural and social locations. Further, this chapter mainly focuses on how the current public sphere of India is constructed and maintained through a set of power relations based on caste. This chapter also talks about the emergence of different publics as a response to the existing public in India.

The third chapter, titled Kerala Modernity, 'Public Space' and Sexual Morality, examines Kerala's modernity and the emergence of the public. This chapter tries to analyse the linkage between colonial modernity and the Kerala public sphere and discuss how the sexual morality discussion emerged in Kerala through the Renaissance and colonial modernity. This chapter also tries to provide an account of Dalit and other lower caste engagements with the discourse of modernity in Kerala.

The fourth chapter, titled "The Resistance to Caste and Moral Codes: A Review of Dalit and Other Lower Caste Women's Struggles in Kerala", attempts to provide a detailed account of struggles organised by lower caste women from the mid-19th century. This chapter will also discuss how the lower castes gained access to various civil rights and challenged caste and moral codes through public protests. This chapter will draw on historical evidence of a women's struggle from the lower castes that has not been accounted for or documented in the programmatic history of Kerala. Moreover, this chapter will trace the linkages between the slavery experience of the past and the present social position of Dalit women in Kerala's context.

The fifth chapter, titled "The Policing of Dalit Women's Sexual Morality: Experiences from Present Kerala," will discuss the specificity of the Dalit woman question in moral policing.. It will try to inquire into the trajectory of a Dalit woman's experience of caste and sexual morality. I will take a few instances of violence against Dalit women and analyse the peculiarities of the moral policing experience faced by women from the lower castes. This chapter also examines the

voyeuristic gaze through which a Dalit woman is imagined in the mainstream imagination of Kerala.

The sixth chapter will be the conclusion to my argument in this thesis.

Chapter -II

Caste, Moral Policing, and Indian Public Sphere: A Theoretical Approach

This chapter attempts to map the theoretical frameworks and tools with which to engage with the ideas of "morality" and the discourses circulating in the public spheres of India. Further, it critically unpacks how caste is a significant factor in the construction of the norms of moral policing. It discusses how various communities are placed and treated in the public domain in terms of the power they wield or the lack thereof. As I have highlighted earlier, in the Indian context, caste, class, and gender emerge as categories that determine a person's very entry into public space. Within the public domain, women are marked, visibilised or invisibilised on the basis of the imaginary markers of caste, ethnicity, religion, and nationality that have been inscribed on their bodies. According to Uma Chakravarti, brahminical patriarchy in early India illustrates the reproduction of the structures of social relations that determined gender. While such brahminical ideology could not find hegemonic acceptance of women, such a system was maintained and perpetuated by women's participation in such a system that both rewarded and inferiorised them.⁵³

As a historical consequence of the way that Brahmanical scriptures, Dharmasastras, and Hindu ideology have defined their control over women's bodies to preserve caste purity, the imagined morality of the Indian public categorises the moral status of women based on their caste identity. Feminist scholars like Uma Charavarti observe that there are self-imposed chastity norms

⁵³ Uma Chakravarti, "Conceptualising Brahminical Patriarchy in Early India: Gender, Caste, Class, and State," *Economic and Political Weekly* 28, no. 3 (1993): 583.

reproduced for the Hindu dominant caste women within the system. The notion of *pativrata* is created by the patriarchal regime structure gender in such a way that women consider themselves as in-charges of their own sexuality, thereby erasing the hidden patriarchal ideology of women's subordination.⁵⁴

Hindu Texts like *Manusmriti* continue to play a vital role in the construction of Indian society. Manu's principles form the basis of Indian traditions and the customary practices upon which one's caste identity is built. As Dr. B.R. Ambedkar points out:

In the scheme of Manu, the Brahmin is placed first in rank. *Below* him is the Kshatriya. *Below* Kshatriya is the Vaishya. *Below* Vaishya is the Shudra and *Below* Shudra is the Ati-Shudra (the Untouchables). This system of rank and gradation is simply another way of enunciating the principle of inequality, so that it may be truly said that Hinduism does not recognise equality. This inequality in status is not merely the inequality that one sees in the warrant of precedence prescribed for a ceremonial gathering at a King's Court. It is a permanent social relationship among the classes to be observed—to be enforced—at all times in all places and for all purposes. It will take too long to show how in every phase of life Manu has introduced and made inequality the vital force of life.⁵⁵

Ambedkar points out that the foundational parts of the law made by Manu are operational in Hindu society. For instance, he insists that serving the Brahmanas is the only work that the Shudra

⁵⁴ Uma Chakravarti, "Conceptualising Brahminical Patriarchy in Early India: Gender, Caste, Class, and State," 585.

⁵⁵ B.R. Ambedkar, "Philosophy of Hinduism," *Dr. Babasaheb Ambedkar's Writings and Speeches Vol. 3* (New Delhi: Ambedkar Foundation, 2014): 25.

can do. If he is unable to subsist on the basis of this service, he can then serve Kshatriyas or Vaishyas. He is not allowed to have any means beyond mere survival because no superfluous collection of wealth must be made by a Shudra, even though he has the power to make it, since a servile man who has amassed riches becomes proud and, by his insolence or neglect, gives pain even to Brahmanas.

Further, as per the injunctions of Manu, lower caste people must not have access to education. While the Brahmin is assigned the role of a teacher and learner, acquiring knowledge of the Vedas, the Shudras are barred from learning, and as the law suggests, Brahmins are not to read the holy scriptures in the presence of Shudras.⁵⁶ Further, as Ambedkar notes, Manu explicitly says that women have no business with the text of the Veda. Ambedkar cites Manu's injunction: "A twice-born man who has improperly divulged the Veda (i.e., to Shudras and women) commits sin, atones for his offence if he subsists a year on barley."⁵⁷ Manusmriti also clearly pointed out how a Brahmin must be protected from pollution from *ashudhi*, or his purity. According to verse 3:239 of the *Manusmriti*, "A Chandala, a village pig, a cock, a dog, a menstruating woman, and a eunuch must not look at the Brahmanas while they eat."⁵⁸ What Ambedkar and subsequently many other scholars have pointed out, once

Women become complicit in the broader structure of their own servitude; all the anxiety that was illustrated by the early texts to monitor the upper caste woman's sexuality and her purity, and thereby caste boundaries, would become somewhat redundant. Caste identity in India is very

⁵⁶ B.R. Ambedkar, "Philosophy of Hinduism," 121-122.

⁵⁷ *Babasaheb Ambedkar's Writings and Speeches*, D.R Ambedkar Foundation (2014): 122

⁵⁸ Ganganath Jha, *Manusmriti with Bhashya of Medhatithi* ed. (Allahabad: Asiatic Society of Bengal, 1932).

critical to understanding hegemonic notions about sexual morality. By now, quite a few studies have come out on how Brahmanical patriarchy controls women's sexuality. These studies have largely focused on Brahmin women or women from dominant castes. However, in this study, I intend to look at how Brahmanical patriarchy projects women of lower caste communities as sexual subjects and the ways in which its hegemonic imagination persuades the popular sensibilities of the Indian public sphere.

Caste and Indian Public Sphere

Mainstream savarna male scholars have critically analysed Indian modernity as a colonial project. However, scholars of subaltern studies have looked at the project of modernity as radically demarcating the above framework. M.S.S. Pandian observes that elite and upper-caste cultural representations and spiritual practices, represent the so-called uncolonised domain and therefore become conflated as the culture of the nation. He says,

This act of mobilising a part of the nation to stand for the whole, not only inferiorized vast sections of lower castes as inadequate citizens-in-the-making, but also significantly *delegitimize the language of caste in the domain of politics by annexing it as part of the cultural*. It is only by unsettling the boundaries between the spiritual and material, inner and outer, could the lower castes (and women) contest the logic of exclusion inherent in the so-called national culture and talk caste in the colonial public sphere.⁵⁹

⁵⁹ Mathias Samuel Soundara Pandian, "One step outside modernity: Caste, identity politics and public sphere," *Economic and Political Weekly*, 37, no.18, (2002): 1737

Pandian takes M N Srinivas's work as an example of Savarna educated men's perspective on modernity and the public sphere. Pandian quotes Srinivas to demonstrate how the framework of Indian modern cannot include persons from the lower caste. He states that only a miniscule population of the Indian public came into direct interaction with the British. Those particularly working in the British households held some power within their community and caste group, but faced upper-caste insults due to their superficial westernisation. Conversion to Christianity also did not impact the influence, as those converted were mostly from the lower-caste groups, who continued to face casteism.⁶⁰

Gopal Guru notes that there has not been much discussion of modernity from the margins in academic circles in India. He observes that one rarely finds substantive discussions on Jyotirao Phule, Narayana Guru, Ayyankali, Joshua, Pandit Iyothee Thass, Laxmi Narasu, Dr. BR Ambedkar, Tharabhai Shinde, and many others in the mainstream debate in India, notwithstanding the fact that these marginalised thinkers constructed their own conception of modernity even as they partially borrowed from colonial modernity as a starting point.⁶¹

The thinkers listed above were denied access to the regional epistemological resources; thus, they are forced to draw intellectual resources from the west. The conception, reception, and retention of modernity among different social groups in India vary depending on the structural advantage

⁶⁰ Mathias Samuel Soundara Pandian, "One step outside modernity: Caste, identity politics and public sphere," *Economic and Political Weekly* 37, no. 18.(2002): 1738-39

⁶¹ Gopal Guru, Foreword to *Kerala Modernity: Ideas, Spaces, and Practises in Transition*. Satheesh Chandra Bose and Shiju Sam Varughese ed.(Hyderabad: Orient Black swan, 2015), ix-xiv.

offered to each by historical conditions. The conception of modern life as framed by the subaltern mirrors the difficult struggles of the people of the margins to access public space.

Guru illustrates this stating that democracy was the key organising factor for lower caste movements. It is such movements by the lower caste groups that both expanded and deepened the concept of democracy, making it a strong-arm of the deprived, who were historically denied access to the participation in public life.⁶²

Indian Public, Women's Bodies, and Sexualities

The control over the sexuality of dominant caste women is a major site of research within the framework of modernity and Hinduism. As guardians of national morality, the violent nature of brahmanical patriarchy was inscribed on the bodies of savarna women. The very imagery of *Bharatmata* (Mother India) shows the gendered Hindu imaginations about nationalism. The observations of Uma Chakravarti help us understand the imagination of ideal womanhood or *Stree Dharma*. Chakravarti reflects:

The things that were gradually and carefully constituted, brick by brick, in the interaction between colonialism and nationalism are now so deeply embedded in the consciousness of the middle classes that ideas about the past have assumed the status of revealed truths.⁶³

Whereas this thesis as a whole draws from the continuities and discontinuities in those discursive spaces, this section examines how knowledge about sex, desire, and normativity was produced and to what effect. As opposed to the understanding of the colonial state as the context and

⁶² Gopal Guru, Foreword to *Kerala Modernity*, xiii.

⁶³ Uma Chakravarti, *Gendering Caste through a Feminist Lens* (Calcutta: Stree, 2003), 28.

conduit of regulatory power, this section considers a huge array of indigenously produced texts as translating and mediating that power. Those spaces call for independent analysis, considering the scale on which they play a role in producing knowledge about local sexualities and re-ordering them outside of their location within the hierarchies of power that characterised the colonial situation. This is a significant historical difference, marking the nationalist/national-elite/upper caste Hindu discourse that cannot be subsumed under colonial ideology. For instance, only a chaste upper caste Hindu woman embodying brahmanical symbols can represent the mother country in the Brahminical-Hindutva imaginations of women. Other women of diverse identities are excluded from this imagery of “ideal womanhood.” In this context, John and Nair suggest that elaborate codes of moral conduct and marks of caste, ethnicity, and national imagination were inscribed on women’s bodies. It is on the body of the middle-class upper-caste woman that questions of modernity and tradition are formulated. It is her body that becomes the contesting grounds for legitimate and illegitimate forms of sexuality and morality.⁶⁴

V Geetha observes that the ‘pure’ and ‘high’ born in the Indian context are the only ones for whom *Streedharma* is intended. They must be virginal, monogamous, and obedient to their spouses and families. Chastity is viewed in this context as a caste and class virtue, in contrast to those who are inherently “non-chaste,” whose bodies are not “rapeable” because they have no chastity in the first place. Furthermore, she continues, *streedharma* is not just a normative ideal rooted in the past; it permeates the present, as evidenced by the anxiety that exists in our modern society regarding women's sexual “nature” and sexuality in the obsession with determining

⁶⁴ Mary E John and Janaki Nair, “Introduction: A Question of Silence? The Sexual Economies of Modern India” in *A Question of Silence? The Sexual Economies of Modern India*, eds., Mary E John and Janaki Nair (New Delhi: Kali for Women, 1999), 8.

whether their violated bodies indeed invited sexual assault or if the assault was imposed upon them. To cite: “[S]uch taint is a mark of unredeemed female vice or of her always already low status. A chaste woman thus cannot be raped, something that is repeated ad nauseum.”⁶⁵

Several Hindu texts like the *Smritis*, *Samhitas* and *Puranas*, talk about the duties of an ideal woman, consequently resulting in practices like the Sati. It is very essential to look at these customary practices that existed within Hinduism to control the sexuality of upper caste women. Control over women’s bodies has always been a crucial matter of concern to the upper caste public. As Sabala and Meena Gopal observe:

Women have always received contradictory messages about their bodies. When expedient, it is glorified by ideal images of goddesses as the honour of the nation/family/community and sometimes the same body is projected as shameful, embarrassing, vexatious, fearful and disgusting. Women have constantly struggled to maintain this ideal “body” and project themselves as “good women” or have been afraid to confront the negative aspects of being portrayed as “bad women”.⁶⁶

Such contradictions create a distorted image of women’s bodies for themselves. The gendered bodies of lower castes and classes are constructed through gender discrimination, severe labour loads, hunger, and other factors. Their bodies are portrayed as disgusting, unclean, polluted, and shameful. They manage to survive with little to lose.

Tanika Sarkar discusses scandals involving chaste Hindu women in Bengal in the late nineteenth century. Referring to a scandal that rocked Bengal during this period, involving the seduction and

⁶⁵ V.Geetha, *Undoing Impunity: Speech after Sexual Violence* (New Delhi: Zubaan, 2016), 26-27.

⁶⁶ Sabala and Meena Gopal, “Body, Gender, and Sexuality: Politics of Being and Belonging,” *Economic and Political Weekly* XLV, no. 17 (2010): 43-51.

rape of a woman named Elokeshi by a powerful Mohunt and her subsequent murder by her husband in a fit of rage, she analyzes the sexual morality around the scandal. As she points to the ways in which scandals such as adultery and murder brought debates on sexual morality to the forefront, it becomes evident that such events were catalysts in fashioning the very constitution of the hindu 'public.'

In the "Nationalist Resolution to the Women's Question," Partha Chatterjee elaborates on the complex relationship between the reimaginings of the women's question and Indian nationalism. He points out that while the women's question was a central issue in some of the most important debates over social reforms in Bengal in the early eighteenth and in the mid nineteenth century, this issue disappeared from the public sphere by the end of the twentieth century. The woman reappeared not so much as the subject of reform but as the spiritual core of the nation in opposition to the material domain, which was the site of men. Thus, a binary emerged between the home and the world, the inner and the outer and the spiritual and the material, in each case, the former being the domain of women and the latter, of men. This involved not only the separation of women from the public world of men but also from western women and lower caste women who were considered immoral. It is critical to note that the "purity" and the "morality" of upper caste women were constructed through their difference from "other" women.⁶⁷

⁶⁷ Partha Chatterjee, "The Nationalist Resolution of Women's Question," in *Recasting women: Essays in Colonial History*. Kumkum Sangari and Sudesh Vaid eds. (New Delhi: Kali for Women, 1990), 238-39.

Dalit academicians like Gopal Guru⁶⁸ and Savarna feminist scholars like Sharmila Rege⁶⁹ debated the differences in Dalit women's experiences; however, the Dalit feminist standpoint is very essential to articulate in this context. The argument of being different or expressing a different stand from the existing points of view on the women's questions was for Dalit women an evolution of identifying themselves and their identities in the ongoing feminist/women movement.

Dalits and the Indian Public sphere

The idea of the public sphere becomes much more contested when it comes to Dalits. Ambedkar observed that caste killed the public conscience and prevented the formation of public opinion. Dalits have a long history of being considered "untouchables," not allowed into the four *varnas* (Pyramidal structure of caste) of Indian society. The caste system, a kind of sociopolitical division in Indian civilization, evolved out of the Varna system. People are divided into inherited social categories under the caste system⁷⁰. Therefore, each caste's civic, cultural, political, and economic privileges are predetermined and conferred by birth. There is an unfair distribution of rights among the castes. The people's social standing and occupation are determined by their caste. The outcastes are the social groups excluded from the caste system. They are the formerly

⁶⁸ Gopal Guru, "Dalit women talk differently," *Economic and Political Weekly* 30, no 41/42 (1995): 2548-2550.

⁶⁹ Sharmila Rege, "Dalit Women Talk Differently: A Critique of 'Difference' and towards a Dalit Feminist Standpoint Position," *Economic and Political Weekly* 33, no.44 (1998): 39-46.

⁷⁰ B. R Ambedkar, "Hindus and their want of Public Conscience," in *Dr. Babasaheb Ambedkar: Writings and Speeches, Vol. 5* (New Delhi: Ambedkar Foundation, 2014), 94-99.

'Untouchables,' who were confined to outlying areas of the community/village and denied basic rights including the right to property, an education, and civil and cultural rights.

In his work "Hindus and Want of Public Conscience", Dr. Ambedkar critically analyses the Hindu-dominated public sphere of India, where every act performed by a member of a lower caste is faced with retaliation by dominant caste Hindu men. As he, points out sparingly, the Untouchables are systematically repressed in such a way that they do not even have the right to wear better clothes or jewellery:

If the Untouchables want to wear gold and silver ornaments, they do not object to the Hindus having the same right. If the Untouchables want to send their children to schools, they are not against the children of the Hindus having full freedom for education. If the Untouchables wish to draw water from the well, they have no objection to the Hindus exercising their right to take water. One can go on *ad infinitum*. But it is unnecessary. The point is easy and simple to grasp. It is that whatever freedom the Untouchables claim is not exclusive to them and is not inconsistent with the right of the Hindus to equal freedom. Why then do the Hindus use violence to put down such innocent and perfectly lawful acts? Why does he regard his lawlessness as lawful? ⁷¹.

Additionally, caste endogamy serves as the foundation of a caste-based society such as India to preserve “purity.” This becomes evident in his critical evaluation of the characteristics of caste.

⁷¹ B.R Ambedkar, “Hindus and Wants of Public Conscience,” 99.

He points to the absence of endogamy or intermarriage, as the foundational element of caste order.⁷²

Dalits participate in the Indian public sphere by various activities, which were previously reserved for the dominant caste groups, particularly men. However, in reality, these are caste discriminatory spaces especially when women from lower caste communities entered the public domain, they experienced both caste and gender discrimination. Dalits have historically been denied access to power and excluded from participation in the dominant political and public spheres. Because of Brahminical patriarchy and caste discrimination, Dalit women were structurally subordinate to women from dominant castes. In the past, dominant caste women likewise had limited or no access to institutions, public spaces, power, and authority. Whenever they had access to power, though they were denied access to public space earlier, they had a different trajectory for accessing power and representation. Compared to Dalit and other lower caste women, they have exercised power, even in their subordinated status in a patriarchal setting, through their kinship and marital status.

In the Indian public, Dalits have historically been involved in the struggle for entering public space to access their basic rights and human status. Dr. B.R. Ambedkar, worked in the public sphere in different capacities and positions, hence, he had to lead the activities to access basic rights. In the 1927 Mahad Satyagraha, Dalits marched to a Public tank in Mahad town of Maharashtra state to access water.

The 1920s, a decade that significantly affected post-colonial India, saw the emergence of Ambedkar's leadership. Simultaneously, the Gandhian nationalism that helped to influence popular

⁷² B.R Ambedkar, "Castes in India: Their Mechanism, Genesis and Development," in *Dr. Babasaheb Ambedkar Writings and Speeches Vol. 1* (New Delhi: Ambedkar Foundation, 2014), 8.

politics in the late colonial and post-colonial periods had its roots in this decade. The growth of organisational politics oriented on socialism and Marxism in India, which sought to highlight a political discourse about capitalism, colonialism, and the proletariat, was a defining feature of the decade. With the establishment of the Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh (RSS) and the promotion of Savarkar's concept of Hindutva, the 1920s also provided a fertile field for the flowering of Hindu nationalist politics in India. The history of organised Dalit politics is methodically traced in Ambedkar's Marathi Dalit newspapers, which are crucial historical records. These records/newspapers are an amazing source of engaged-with-the-moment views on the sociopolitical changes taking place in the background. Newspapers like *Mooknayak* (1920–1923), *Bahishkrit Bharat* (1927–29), *Janata* (1930–1966), and *Prabuddha Bharat* (1956) offer a riveting timeline of the history and tensions of the moment from the Dalit political standpoint.⁷³

It may be claimed that apart from putting Ambedkar solely in the Dalit Bahujan sphere of politics and thought, his contributions to Indian civil society as an intellectual and politician are given the most inadequate consideration. Before the 1990s, feminist writers hardly acknowledged Ambedkar's accomplishments and thoughts, including the Hindu Code Bill and his groundbreaking articles on caste, its origins, and Brahminical Patriarchy. When Uma Chakravarti used the term “Brahminical” or “graded patriarchy” in 1993, she was attempting to highlight the necessity of a feminist approach towards Ambedkar.⁷⁴

⁷³ Prabodhan Pol, “Seeking Political Alternative: Perspective on Peasants Activism in Ambedkar’s Newspaper Janata,” *Economic and Political Weekly* 57, no. 44-45 (2022): 1-12.

⁷⁴ Sharmila Rege, *Against the Madness of Manu: B.R Ambedkar’s writings on Brahmanical Patriarchy* (New Delhi: Navayana, 2013): 14.

Bahujan Public Sphere

Jyotirao and Savitibhai Phule's establishment of schools for the lower castes and women in the mid nineteenth century may be read as the most liberatory processes in history. In the vision of the Phule couple, a caste-free, egalitarian society can be achieved only by having access to knowledge and education. Jyotirao Phule, who recognised the cultural roots of Aryan dominance and Brahminical power, is regarded as one of the first intellectuals who studied social justice. Phule's critiques of caste relations in western India are based on the political sway of Brahmins in the Peshwai and the corrupt forms of colonial modernism that had increased the influence of the higher castes. A key component of Phule's analysis of caste relations in colonial society was his recognition of the crippling standards of behaviour that punished higher caste women. In 1848, Phule founded a school for untouchable girls with the help of his wife, Savitribai, and in 1854, both founded a residence for widows from upper castes. In addition to challenging higher caste men by denouncing how they treated their wives, he displayed immense compassion and empathy for disadvantaged Brahmin and upper caste women, who served as weakest links in the caste system's transmission. Phule was aware of the restrictions placed on higher caste women's lives by the demands of chastity and caste purity, and he had a deep sense of how caste norms disadvantaged both upper and lower caste women. The expropriation of manual and sexual labour experienced by lower caste people was no less repressive than the softer forms of gendered dominance experienced by upper caste women.

The Phule couple opened up a world of knowledge by providing education to the marginalised communities in Maharashtra of the erstwhile Bombay presidency. They strongly believed that education would enable lower caste communities to gain knowledge and access to the judicial system. Jyotirao Phule, who was greatly influenced by Thomas Paine, wrote extensively about

caste, slavery, and other types of societal oppression. He provides a very useful explanation of caste and its oppressive structure through his writings. Jyotirao Phule wrote the groundbreaking work *Gulamgiri* (Slavery) in 1873, which established his "racial theory" of caste origin. According to this view, Brahmins had invaded native people and ruled by asserting their racial superiority.⁷⁵

Savitribai founded a women's organisation called Mahila Seva Mandal in 1852 in addition to founding the first women's school in Indian history. The organisation aimed to increase women's awareness of their rights as well as other social issues. Being a woman, she was able to perceive the double plight of the majority of women because she recognized how caste and brahmanical patriarchy related to gender issues. She got involved on several levels to resolve issues that were unique to women. She strongly advocated against widows being victimised. She encouraged and promoted widow remarriage. She also advocated against killing "illegitimate" children in infancy. She founded a residence for such children. Her own house was transformed into a safe haven for abandoned women and young orphans who were the most vulnerable sections of the society. She coordinated the barbers' strike as a part of the resistance to the widespread practice of shaving widows' heads.⁷⁶

Jyotirao and Savitribai Phule were the pioneers of significant anti-caste theory and developed a type of sociocultural activism based on bringing together the disadvantaged. They classified them as *stree* (women), *Shudra* (lower caste), and *ati-Shudra* (Dalits). Being from a lower social class, they recognized the significance of addressing both the oppression of women and the oppression

⁷⁵ Jyotirao Govinarao Phule, *Slavery* (New Delhi: Gautam Book Centre, 2007), 31.

⁷⁶ Braj Ranjan Mani, *A Forgotten Liberator: The Life and Struggle of Savitribai Phule* (New Delhi: Mountain Peak, 2008), 14.

of shudras and ati-Shudras simultaneously. The Phules also included other marginalised groups, such as adivasis and Muslims, as part of their understanding of the oppressed.⁷⁷

By forming Sathyshodhak Samaj in 1973, Jyotirao Phule aimed at the progress of women and lower castes. Pioneering feminists like Tarabhai Shinde were part of this organisation. Savitribai's influence through her teaching and writing is reflected in an essay written by her fourteen year old student Muktabai Salve, which was published in the newspaper Dyanodaya in 1855. The article is titled "*Mang Maharachya Dukhvisayi*" (About the Grief of Mangs and Mahars), analysing the extreme plights of two Dalit caste groups of Maharashtra in those times. According to Muktabai Salve's essay, "About the grief of Mahars and Maangs," written at the age of fourteen, in a historical context where Dalits are not permitted to pursue education, she asks what is the religion of the lower-castes who are banned from reading the religious texts? She further asks, why do lower-castes have to follow the Vedas, when they are not allowed to read it? In conclusion she hopes for the complete vanishing of a religion such as Hinduism where only some hold privilege while others are deprived.⁷⁸

The context and impact of Muktabai's pursuit of higher education can be noted as a historic development in terms of Dalit women entering the public sphere. It is similar to how Dalit women in Kerala entered the education system through the Ayyankali movement, and Panchami, a Dalit girl was admitted to a school in Ooruttambalam, Thiruvananthapuram.

⁷⁷ Braj Ranjan Mani, *A Forgotten Liberator*, 16.

⁷⁸ Muktabai Salve, "About the Grief of the Mangs and Mahars," *Savari* (2015):

<https://www.dalitweb.org/?p=2947>

Tarabai Shinde, also influenced by Phule's social reform movement, has written about the unequal treatment of and discrimination against women, comparing the uneven positions of women and men in society in her work "*Stree Purusha Tualana*," in 1882, considered as a pioneering feminist writing in India; in her essay, she fearlessly exposed the Brahminic patriarchy-driven mentality that controls women's lives. She frankly and fearlessly mocked the men and reformers, in particular those who defended male dominance with scripture. She emphasised the distinction between doctrine and practice by bringing to light the dishonesty and hypocrisy inherent in empty reform discourse. Her writing was a response to the trial of a twenty four year old Brahmin widow Vijayalaxmi. In 1881, the local session court in Olpad, Gujarat, found Vijayalaxmi guilty of infanticide and gave her the death sentence. Vijayalaxmi, like the majority of women in the nineteenth century, was a young widow and a victim of child marriage. Her pregnancy and subsequent execution to her illegitimate child to avoid public disgrace and ostracism became the subject of a heated public debate.⁷⁹

Anupama Rao foregrounds how, in Shinde's writing, male ingenuity and lust, as well as the sexual depravity of males, were held accountable for women's misery and sexual misadventures. Shinde also demonstrated a deep understanding of how the ideologies of the excellent wife and the loose woman interacted with one another by probing the sexual economics of marriage and prostitution

⁷⁹ Tarabai Shinde, *Stree Purush Tulana (A Comparison between Men and Women: Tarabai Shinde and the Critique of Gender Relations in Maharashtra)*, Rosalin O' Hanlon ed. and trans. (Madras: Oxford University Press, 1994), 79-124.

as two sides of the same coin. One of the first feminist critiques of caste was found in Shinde's writing. But upper caste reformers and eventually anti-colonial nationalists chose to ignore it.⁸⁰

After Jyotirao Phule's death, Savitribai took over the leadership of the Satyashodhak Samaj. In Saswad, she presided over the Samaj meeting in 1893. Savitribai again put forth a lot of effort and was successful in convincing the government to take action during the famine of 1896. Pune was hit by an epidemic in 1897. Savitribai personally contributed to the relief efforts during this disaster. She contracted the plague this time and passed away on 10 March 1897. The engagement of the lower caste community is crucial to understanding the Indian public sphere. Jyotirao Phule's writings, like *Gulamgiri* and Savitribai Phule's contribution to the education of women, played a critical role in the emergence of the counter-public of lower caste communities. The newly opened space for education and creative engagements provided access to public space to those who were most marginalised and excluded. These new entries into the public space reflected the creation of writers and intellectuals among the lower caste women. Muktabai Salve is a shining example.

Ambedkarite Counter Publics

Following the widespread dissemination of Dr. Ambedkar's works and speeches in various languages throughout India in the late 1990s, it resulted in the emergence of an assertive Dalit public sphere. Other educated Dalit populations outside of Maharashtrian Dalits that have been deeply inspired by Ambedkar's philosophy. Later, in different dominant public spaces, including colleges and dominant public spheres like literary spheres, it spawned little counterpublics. It has

⁸⁰ Anupama Rao, "Sexuality and the Family Form," *Economic and Political Weekly* 40, no. 8 (2005): 715-718.

been characterised as an Ambedkarite political culture by Gopal Guru and Sundar Sarukkai.⁸¹ Ambedkarite public culture is viewed as a mental and physical arena that nurtures the autonomous Dalit self and an emancipatory worldview. It created a setting where social discursive interactions with useful mechanisms for the emergence of Ambedkarite consciousness could take place. Some academics have seen it as an "Ambedkarite counterpublic." It gave rise to communication networks among marginalised groups. It took place in Dalit households, where phenomenal changes in daily life, regular family gatherings, and belief systems altered everyone's perspective on the world. Dr. B R Ambedkar carefully redefined the fundamental practices and norms of the established culture and vigilantly envisioned a Dalit cultural consciousness.

Ambedkar imagined a community that focused on education, agitation, and organisation. In Maharashtra, counterpublics emerged in the physical, cultural, and literary spheres, marked by Ambedkarite effects on the politics of annihilation of caste and liberation. According to Sharmila Rege, counterpublic writings on Ambedkar and women's liberation marks the 1990s, arguably enabled by an accordance between autonomous Dalit women's organisations, and national level forums for Dalit women and parties like the Bharatiya Republican party, Vikas Vanchit Mahila Parishad in 1996, which foregrounds the ideological and functional tension within the women's movement regarding Ambedkar and feminism. In the 1990s various booklets, souvenirs, and special issues of magazines with differing ideological positions on Ambedkar and women's liberation were in circulation. The Scheduled Caste and Scheduled Tribe Protection against Atrocity Act (hereafter, PoA Act) is one such law that combats the caste impunity that drove violence against Dalits, by protecting the underprivileged and vulnerable from atrocities

⁸¹ Gopal Guru and Sundar Sarukkai, *The Cracked Mirror: An Indian Debate on Experience and Theory* (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2018), 89-106.

perpetrated against them. The PoA Act protects the scheduled castes, formerly untouchables, and scheduled tribes from atrocities committed by anyone from unscheduled castes and unscheduled tribes.

Caste, Gender and Indian Public Sphere

In India, the question of morality is intimately related to the hierarchical position of religions and the pyramidal structure of the caste system. Dr. Ambedkar observes that the family morality of India is a product of Hinduism, which accepted *Manusmruti* as the basis for making its customary laws.⁸² Lower caste women, especially Dalit women, are stigmatized as “sexual beings” in the savarna dominated Indian public. The hegemonic imaginations of lower caste women’s sexuality and licentiousness are deeply rooted in untouchability and other forms of caste oppression. Ambedkar observes how Brahminism suppresses women’s bodies and sexuality. He analyses how the dominant castes violate the bodies of Dalit women to satisfy their sexual desires without going through a legal marriage. In the speech that appeared in the *Times of India* on June 17, 1936, Dr. Ambedkar asked sex workers to give up their “disgraceful” lives and come out of the profession to lead a dignified life. He wished for a respectful life for the Dalit women who have been sexually exploited under the caste system.

Here, from a Dalit feminist location, I would like to problematize the arguments of liberal discourse that see sex work as work, and the choice of engaging in sex work as one that is merely

⁸² B.R Ambedkar, “The Morals of the House—Manusmriti or the Gospel of Counter-Revolution,” in *Dr. Babasaheb Ambedkar Writings and Speeches Vol. 3* (New Delhi:Ambedkar Foundation,2014), 332-356.

individual. This strand of liberal discourse effectively legitimises the sexual exploitation of lower caste women in the *Devadasi* and *Jogini* systems. This can be understood in the context of hegemonic imaginations about Dalit women's morality and chastity and the dominant public's failure to understand the moral values followed by Dalits as a community.

Sharmila Rege's work on Marathi cultural art form *lavani* provides a background to the history of lower caste women who were considered sexual labourers for the Peshwa rulers in the eighteenth century. She observes how the erotic *lavani* image had been created and was blamed for the decline of Brahminical rule. She further notes: The *shrinarik lavani* became one of the modes of constructing the bodies of lower caste women as either arousing or satiating male desire.⁸³ This construction was crucial to the pre-colonial Peshwa state's appropriation of the labour of lower caste women through the institution of sexual slavery.

The adoption of sex work as a caste-based labour is a customary practice prevailing in Madhya Pradesh and Rajasthan. Bedia, a nomadic tribe, were, Rana et al. point out how the "Rai folklore" performers and artists of Central India, the Bedias have been portrayed as criminals. Bedias struggled to survive after the demise of the monarchy in Central India, which brought loss of patronage and the alteration of state regulations. Consequently, Bedia women engaged in prostitution for the sake of survival. As soon as they reached puberty, the girls were allowed to enter this occupation. These girls worked at dance bars and as professional sex workers in metropolises and small towns because these settlements were close to the city. Their fathers and

⁸³ Sharmila Rege, "The Hegemonic Appropriation of Sexuality: The Case of the Lavani Performers of Maharashtra," *Contributions to Indian Sociology* 29, no. 1-2 (1995): 24-25.

brothers would work as their pimps. The family would survive on the woman's earnings through sex work.⁸⁴

Dalit women and Indian Public sphere

Alongside the flourishing Dalit political movement, a literary sphere of Dalit writers and activists emerged. It was a counterpublic to the dominant literary sphere of India, which hardly considered the writings by Dalit's as literature. The writings of Dalit's has been known as Dalit Sahityam or "Dalit literature". After a long gap since Muktabai Salve's political essay, Dalit women's literary engagements mainly in the form of poems and autobiographical works especially in Marathi, were noted and later many of these appeared in translation. Dalit women's entry into the literary public sphere was through poems, short stories and Autobiographical writings. When we look at the autobiographical writings of Dalit women like Baby Kamble, titled *Jina Amucha* (The Prisons We Broke) or *The Weave of My Life: A Dalit Woman's Memoirs* by Urmila Pawar, we can find the significant day-to-day struggles of Dalit women against the hegemonic moral codes of Brahminical patriarchy.

Urmila Pawar also talks about her life as an educated Dalit woman from the Konkan region of Maharashtra. In her work mentioned above she describes the struggles of three generations of Dalit women to overcome the constraints of caste discrimination.

Writers like Bama have written about her life experience as a Dalit and women in her novel *Sangathi* (1994). She included several stories from her early years and memories of her

⁸⁴ Usha Rana, Diwakar Sharma, and Debarati Ghosh, "Prostitution in northern Central India: An Ethnographic study of the Bedia community," *International Journal of Anthropology and Ethnology* 4, no. 1 (2020): 1-16.

grandmother (Paatti) in this well-known work. She describes the caste dominance and moral policing that Dalit women experience in their daily lives. She recalls how an upper caste landowner named Kumaraswami Ayya molested a teenage girl named Mariamma while she was fetching water from his field. She managed to run away from there, thus saving herself from rape. After the subject was brought up in the community, Kumaraswami went to the Caste Panchayat (*Nattamai*) out of fear for his personal reputation. He falsely claimed to have seen Mariamma and another labourer, Mannikam engaging in sexual activity while working in his field. The panchayat, which was likewise prejudiced and thus, refused to allow the women to defend themselves. The Dalit Paraya members watched in silence as a woman from their community was entirely martyred and denied justice, as they were fearful of punishment and the prospect of losing their employment in the fields of the higher castes.⁸⁵ The fear or experience of sexual assault is a common theme in Dalit women's writing, signaling how their everyday experiences of caste and gender result in enormous insecurity. In Sivakami's novel *Pazhainan Kuzhithalum* (The Grip of Change), a young Dalit woman named Thangam is raped by her landlord after her husband's death. She is also forced to be the concubine of an upper caste man. After the assault, a man from her own community mediates on behalf of the landlord. Here, a Dalit woman's sexual modesty is taken for granted and devalued. In Bama's autobiography *Karukku* (1992), she shares her experience as a Dalit Christian woman from a village in Tamil Nadu who wished to become a nun and joined a catholic convent. However, she leaves the convent after facing caste discrimination even within that space. Bama uses authentic images of Dalit women from the Paraiyar community to highlight how they negotiate their identity on a daily basis with non-Dalit women. By narrating the tale of resistance and rebellion, *Karukku* questions mainstream discourses that do not represent the issues of Dalit

⁸⁵ Bama Faustina, *Sangathi (Events)*, trans. Lakdhmi Holmstrom (Oxford University Press, 2005), 27-28.

women in substantive or political ways⁸⁶. The experiential narratives by Dalit women have contributed to change the perspectives on caste and gender in India as well as the orientation of dominant discourses. The translations of Bama's works into many languages has spawned and influenced Dalit women writings in various levels.

I would like to look at Swathy Margaret's reflections about Dalit women in public spaces like universities in her experiential writings. She recalls how her identity as a Dalit woman was clearly disengaged from the imagined common-ness of urban women students who claimed to be feminists at Hyderabad Central University (now the University of Hyderabad). She also points to the discrimination she faced in public and in spaces dominated by Dalit men on account of her identity as a Dalit woman.⁸⁷

According to Ruth Manorama, the treatment of Dalit women in India connects with issues of state violence, the denial of land rights, social and legal discrimination, the violation of civil liberties, inferior status, dehumanising living and working conditions, complete destitution, malnutrition, poor health conditions, the negative effects of various contraceptives and the newly invented family planning devices that violate their bodies, taking mileage out of their illiteracy, as well as ignorance.⁸⁸

This chapter also focuses on the critique of the myth that Dalit women are "morally loose," an assumption that is the result of society's unwritten yet hegemonic law. This makes Dalit women

⁸⁶ Bama Faustina, *Karukku*, Lakshmi Holmstrom trans (2014),126

⁸⁷ M Swathy Margret, "Dalit Feminism," *Countercurrents.org* (2005)
<https://www.countercurrents.org/feminism-margaret030605.htm>

⁸⁸ Ruth Manorama, "Downtrodden among the Downtrodden," in *Women's Studies in India: A Reader*, ed., Mary E John (New Delhi: Penguin Publications, (2008), 451-452.

bear the burden of being stigmatised as degenerate and lacking moral values. There are very few studies done on Dalit women's sexual agency; the work by J. Indira's rape against Dalit women stands out in this vacuum. It talks about how sexual coercion and violence against Dalit women are linked to the historical contexts of Dalit women's sexual agency and bodily autonomy as well as choice that are systematically denied and crushed. Dalit women are considered immoral or morally loose, Indira observes, "the myth that Dalit women are morally loose persons makes them bear the responsibility for the degeneration of moral values. The subjugation and sexual violence of Dalit women are specific and institutionalized, with class and religion playing crucial roles in such domination."⁸⁹ The violence against Dalit women is not merely related to the sexual pleasure or revenge-driven actions of men. It is an act of taking revenge against the entire Dalit community. Stripping and parading Dalit women naked publicly is considered a common punishment to the community. Vasanth Kannabiran and Kalpana Kannabiran analyse an event of the naked parading of Dalit women in Chilakurti Village in Nalgonda District of Andhra Pradesh, highlighting the routineness and impunity surrounding such occurrences:

On August 14[1991], 35-year-old Muthamma, a Golla by caste and an agricultural labourer was brutally beaten up by three Reddi goondas and paraded naked through the streets of the village, arrack being forced down her throat all the while. It was the day of the village shandy but nobody intervened or came to her rescue. The women, unable to bear the sight, went indoors and shut their doors. The men covered their eyes. One old man who tried to come forward and cover her with a cloth was also beaten up. It was only at the initiative of the agencies of the state, the district collector and police officials that this case

⁸⁹ Jalli Indira, "Rape against Dalit women: Otherness vs Nothingness", *Indian Journal of Human Rights* 3, no.1&2(1999):125-26.

was registered. For the villagers, this was not the first time this kind of thing had happened.

Muthamma was only one of many victims.⁹⁰

These studies demonstrate how the upper caste public perceives Dalit women's sexuality and bodies as symbols of caste domination and power. It also highlights a number of issues related to women's honour, which results in the good/bad dichotomy. It is shockingly clear that the higher caste individuals who attacked Dalit women treated them like animals in an effort to assert their caste superiority and power. It is indeed ironic how some women who are branded as “bad women” are handled in public, while some women are protected as “pure” and beneficial to their community. Here, the subjectivity of Dalit men is also shaped by the historical caste contexts since, unlike higher caste men; they play a passive role in looking after the “chastity” of Dalit women.⁹¹ It clearly demonstrates that masculinity is shaped by privilege or lack thereof.

Caste purity, chastity and virginity are the major factors for determining the morality of upper caste women, which also indicates why Dalit women are judged by a different scale. It points to the instrumental role of reformist upper caste men in maintaining moral norms and how the hegemonic project through caste Hindu codes shaped by *manusmriti* influenced Indian morality norms. Anupama Rao observes how the Devadasi was treated in south India.

According to her, Upper caste widows faced several caste restrictions on remarriage, since it was primal to preserve their sexual purity as a marker of their high-caste status. On the other hand,

⁹⁰Kalpan Kannabiran and Vasanth Kannabiran, “Caste and Gender: Understanding Dynamics of Power and Violence,” *Economic and Political Weekly* 26, no. 37 (1991): 2130-33.

⁹¹ Padma Velaskar, “Caste patriarchy and Dalit women’s Subordination: towards a Theoretical Framework,” *Sugava, Prerana Visheshank*, (1998),83.

Devadasi were women from the lower-castes, for whom the ideology of marriage made them sexually accessible for all men.⁹²

Dalit women have historically been employed as nannies, domestic servants, and manual scavengers by dominant-caste women in their houses, placing them in submissive roles in social relations. Caste hierarchies grant dominant caste women an advantage and control over lower caste and Dalit women.⁹³

Sharmila Rege, in her work titled *Writing Caste, Writing Gender: Narrating Dalit Women's Testimonies*, speaks about Dalit women's role in the Ambedkarite counterpublic in terms of conjugality and family relations. This involved mapping their position by reclaiming Ambedkar's legacy to the community, which centred on the struggle for justice and dignity.⁹⁴ In her book *Against the Madness of Manu*, Sharmila Rege analyses the caste-gendered aspect of selected writings of Babasaheb Ambedkar, aiming towards a feminist reclamation of him. In this work, the hierarchies of a feminism-specific space are discussed, where Dalit women struggle to assert their agency and claim their space. The work further shows how Dalit women's identity in the public space has faced several challenges during the last two decades.⁹⁵ Ambedkarite analysis of Hindu *Smritis* and *Sanhitas* unfolds remarkable ways of interpreting Brahminical patriarchy as a structure that destroys women's lives in general and Dalit women's lives in particular. Ambedkar has analysed how caste purity is maintained in society through caste endogamy. Thus, the caste

⁹² Anupama Rao, *Gender and Caste* (New Delhi: Kali for Women, 2003), 142.

⁹³ Prachi Patilachi Patil, "Understanding Sexual Violence as a Form of Caste Violence," *Journal of Social Exclusion* 7, no. 1 (2016): 66

⁹⁴ Sharmila Rege, *Writing Caste/Writing Gender: Narrating Dalit Women's Testimonies* (New Delhi: Zuban, 2006), 38

⁹⁵ Sharmila Rege, *Writing Caste/Writing Gender: Narrating Dalit Women's Testimonies*, 70-73.

hierarchy can be ended only through inter-caste marriages. Ambedkar clearly explains how Savarna women's bodies are being used as safeguards of the caste system. However, as Rege points out, the feminist movement in India has not substantively or seriously addressed this manner in which caste purity inscribed on and maintained through women's bodies. If a savarna woman marries a lower caste man, it leads to a social boycott of the savarna woman and in many cases, the killing of the Dalit man and the woman who dared to cross caste boundaries by allowing such transgressive desire.

Caste purity is also related to religious purity in terms of practising Brahminical religious practices within the Hindu fold. Dalits who engage in such practices need to prove their purity through vegetarianism, chastity, and extreme cleanliness from a Brahminical perspective.⁹⁶ This may be observed in various forms of possession among lower caste communities. Moreover, women in temporary possession are considered ultimately invalid, due to the "pollution" of their bodily significance, thus, women are usually possessed by evil spirits. According to a belief common amongst Tamil Pallars, this is because women are weaker and cannot resist evil spirits. In this dominant perspective, women are considered "less pure" than men, polluted, and less frequently possessed by gentle deities because of their menstruating bodies. The majority of the labouring population among Indian women is Dalit. They are not merely into labour; it is also their caste occupation. As Ruth Manorama observes, a large majority of Dalit women are illiterate and work for extremely low paid daily wages. If men from the middle castes get better occupations, then their women usually stop doing labour outside the homes.⁹⁷ However, Dalit

⁹⁶ Karin Kapadia, "Dancing the Goddess: Possession and Caste," in *Life as a Dalit: Views from the Bottom on Caste in India*, ed. Subhadra Mitra Channa and Joan P. Mencher (New Delhi: Sage, 2013)

⁹⁷ Ruth Manorama, "Downtrodden among the Downtrodden," *Women's Studies in India: A Reader*, ed., Mary E John (New Delhi: Penguin Publications), 452.

women are forced to continue with their caste occupation even when their partners are engaged in steady labour work. The condition of Dalit women is further dehumanised because they work as manual scavengers and community toilet cleaners. The inhuman works like cleaning and carrying human excrement is left to Dalit women.

It can be argued that the Dalit women's question is rarely given attention as a serious issue in the academic sphere. Their voices are muted due to the power relations between caste and cultural capital in the Indian context. Brahminical feminism also has played a key role in erasing the question of Dalit women.⁹⁸ The question of Dalit women's sexuality and bodies is always discussed in the media and other public spheres in a way that devalues their agency. The experiences of savarna women have been read repeatedly through savarna feminist lenses of understanding. The existing casteist customs of Hinduism routinely represents Dalit women as sexualized subjects in their narratives and literature. The Devadasi system in south India is a great illustration of it. The Renukamaba Mela in Karnataka exemplifies how Dalit women are exploited as they perform *puja* or ritual worship with their naked bodies on display during the festival. Dalit women have long faced sexual abuse due to their lower social position and casteist imaginations about their sexuality. The origins of these hegemonic imaginations about Dalit women as hypersexual subjects result in rape against Dalit women every minute in India. However, the rape of Dalit women is a highly normalized matter in India where cases are rarely reported, and even reported cases hardly lead to conviction. The discussion on the role of caste in sexual abuse of women has been virtually absent from the upper-caste women's movement,

⁹⁸ M.N Sanil, "Still a part apart," *The Little Magazine* 6, no. 4-5 (2006): 97-99.

academia, and civil society, despite the PoA Act listing sexual violence against Dalit women by upper caste/dominant caste males as an atrocity.

Caste and gender based violence against Dalit Women

The oppression of women is considered a manifestation of the patriarchal system. However, violence against Dalit women and other women from lower castes cannot be described only in terms of patriarchy without taking caste into account. Women of the Dalit community face violence in their day-to-day engagements in public life in different parts of India. Both men from the dominant caste and men of their own community oppress them. Apart from routine acts of violence, numerous instances of sexual harassment against Dalit and Adivasi women have been reported in India over the past few decades. As a result, India's public sphere was forced to take note of the violence against Dalit women.

One such incident that forced us to engage with the brutal violence emerging from the nexus of caste and gender was the following: Bhanwari Devi, a native of Rajasthan, worked as a *saathin* (friend), a grassroots worker, for the government of Rajasthan's Women's Development Project in 1985. Her duties included promoting family planning, hygiene, the value of educating girls, and campaigns against child marriage, dowries, and female feticide. Bhanwari Devi took up the issue of child marriage in her village in 1992 as per the government's campaign against child marriage. Only a small number of her neighbours backed her, even though they were aware that child marriage was illegal. One family, that of Ramkaran Gurjar or Thakurs, who belonged to an upper caste, made plans for their infant daughter's marriage to take place the next day. Bhanwari Devi tried to persuade the Gurjar against engaging in child marriage but the marriage still took place, and nothing was done to stop it. However, the villagers associated certain police inquiries preceding the marriage with Bhanwari's intervention. Following that Bhanwari Devi's family

was socially isolated from the area, and she lost her employment. Subsequently she was raped by several men of the dominant Gurjjar caste, and they physically assaulted her husband. Bhanwari later filed a complaint alleging that her medical checkup had been postponed. The local politicians supported the accused individual. Bhanwari Devi's struggle challenged conventional ideas about what constitutes a woman's place in the workforce. After long term intervention of women's groups and feminist activists from all over India, when a Public Interest Litigation (PIL) was filed by a women's rights group known as Sakshi which was led by Naina Kapur against the state of Rajasthan and the Central Government. It was argued in the PIL that there should be a law that protects women from sexual harassment at work. Its primary focus is on the implementation of women's fundamental rights at work as per the provisions of Articles 14 through 21 of the Indian Constitution..

In 1997 the Supreme Court pronounced a groundbreaking judgment laying down guidelines to be followed by all institutions and establishments in addressing complaints about sexual harassment.. It was the outcome of a landmark victory in the history of the women's movement in India. The Supreme Court of India formulated the Vishakha guidelines, which made it mandatory for institutions across the country to put measures in place to prevent and redress sexual harassment in the workplace. The Vishaka guidelines laid the foundation for the Sexual Harassment of Women at Workplace (Prevention, Prohibition and Redressal) Act, 2013.

Dalit Women on Vishaka Guideline

One of the most significant regulations protecting women's rights in the workplace is the Vishakha Guidelines. However, Bahujan women have made very significant statements concerning the background of the Vishaka Guidelines. Although it is crucial to safeguard women from sexual harassment at work, the circumstances surrounding Bhanwari Devi's rape were

entirely different. In the 1990s, there were insufficient laws protecting the rights of women in the workplace, particularly those who worked in the unorganised sector. It was vital at the time to consider a law to safeguard those rights. However, it failed to emphasise how caste and gender intersections further complicate the uncertainties faced by female workers in the workforce. Due to its absence in the petition submitted to the court, the caste question was excluded from the verdict. This is ironic and tragic because the entire event played out in the context of caste. In fact, the district court judgment had stated that Bhanwari's husband could not have watched passively the gang rape of his wife. The judge also said that an uncle could not have participated in rape in the presence of his nephew. These statements were an open display of the prejudice inherent in legal institutions, not just in the feudal setting of the village.

Thus, any understanding of relationships of power in the Indian setting without consideration of caste is a superficial exercise. The Bhanwari Devi case remains a stark example of rape as the culmination of the Brahminical power. In the case of Bhanwari Devi, the upper caste men's intention in assaulting her was to teach a lesson to a woman from a lower caste who attempted to get involved in the upper caste community's affairs. When a Dalit woman dared to disrupt a higher caste ritual, even though it was her government-sanctioned work, it was an insult to their feeling of caste pride; therefore, they decided to retaliate against her in order to teach her a lesson. This case, along with numerous others, shows how the Brahminical caste system constantly attempts to punish those communities that are at the bottom of the pyramidal caste order.

The 1990 marks the beginning of numerous identity movements around the world, particularly in the West. However, the subaltern discourses on how sexual violence and harassment affects women from different communities in differential ways in an Indian context adds greatly to the complexity.

Nikita Sonavane and Disha Wadekar observe that the rape of Bhanwari Devi was a prime example of "power rape," rooted in the Brahminical caste system. Without a caste analysis, any understanding of power dynamics in the Indian setting is merely a surface-level endeavour. Sexual harassment at work is a symptom of oppressive patriarchal and caste institutions, rendering Dalit Bahujan Adivasi (DBA) women particularly vulnerable. Women generally have fewer access points to remedies than men do, which enhances the risk they face. The availability of remedies is further limited by one's social standing in relation to their caste. Due to the dominant perception of women from low castes being "less honourable", they are less likely to be given credibility. Further they face severe backlash in cases of sexual violence, and their narratives are systematically invisibilised within the workplace sexual harassment discourses.

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The court gave a casteist explanation in its judgement on the rape of Bhanwari Devi in Rajasthan. The court said that there are no incentives for men from the upper caste to touch the bodies of lower caste women. Nevertheless, Bhanwari Devi's life's struggle against sexual harassment resulted in a remarkable law for all women in India. The judgement in the case of Bhanwari Devi might be considered as an incredible example of the denial of justice based on caste privilege. Five men who had gang-raped Bhanwari Devi were acquitted by the district and sessions court of Jaipur, Rajasthan, in November 1995 on the grounds that "the rapists are middle-aged and therefore respectable citizens, while rape is usually committed by teenagers."¹⁰⁰ Additionally,

⁹⁹ Nikita Sonavane and Disha Wadekar, "Dalit Bahujan Women need to Reclaim Vishakha Guideline- They Started Indian #Metoo first," *The Print* (2021) <https://theprint.in/opinion/dalit-bahujan-women-need-to-reclaim-vishaka-guidelines-they-started-indian-metoo-first/611188/>

¹⁰⁰ Kanchan Sinha, "Citizenship Degraded: Indian Women in a Modern State and a Pre-modern Society," *Gender & Development* 11, no. 3 (2003): 24.

the judgement adds that because Bhanwari was from a lower caste and the criminals were upper-caste men, the rape could not have occurred. The verdict "naturalises rape as a transitory stage of growing up, thereby denying that rape also revolves around issues of power and control." Here, rape is also considered as a type of entertainment for young men, who grow out of this immaturity as they mature into grownups or middle-aged men. The terms "respectable," "upper-caste," and "male" were used to create an opposition to Bhanwari Devi, who is "lower-caste," "female," and hence "non-respectable." In order to demonstrate how Bhanwari Devi automatically becomes a "non-rapeable" entity for the upper-caste male, the court makes reference to her status as a "lower caste woman."¹⁰¹ Prachi Patil observes:

The categories of 'respectable', 'upper-caste' and 'male' were invoked to construct an antithesis and reinforce Bhanwari Devi who is 'lower-caste' and 'female', and therefore 'non-respectable'. The judgement refers to Bhanwari Devi's status as a 'lower caste woman' to prove that she automatically becomes a 'non-rapeable' entity for the upper-caste male. The judgement bases itself in the caste restrictions placed on social interactions within the caste system, which forbid the higher castes to have social or sexual relations with the lower castes and Dalits. Notwithstanding, the judgement rejects the historical nature of caste patriarchies which have subjected lower-caste and Dalit women in varying degrees to sexual exploitation at the hands of dominant and upper-caste males. The agency of the judge, in this case, is rooted in his own caste location which identifies Bhanwari Devi primarily as a 'lower caste woman,' rather than a citizen with constitutional

¹⁰¹ Taisha Abraham, "Sathin Bhanwari Revisited," *Indian Journal of Gender Studies*, 19, no. 1 (2012): 153.

safeguards. The judgement illustrates that the Indian judiciary is not free from caste prejudice and patriarchal bias reducing social justice to a distant dream.¹⁰²

The judge's authority in this case is based on his own caste knowledge, which labels Bhanwari Devi primarily as a "lower caste woman" rather than a citizen protected by the constitution. The decision shows that patriarchal bias and caste discrimination persist in the Indian judiciary, making social justice impossible to achieve.

Vishakha Guidelines that led to the Act against sexual harassment at the workplace set a major milestone in the long-term protest by Bhanwari Devi and women activists in India. Yet, I would claim that the act was founded on the liberal imagination that all women are sexually harassed for similar reasons. Thus, women activists from lower castes, Dalits, and Adivasi communities argue that the law is not sufficient to provide justice to women from these communities.

Khairlanji Massacre

In the Maharashtra village of Khairlanji on September 29, 2006, a caste-based Hindu mob killed the entire Dalit family, including Sujata Bhotmange, her husband Bhaiyal Bhotmange, daughter Priyanka, sons Roshan, and Sudhir. The Bhotmange family had gained confidence in the village as a result of the economic and educational growth. The dominant OBC groups were incensed by and resented their confidence and assertiveness. On that day, preceding the murder, women from the dominant Kunbi and Kalar group cheered their men as they took Surekha Bhotmange and her daughter Priyanka Bhotmange from their home, paraded them naked, before they were brutally raped, and killed at the center of the village. However, none of the female offenders/accomplices

¹⁰² Prachi Patil, "Understanding Sexual Violence as a Form of Caste Violence," *Journal of Social Exclusion* 7, no. 1 (2016): 65.

were detained or accused with aiding and abetting the rape and murder of the Bhotmange family. Smita Patil makes a salient point about how “the upper caste men and women dictate the sexuality of Dalit women, decide the morality of the Dalit women and regulate their bodies.” Surekha Bhotmange, the mother, was taught a lesson in Khairlanji because she was branded as a promiscuous woman who had an illicit relationship with a relative. Here, Dalit women are considered sexually loose women having bodies that are punishable by the caste mob. Dalit women who decide to speak up must deal with “confrontation from non-Dalit men and women at every stage of their lives.”¹⁰³ As the Khairlanji massacre demonstrates, along with dominant caste men, dominant caste women have played a significant role in the sexual assault on Dalit women. Considering that, they have a stake in maintaining their sense of self-purity, which is “defined by notions of honour and marked by social distance between the castes, this shows how dominant caste women have been complicit in the violence against Dalit women.”¹⁰⁴ The complacency of upper-caste/dominant caste women in crimes against lower-caste, especially Dalit women, is unfortunately not widely discussed.

Delta Meghwal

In the case of the rape and murder of Delta Meghwal on 29 March, 2016, in a hostel of the college where she studied at Bikaner district of Rajasthan, the hostel warden Priya Shukla, a woman from the Brahmin community, gave Delta the order to clean her male teacher's room. Later, Delta was raped by the male Physical Education teacher, and her body was discovered the following day in

¹⁰³ Smita Patil, “Caste System and Dalit Feminism: A Comparative Study of Mang and Mahar Women in Western Maharashtra,” (PhD Dissertation, Jawaharlal Nehru University, 2013):16.

¹⁰⁴ V Geetha, “On Impunity,” *Economic and Political Weekly* 48, no. 2 (2013): 15-17.

a water tank. Her father alleged that the college had tried to hush up the incident and claimed it had asked for a written apology signed by Meghwal and the PT teacher as they were “caught” having consensual sex.. Delta was the first woman from her village to receive recognition from the state for her talents. She was a bright student and painter, who topped in an art competition in Rajasthan when she was in the 12th standard. One of her artworks was published in an art magazine brought out by the Rajasthan secretariat. Overall, she was a bright young lady who succeeded in school and served as a role model for the Dalit community. Yet, Delta's attempt to climb the social mobility ladder despite caste-related obstacles appears to have enraged upper-caste male and female administrators of the institution where she studied; instead of finding encouragement she was pushed back into the situation of precarity that ordinary Dalit women face on a daily basis. In the caste hierarchy, the Dalit groups have historically been given the task of cleaning and manual scavenging. In India, it frequently occurs that Dalit children are made to clean bathrooms and classrooms in schools or hostels. After a protracted legal battle, the victim's family and their solicitors achieved a rare triumph in October 2021 when the accused teacher Vijendra Sing and the wardens were given harsh jail sentences by the Rajasthan court.

We can see from the above discussion, that while the caste system grants some privilege and protection to women from the upper castes, the same is not granted to women from subaltern communities. On the other hand, they brutalized and socially boycotted, subjected to extreme sexual violence and humiliation and often killed instead of receiving justice or even an iota of recognition of what they have been subjected to. Ironically, women like Sujata Bhotmange or Phoolan Devi never stirred the emotions of India, as did “Nirbhaya”. When Jyoti Singh, a young paramedical student was brutally raped in New Delhi in December 2012, it shook up the nation, people were out on the streets protesting and she was given the title “Nirbhaya” honouring the

resistance she put up against her assaulters.. All the six accused were detained within six days of the incident, and demands for capital punishment for them emerged both inside and outside the parliament. The nation was shaken and horrified by how vulnerable women are to assault in urban places, and the ferocity of the violence that the victim endured. Protests erupted around the nation, demanding stronger rape legislation. The public sphere of India demanded the culprits to get punished as fast as possible.

While one is heartened by the empathy towards the victim and anger that the incident generated in India, the fact remains that only some rape instances cause outrage in society, while others do not. We may discover that societal responses to sexual assault depend on the caste and class positions of the people involved premised on the status of the perpetrators and survivors. When female victims come from higher caste-class backgrounds in comparison to their male attackers, such instances receive tremendous media and public attention, and courts deliver speedy justice. The killings and rapes of Dalit women by dominant caste men keep recurring in India till today. Indira Jalli's work discusses how the Brahminical court works in favour of dominant caste rapists. The lawyers raise the argument that Dalit women are "immoral" or inherently non-chaste and hypersexual. This hegemonic notion denies justice to them.¹⁰⁵ Rape and other injustices against Dalit women cannot be read as only a violation of body and sexuality in terms of the dominant feminist discourse. The objective of such rapes are to humiliate and re-enforce the subordination of the entire community and as we have seen, crush any aspirations Dalit women might have for achieving a better life through education. Because such aspirations strain against what is accepted as "normal" by the upper-caste mindset—that Dalit women are meant for labour and sexual

¹⁰⁵ J Indira, "Rape against Dalit Women: Otherness vs. Nothingness," *Indian Journal of Human Rights* 3, no.1&3 (1999): 120-134.

exploitation Crimes against Dalits follow a pattern where Dalits are more vulnerable and Savarnas are more likely to go unpunished. For instance, when a fifteen year old girl from Maratha community was gang raped and murdered by three Dalit men in the village Kopardi, in Ahmednagar district of Maharashtra, there was large scale protests by Marathas in Western Maharashtrian towns and the three accused were convicted of gangrape and murder. According to data from the National Crime Records Bureau (NCRB) on atrocities against Dalits since Khairlanji, the most common crimes against Dalits were rape and murder. Despite widespread protests against and media attention on caste atrocity in Hathras district in Uttar Pradesh, where a nineteen year old Dalit woman was gang raped on 14 September 2020, and later died in a hospital, similar cases of gang rape and the murder of Dalit women by Savarna men continue to occur. As a part of constitutional provision, Dalit and Adivasi communities can access the SC/ST (PoA) Act, 1989. However, the number of cases filed and people convicted, under the provisions of this Act, are very few, because the legal system hardly supports Dalits when they approach the law. Sunaina Arya observes that caste norms and practices against Dalit women have not disappeared in spite of the laws against caste-based atrocities. In addition, as she points out, “due to the brahmanical nature of violence and exploitation of women, the gender issue cannot be addressed in a vacuum but rather through interaction with our social reality.”¹⁰⁶

Indian society is mostly caste-based, as shown by the prevalence of honour killings or familial custodial murders in that country. Parents, guardians, or local officials frequently kill couples for one of two reasons: either they dare to seek an unconventional marriage on their own, or, more

¹⁰⁶ Sunaina Arya, “Dalit or Brahmanical Patriarchy? Rethinking Indian Feminism,” *CASTE: A Global Journal on Social Exclusion* 1, no.1 (2020): 223.

audaciously, they choose a life partner from outside their own caste. In a caste-based society like India, defying caste rules is seen as a call to rape, murder, and other serious punishments.

Ambedkar has analysed how women's bodily autonomy and sexuality are controlled through brahmanical patriarchy. He writes:, "It is a general right of the Brahmin against the lower caste to claim any woman of that class for mere prostitution, for the mere satisfaction of sexual appetite, without burdening the Brahmin to any of the obligations of marriage."¹⁰⁷

Ravikumar has also examined how the caste system inscribed its derogatory signs on Dalit women's bodies, looking at this as an extension to Ambedkar's theoretical position that women are the gatekeepers of the caste system.¹⁰⁸ Ambedkar's speech in Kamathipura to the Vghyas, Devadasi, Jogitinis and Aradhis (sex workers) in 1936 was a remarkable move to oppose the legitimization of control over sexuality of lower caste and minorities. Sharmila Rege quotes him from the speech that appeared in the *Times of India* on June 17, 1936. Appealing to the women to give up their "disgraceful lives," he asks lower caste women to leave the profession of prostitution that keeps them shunned from the society. Invoking the need for a domestic life, she urges Mahar women in Kamathipura to leave prostitution and sex-work.¹⁰⁹

There are criticisms of Ambedkar's position against prostitution. Rege puts in perspective how the Ambedkarite position was based on the knowledge that women's lives in prostitution are first

¹⁰⁷ B.R Ambedkar, "Hindus and their want of social conscience," In *Dr. Babasaheb Ambedkar: Writings and speeches Vol. 5*, ed., Vasant Moon (Government of Maharashtra: Department of Education, 1989): 325.

¹⁰⁸ Ravikumar, "Introduction—Private and Public Selves," in *Ambedkar: Autobiographical Notes*. (Pondicherry: Navayana, 2003),17.

¹⁰⁹ Sharmila Rege, *Against the Madness of Manu: Dr. B. R. Ambedkar's Writings on Brahmanical Patriarchy* (New Delhi: Navayana, 2013), 146.

initiated by religious consecration to endorse sexual desires of upper caste men, leading to their subsequent entry into prostitution. They were born into particular untouchable communities where they were expected to perform sex acts for caste-Hindu men, which led to a life of prostitution.

Ambedkar, as the leader of the oppressed castes, has addressed people from each and every layer of the Dalit community to mobilise them socially. I understand Ambedkar's address to the women of Kamatipura as an effort by him to convey to them that they must rise out of the oppressive destinies designed for them and aspire for a life with dignity. This involves a disruption of the dominant imagination of Dalit women's bodies as easily accessible while domesticity and attendant privileges are reserved for "good" caste Hindu women.

The problem of gender cannot be dealt with in isolation, but rather only through an interaction with our social reality because of the brahmanical nature of violence and exploitation of women. In the middle of the 19th century, Phule made great efforts to support and educate Dalit women and the community as a whole, and in the first half of the 20th century, Ambedkar accomplished the same. However, a male-centred approach within the contemporary Dalit discourse has emerged as problematic. The community's patriarchal structures and ideas of masculinity have occasionally been enhanced by men's assertions of Dalit rights and social position. An essential axis for the politicisation of caste identity was the regulation of Dalit women's sexuality. Symbolic efforts to restore women's and the community's dignity as well as honour or respectability were also connected to the control of women.¹¹⁰

Intersectionality and the Indian Public

¹¹⁰ Shailaja Paik, "Building Bridges: Articulating Dalit and African American Women's Solidarity," *Women's Studies Quarterly* 42, no. 3/4 (2014): 74-96.

The entry of dominant caste women into politics happened much earlier than that of lower caste women, since their access was facilitated by the privileged position earned through their caste status. Consequently, dominant caste women gained significantly more respect and influence than lower caste males and far more than Dalit women did. Due to their higher social status in the caste system, upper caste women have access to the labour of lower caste and Dalit women.

The anti-Mandal agitation was one of the most significant political movements that brought to the fore the privilege and caste prejudices of savarna women in the Indian public sphere. Hindu women from dominant castes were inspired to join the anti-Mandal political forums in early 1990s following the implementation of the recommendations of the Mandal Commission that enhanced the reservations for backward castes in public service and institutions. The caste Hindu women who protested in these movements carried placards expressing their concern about finding a good higher caste Hindu husband in light of the new reservation policies. As Geetha points out the underlying message was that if the men from lower castes would fill the positions in government service as a result of affirmative action, and upper caste women could not rationally be expected to fall in love with or marry men from those castes. In ways that would have a significant impact on how the women's movement perceived social and sexual justice, articulate young women from dominant castes were juxtaposed against subaltern men as the former voiced anxiety and disgust at the thought of social and marital relationships with the latter.¹¹¹

Women and Dalits have been the first groups to articulate the language of rights. In the Indian public sphere, educated women made their own position while problematizing its dominant nature. Male dominance was the focal point of discussion, as was the idea that women were

¹¹¹ V. Geetha, *Undoing Impunity: Speech after Sexual Violence* (New Delhi: Zubaan, 2016): 191-192.

homogeneously oppressed. This assumption is also reflected in the movements against rape, because sexual violence has largely been regarded as matter of gendered violence and subjugation catering to male pleasure. Marxist feminists have considered the class status of the survivor, but caste based gender violence has not been a prime concern in the women's movement of India. The *Vishakha Guideline*, as I have discussed, can also be read as an example of erasing the social location of the survivor.

Flavia Agnes's analysis provides insight into the demands placed on women's groups during the early campaigns against rape and sexual assault to develop alternatives. As she notes, even as the legal system came to be the only avenue for women to seek redressal. As a result, the Indian women's movement has routinely focused on the implementation of laws that would act as a brake on long-sanctioned male privileges over the female gender, to the extent that it expressly foregrounds sexuality.¹¹²

Conclusion

The chapter discussed the interplay of caste and moral policing in the Indian public sphere through tracing the history of systemic oppression that contributes to the act of moral policing. It additionally looked at how different discourses of power operate in the public domain. Furthermore, it contested the imagined reality of dominant caste women as the defenders of national morality, which additionally discredits women from lower caste communities. The issue of sexual morality thus arises from this context, where a nationalist moral imagination deifies upper caste women, while women from the Dalit communities are mere objects of scandal and

¹¹² Flavia Agnes, "Law, Ideology and Female Sexuality: Gender Neutrality in Rape Law," *Economic and Political Weekly* 37, no. 9 (2002): 844-847.

sexualization. The trajectories of Ambedkarite or Bahujan public sphere, on the other hand, has been engaging with the question of caste and gender that leads to the framework to examine the Kerala context in the third chapter.

Chapter III

Kerala Modernity and the Construction of Sexual Morality: Dalit Women's Perspective

In this chapter, I would like to examine how the conception of sexual morality underlying modernity influenced the formation of both public and private spaces. This chapter discusses Kerala's modernity as a hyper-analysed subject and observes how theorizations of Malayalee modernity have been critiqued from Dalit/Dalit feminist perspectives for placing the savarna, middle class, and male at its centre. Men of the dominant castes—constructing other marginalised selves only in relation to their centrality, have imagined the hegemonic idea of modernity in Kerala. The subjectivity and agency of Dalits, lower castes, and women in the Savarna castes were completely denied or instrumentalized within the discourse of modernity. *Sadaacharam* is a vernacular term used to signify sexual morality in Malayalam. This term directly refers to a person's morality. *sadaacharam* or *Laingika sadaacharam*¹¹³ (*Sexual Morality*) is often placed as one of the central subjects of discourse in the public sphere in Kerala. A person having “proper moral values” or the quality of *Sadaacharam* receives certain legitimate recognition in the society. Such values are related to the control and regulation of one's body and behaviour as per caste norms.

Caste, Sexuality and Kerala Modernity

Kerala is imagined as a rational modern public sphere compared to other regional public spheres, with its social reformist and Left legacies and model credentials in the development. Rajeev Kumaramkandath notes that the attempts to revive the local tradition and culture categorically

¹¹³ *Laingika Sadacharam*” mainly an academic usage to indicate sexual morality; however, the term *sadaacharam* used to describe sexual morality in non-academic literature, ordinary conversations.

maintained, above all, a rational prerogative for western-centric values. This was primarily reflected in the propaganda around issues concerning women, bodies, sex, desire, erotic pleasure, propriety, respectability, and so on. Rather than simply translating Victorian values, this body of writings, appearing in Malayalam magazines in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, addressed the most fundamental practices associated with local life. It consisted of attempts to support reform enterprises by justifying and rationalising their engagements to build a modern and progressive society. However, the rationalisation simultaneously involved the de-rationalization of many local practices, customs, and traditions. The bifurcation between the rational and irrational drew mainly on concerns regarding strengthening the “material and moral bases of society.”¹¹⁴

The critique by feminists of the early Kerala public space brings out the subtle form of muting the history of women. Further, the Dalit criticism of Kerala modernity as a homogenised structure did not address the question of Dalit women in any substantive manner. Thus, I believe, the much needed and critical problematization from a Dalit feminist perspective is still lacking within the common critical discourse on Kerala modernity. Subaltern and postcolonial scholars have suggested that Indian modernity has emerged with unique characteristics owing to the historical specificity of the Indian subcontinent’s experience of colonialism. Kerala society has evolved through the process of engagement with colonial modernity and the Renaissance, which contributed to the making of “modern Kerala”/ “modern Keralam.”³ However, the social structure that developed through this modernity was not an egalitarian one because the reform movement emerged in Kerala under the leadership of western educated upper-caste men. These reformist men

¹¹⁴ Rajeev Kumaramkandath, “Body and Desire in the Malayalee Public Sphere: Sexual Morality in Early Malayalam Magazines,” *Kerala Sociological Society* 39, no. 2 (2011): 117-130.

accepted the superiority of western notions of rationality, progressiveness, impersonal bureaucracy, and modernization in the public sphere. Simultaneously, they maintained their cultural superiority (based on caste and gender) in public and private spaces. The various caste groups of Kerala have engaged with colonial modernity in a range of ways. During the making of Kerala modernity, the dominant caste people introduced reforms within their community, and at the same time, the missionary discourse tried to reform the lower caste communities and lift them out of the dehumanised position they were relegated to. Although it must be noted that both groups had an entirely dissimilar engagement with modernity. The dominant caste communities used modernity to form their community organisations.

However, the lower-caste groups, especially the Dalits, during this period were struggling more towards achieving the basic right to live as humans; they barely had the luxury to undertake community based reforms. Thus, colonial modernity provided educated upper-caste men with the consciousness and prerogative to take upon themselves the role as the protectors of the “moral codes” of Kerala society. Partha Chatterjee analyses the role of western educated upper-caste men in the post-colonial era in his essay “Our Modernity.” He brings out the deeply conflicted nature of modernity which was put forth as a legitimate rationale for the colonial subjugation of India, yet its logic led to the understanding of imperialism as illegitimate, among the Indian publics. Modernity therefore became a milieu of reason, freedom, desire of and resistance to power. Modernity therefore also became the mediator between the networks of power and the idea of the promised land.¹¹⁵

¹¹⁵ Partha Chatterjee, *Our Modernity* (Rotterdam/Dakar: SEPHIS & Codersia, 1997), 19.

Rajeev Kumaramkandath observes that by the end of the 19th century in the erstwhile Malayalam-speaking territories, responding to perceived decadent conditions, a relatively small elite section of population commenced an exercise in exhortation, especially through the print media. The attempt to revive the local tradition and culture categorically maintained, above all, a rational prerogative for western centric values. This was primarily reflected in the propaganda around issues concerning women, bodies, sex, desire, erotic pleasure, propriety, respectability, and so on. Early modern Kerala modernization entailed a passionate campaign driven by the need to civilise the society. This extensive propaganda was focused on bodily discipline, gendering one's identity, and regularising bodily routines. The coloniser's early civilization mission were largely responsible for the introspectiveness that pervaded the entire community and served as the main driving force behind all reformation discussions. To cite Kumarankandath:

My use of the terms public and public sphere, rather than subscribing completely to its breathtaking presentation by Habermas (1962), relies on its critique as well: That the “universal access principle”, of which the emergence; according to Habermas, has led to the formation of a public sphere in the 16th and 17th century Europe (1962, 85) has already undergone series of criticisms to acknowledge the fact, as Cubit have termed it, that “public sphere have always existed only in terms of excluding many groups including the poor, women and so on”... Similarly in the early modern Kerala public sphere included only the few English educated local elites and left out the masses who never had an opportunity to go to English schools. ¹¹⁶

¹¹⁶ Rajeev Kumaramkandath, “Body and Desire in the Malayalee Public Sphere: Sexual Morality in Early Malayalam Magazines,” *Kerala Sociological Society* 39, no. 2 (2011), 119.

However, a majority of these views visibilised through the magazines, were voiced by a handful of elites and they captured the dominant narrative and imagination of the society.¹¹⁷

This pattern was also reflected in the reform movement that happened among Namboothiri Brahmins during the colonial period, spearheaded during that period by educated Namboothiri Brahmin men like V.T. Bhattathiripad. This movement used art and literature to spread their ideas, and it became the most central milestone of Kerala's history and modernity. V T Bhattathirippad encouraged widow remarriage among Brahmin women, and then himself married a child widow. He promoted the emancipation of Namboothiri women, and encouraged widow marriages. He campaigned for widow remarriage by putting it in practice in his own household. During this period, the chastity and sexual morality of the widow were highly policed by caste norms and surveillance. The reforms ushered by Battathirippad and other men of the community could be read as a reviving of indigenous culture as well as caste practices under the influence of colonial modern norms. The indigenous cultural capitals like *Kavu*¹¹⁸ and family temples transcended into the form of Hindu deity structures.¹¹⁹ The Brahminical system became the foundation of Kerala's belief system, and temples were revived. In the first quarter of the 20th century, Kerala witnessed

¹¹⁷ Rajeev Kumaramkandath, "Body and Desire in the Malayalee Public Sphere: Sexual Morality in Early Malayalam Magazines," *Kerala Sociological Society* 39, no. 2 (2011), 119.

¹¹⁸ *Kaavu* is considered as a space of dominant caste Hindu community to kept their family deities like Ngaraja (snake), Yakshi (female ghost) and several other family deities for worship; it is designed as a miniature forest near to their house.

¹¹⁹ Samuel Nellimukal, "Keralathile Samoohyaparivarthanam: Samoohya Charithra Padanam" (Social Transformation in Kerala: A Socio-Historical Study), (Kottayam: K S Books. 2003).76.

social movements for the rights of temple entry for the lower castes. Ezhava and the other Bahujan castes also got the right to enter temples.

J Devika's analysis on the formation of the Malayalee public sphere in the nineteenth and twentieth century is vital here. She claims that Patha Chaterjee's argument regarding the status of women is irrelevant to Malayalee society in the early 20th century as this time period saw enormous influence of the community reform, wherein the Kerala state also sought to transform

The 'innermost' social spaces, those of marriage and family, by community movements whose major agenda was the transformation of internally-heterogeneous, loosely-structured pre-modern caste groups into internally homogeneous, strongly bound and mutually exclusive modern communities.

The primary agenda of such reformism and legislative action was to transform the 'inner-domain' informed by modern gender logic. However, this did not undo the patriarchal order, but it's refashioned itself in more complex ways.¹²⁰

Since the conventional indigenous customs were against the Dalits, the Dalit discourse identified certain positive factors within modernity that were empowering for the community. Modernity and the Renaissance opened many public spaces for Dalits facilitating paths for them to abandon their inhuman lives. The sexuality of women in the Dalit community was determined by the norms governing slave labour, determined by the dominant caste men in pre-colonial and colonial times.

¹²⁰ Jayakumari Devika, "Negotiating women's social space: public debates on gender in early modern Kerala, India," *Inter-Asia Cultural Studies* 7, no. 1 (2006): 45-46.

Due to their non-agency with respect to their own sexuality, these women were considered accessible or sexually loose in the public imagination. This imagination continued further and influenced the public domain through popular novels. The good versus bad woman dichotomy became the core idea of popular fiction writing in the Malayalam public sphere. Moreover, films like *Neelakkuyil* (1954), *Chemmen* (1965), *Nellu* (1974) and many others portrayed Dalit and Adivasi women as sexually impure and without moral control. I argue here, that such cultural texts are permeated by the impact of the hegemonic imagination produced by the Brahmanic system, and demonstrate the internalisation of certain elements, such as the transaction of slave women as mere bodies, and not as humans. Rajeev Kumaramkandath notes:

Sexual morality is understood here as a modern term generated from the interface between the coloniser and the colonised in the 19th century; this was then usefully projected, by the coloniser and the local elites, to the local cultures in order to identify and define the non-normative elements in their customs and practices. This doesn't imply that such normativisation didn't exist in the previous, pre colonial, period. However during and post the colonial regime conceptual articulations by the local intelligentsia of notions of sexual morality not only inherited the coloniser's perceptions of civilising through disciplining the body but also popularised it as an essential component of a progressive modern society. The ideological circuits of progress are conceived here as primary disseminating notions of body and desire. The thesis will chart the intimate relationship between these two

conceptual entities, sexual morality and progress, as they are constantly figured in the public domains.¹²¹

The association of sexual morality and caste is not posed as a prime concern in many criticisms of sexual morality and colonial modernity. However, it is important to note that caste, as a pre-colonial institution, played a vital role in constructing the sexual morality of the public in Kerala. The concepts of *Kuleena* or *Proudda Sthree* (moral and chaste woman) emerge from the hierarchical system of caste. Therefore, this chapter intends to inquire into how caste identity plays a role in creating subjects of sexual morality. Brahmanism determines the *sadaacharam* of a reformist, developed, progressive state like Kerala. Yet, historical lineage of imaginations of sexual morality is directly related to someone's caste position in the pyramidal structure of caste. Thus, I would like to probe the Dalit community's engagement with modern public places with preexisting assumptions about the sexual morality of such communities.

The legitimization of caste endogamy with government imposed norms was one of the important progresses of modernity. Further, the question of being a good human or a moral person was one of the key concepts that modernity put forward, and in addition, it imagined equality of people in terms of citizenship combined with nationalism. In this context, the project of modernity, backed by the Renaissance, evolved and developed as key concept of equality. As part of this project, Dr. Ambedkar developed the idea of the annihilation of caste as a key component of equality at the beginning of the twentieth century. This concept addressed the lower caste people directly but also

¹²¹ Rajeev Kumaramkandath, "The Discursive Formation of Sexual Subjects: Sexual Morality and Homosexuality in Keralam," (Ph.D. Dissertation, Manipal University, 2013), 4.

indirectly served people who are oppressed by all kinds of inequalities. He put forward the question of equality using anti-caste tools to break the caste system. Inter-caste marriage as envisaged by Ambedkar was a key mode of disrupting the casteist conjugal practice, which was a huge obstacle for the anti-caste movement. Likewise, in the regional context of Kerala, Ayyankali, Poykayil Yohannan, Pandit Karuppan, Sahodaran Ayyappan, Sree Narayana Guru Swamikal, Chattambi Swamikal, Pambadi John Joseph and many other people contributed to the formation of the idea of a good (moral) human identity for the people, an ideal fundamentally opposed to the prescriptions of Brahmanism.

I aim to analyse Kerala's modernity and morality from a Dalit feminist perspective, therefore, in this chapter, I will also look at how the literature of modernity created the dichotomy of bad women and good women premised on their caste identity. Competing notions of morality are prevalent in society, which affects different communities in diverse ways. Dr. Ambedkar observes that women are the gateways of the caste system; thus, the morality of lower caste or Dalit women differs from that of upper caste women.¹²² Endogamy ensures that caste boundaries are strictly maintained. Therefore, the idea of morality poses several critical questions in connection with “respectability” in the public sphere.

In a critical intervention, Sanal Mohan analyses how Dalits engaged with colonial modernity. All Dalits and other lower castes in Kerala did not benefit from modernity equally. Dalits’ conversion to Christianity played a vital role in engaging with colonial modernity differently since Dalits, as a slave community, were struggling to attain human status because slavery prevailed in Kerala and

¹²² B R Ambedkar, “Castes in India: Their Mechanism, Genesis and Development” in *Dr. Babasaheb Ambedkar: Writings and Speeches, Vol. 1*. (New Delhi: Ambedkar Foundation, 2014), 12-14.

was an integral part of the pre-colonial caste formation. The centrality of the concept of social suffering metaphorically linked to the suffering of Christ could be read as the result of the conversion to Christianity of the slave castes in the late 19th century. It was a reflection of modernity for them. The anti-caste movement emerged with Dalit and *Avarna* reformers like Ayyankali, Sreenarayana Guru, Poykayil Yohannan, Sahodarn Ayyappan, Arattupuzha Velayudha Panicker, and others who played vital roles. Further, in the twentieth century in Kerala, encouraged by the ideals of modernity, Dalits intensified their struggles against the structure of caste domination. The liberation from caste oppression in Kerala maps a different trajectory from the anti-caste movement in other parts of India because the Kerala Dalits' experience of slavery is different from that of Dalit communities in India. While Dalits across the country have shared the experience of untouchability and humiliation, Kerala Dalits have the specific history of being slaves and transacted as commodities in the mid-19th century. It has certain similarities with the slavery experience of African and African American people. As Jyotirao Phule, the pioneer Bahujan theorist, observed in his famous work "*Gulamgiri*" (Slavery), Brahminism has acted as the base of Indian slavery and this formation was strengthened by placing Brahmins at the top of the judiciary in colonial India. Moreover Phule coined the term "mental slavery" to describe the mentality ingrained deeply in the non-Brahmin masses that did not allow them to shake free of the influence of the Brahminical caste structure.¹²³

Dr. BR Ambedkar also analysed and differentiated between slavery and untouchability in India. He points out that slavery was not merely an institution from the hoary past but continued until the

¹²³ Govindrao Jyoti Rao Phule, *Gulamgiri (Slavery)* (New Delhi: Gautam Book Centre, 2007:1873), 216

first half of the 19th century until the British abolished it by law. He probes the historical structure of slavery as follows:

Manu recognizes Slavery. However, he confined it to the Shudras. Only Shudras could be made slaves of the three higher classes. But the higher classes could not be the slaves of the Shudra... Recognition of slavery was bad enough. But if the rule of slavery had been left free to take its own course it would have had at least one beneficial effect. It would have been a levelling force. The foundation of caste would have been destroyed. For under it a Brahmin might have become the slave of the Untouchable and the Untouchable would have become the master of the Brahmin. But it was seen that unfettered slavery was an egalitarian principle and an attempt was made to nullify it. Manu and his successors therefore, while recognizing slavery ordain that it shall not be recognized in its inverse order to the Varna System.¹²⁴

In the early nineteenth century, in Kerala, Colonel Munro, Resident and Diwan of Travancore also declared that slave trade was a punishable offence. Later, Princess Rani Lakshmi Bai of Travancore declared slavery as abolished in 1811: however, the most oppressed castes, like the Pulayas and Parayas, remained slaves. Therefore, after 36 years, Christian missionaries submitted a memorandum to King Uthram Thirunal of Travancore, in 1847, appealing to him to abolish slavery among these castes, describing the plight of slaves. Kerala's princely states were not impacted by the demand. But after six years of long protest, the first anti-slavery proclamation was issued in the princely state of Travancore in 1853. Slave trades and the predicament of slaves are evident in

¹²⁴M. M. Ninan, *Ambedkar's Philosophy of Hinduism and Contemporary Critiques* (Create Space: 2012), 47.

the missionary writings of Kerala. The missionary writings are the major literary source for the slavery studies of colonial Kerala. The missionaries detected how the structure of the slavery itself was similar to the servitude of African slaves in North America.

Sanal P. Mohan uses the term “caste slavery” to define a unique form of social oppression and exploitation that existed in Kerala since the early mediaeval period, including the transaction of untouchable men, women and children. Colonial documents use the term slavery and slave in two contexts: First, to describe the internationally recognised practice of trade in human labour throughout Europe, the New World, and the “system of social control of the subordinated untouchable slaves in Kerala,” that was a result of the caste system. Second, it was understood as an useful tool to describe the peculiar conditions of the slave caste groups under caste-hindu domination.¹²⁵

After the second decade of the twentieth century, the use of terms like “slave castes” and “slaves” to refer to Dalit communities started to decline in missionary writings. Sanal Mohan’s argument on liberation of slavery raises certain questions of how it continued to be practiced even after formal abolition. The abolition of slavery did not mean that the bodies and minds of slaves were freed from the masters’ power. The legislation that abolished slavery did not recognise the ways in which slavery was woven into the caste order. Caste continued to play a crucial role in positioning Dalits into the traditional order of caste, forming barriers for their development as

¹²⁵ Sanal P. Mohan, *Modernity of Slavery: Struggles against Caste Inequality in Colonial Kerala*.(New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2015), 39.

modern citizens of the state. Therefore, abolition of slavery did not change the condition of Dalits within the relation of production.¹²⁶

Scholars like Saradmoni have observed that agrarian slavery was an integral part of the caste formation in Kerala, She draws on Francis Buchanan's accounts of slavery in her work on the Pulayas of Kerala According to Buchanan, and the slaves were entirely the property of their owner. They could be sold or moved in any way the master deemed appropriate, and they might be forced to perform whatever duties the master desired. Saradmoni also cites the Report on Slavery of 1841, which stated that the slave castes were part of the livestock of an estate. Both were equally disposable and might fall into different hands. Cherumars (a slave caste in North Kerala) could be sold, leased or mortgaged, like the land itself, or like any cattle or thing.¹²⁷

In the system of slavery, the demand for Dalit women slaves was the highest because of their reproductive capacity. There are few academic studies carried out particularly on Dalit women slaves, however, we can find certain information about women slaves lives in missionary writings and later in Kerala slavery studies as well. The records of slave agreements show how the Dalit women slaves were transacted and the conditions of owning them as slaves. These agreements gave the owner the right to transact with or even kill the slave. Moreover, the sexuality of slaves was fully controlled by the master, and the women slaves were to give birth without any right to their children, and these children would become the property of the master.¹²⁸ Francis Buchanan

¹²⁶ Sanal P. Mohan, *Modernity of Slavery*, 39.

¹²⁷ Kunjulekshmi Saradmoni, *Emergence of a Slave Caste: Pulayas of Kerala* (India: People's Publishing House, 1980), 52.

¹²⁸ Kunjulekshmi Saradmoni, *Emergence of a Slave Caste: Pulayas of Kerala*, 52-53.

writes, “In Malabar, there are a sufficient number of females who are allowed to marry any person from the same caste as themselves and, whose labour is always exacted by her husband’s master. The master of the girl has no authority over her as long as she lives with another man’s slave.” He further states that The Nambuthiri proprietors cultivated their estates by means of their slaves called Cherumars. The greater part of the labour in the field was performed by slaves from Pulaya or Cherumar communities. They were the absolute property of their masters and could be employed in any work that the master deemed fit, could be bought and sold. He further observed that while a husband and wife might not be sold separately, the children may be separated from their parents and siblings.¹²⁹ Therefore Dalits have their own system of clan like illam to identify their family members or relatives during the slavery; It is known as *Illam*¹³⁰ means home. Illam was also can be read as a system followed to maintain moral codes among slave castes with their limited ability to live a human life.

As pointed out by Sanal Mohan, the wages paid to the slave labourers of untouchable castes were extremely poor, based on all the available sources, including native property owner records, colonial accounts, and missionary reports. A male slave in Travancore was paid three-quarters of an idangazhi, or 600 grams, in salary in the middle of the 19th century. Women would receive a

¹²⁹ Francis Buchanan, *A Journey from Madras through the Countries of Mysore, Canara, and Malabar*. Vol.2. (London: Cambridge University Press, 2011), 146-47.

¹³⁰ *Illam* is a system of clans followed by sub castes among Dalit communities in Kerala to identify their blood relatives. It is saying that (I collected information from elderly members of the community) there was a large level of displacement during slavery. Therefore, members from the same clan were informed their clan name should be followed to identify their family members, and marital relationships and love affairs between men and women from the same clan were strictly prohibited. This system was strictly followed by Dalit communities until mid-twentieth century.

significantly lower pay. Because landowners in certain cases understood fully well that such actions were required for the survival of the slave workers, they sometimes chose to ignore the slaves' need to steal standing fields of rice or some tubers or roots. Mohan points to the condition of the slave women who occupy the primary role in agricultural labour and production. Women take up the difficult tasks of weeding, transplanting and harvesting of agricultural products. Alongside this labour, they were also engaged in domestic work within their households, including cooking, getting water and firewood. Not only productive labour, but these slave women were also expected to carry the burden of furthering the slave reproduction, sometimes such burden of species reproduction was egged on by landlord-owners.¹³¹

Mohan further foregrounds how the slave women's religiosity extended beyond simple prayers and prayer gatherings. He refers to a letter by the missionary Hawksworth in his annual letters to the CMS headquarters in 1861, where he mentioned a slave girl named Elizabeth who had to endure suffering because of her faith before ultimately passing away from disease and praying that she was going to her father, Jesus. Moreover, the growing number of women from slave castes deployed in the missionary context allowed women of slave caste to visit upper-caste homes.¹³²

Dalits and the Contested Public Space of Kerala

Colonial and pre-colonial Kerala prohibited the access of public space to Dalits and other lower castes on the basis of their position in the hierarchical caste structure. The rigid norms of purity and pollution determined the distance between the castes, ensuring that the inferior castes did not

¹³¹ P Sanal Mohan, "Women in Religiosity: Dalit Christianity in Kerala," *Economic and Political Weekly* 52, no. 42/43, 52 (2023): 52.

¹³² P Sanal Mohan, "Women in Religiosity: Dalit Christianity in Kerala: 50-57.

pollute the superior one. The lower castes had to keep mandated distance from a Brahmin in a public space, while untouchables like Pulayas had to keep a distance of 96 feet from a Brahmin and of 64 feet from Nairs. Moreover, unseeable communities like Vedan and Nayadi had to run away from those spaces where upper caste men might appear. Dalits had to make their presence felt with a noise if Savarnas happened to be close by. A major struggle led by the untouchables was for access to basic human rights. They wanted liberation from the inhuman and miserable life of slavery imposed upon them. Kerala has witnessed the untouchables' struggles to have a decent human life. Kerala's reformist ideas of modernity did not extend to the slave castes as an inclusive category in their reforms. Dalits in Kerala have historically been excluded from public spaces like markets. Moreover, they have also been denied equal access to health facilities, education, and many other basic rights. Thus, the right to access public spaces and institutions emerged as a major question in the struggles and movements for Dalit rights in the early twentieth century. The struggle by lower caste women for the upper cloth and the removal of stone ornaments is known as *Kallumala*. The privileges of modest attire were denied to women of the lower castes who could only wear a cloth of coarse texture, not lower than the knee or higher than the waist. In 19th century Travancore, baring of one's chest by both men and women of lower castes to higher status people was considered a sign of respect. Dalit women were made to wear necklaces made of stones or glass to mark their lower caste status. When the lower caste women, with the support of the missionaries attempted to cover their breasts for the first time, this was simply not acceptable within the caste hierarchy of Kerala, with the upper-caste men pulling the breast-cloth off the women of the lower castes. In 1813, Colonel John Munro, British *dewan* in the Travancore court, granted permission to women converted to Christianity to wear upper cloth through issuing an order. There were instances of riots in Travancore against allowing lower caste women to wear

upper cloth. However, the women continued to fight for wearing the upper cloth in the style of women of higher status.

Sartorial politics, particularly ones that restrict and enforce particular codes of attire such as strict prohibitions against wearing the *melmundu* (upper body garment), must be read as being crucial to the creation of a caste habitus. It was indeed this caste habitus that social reformers such as Mahatma Ayyankali, Sree Narayana Guru and Poikayil Appachan were challenging. Often, it is reductively thought that the work of the social reformers was to uplift the specific communities that they belonged to, but their role was to reform and realign the patterns of hierarchical habits.¹³³

Ayyankali, who had himself openly challenged caste laws by wearing a coat and a *mundu* (*Along cloth around 3mtr*), responded to the movement started by Pulaya women at Perinad demanding the right to cover their breasts in October 1915. A gathering of Pulaya, Paraya and other Dalit women were organised by Ayyankali at Kollam on 21 December 1915. At the gathering, hundreds of Pulaya and Paraya women cast off their stone necklaces in a symbolic act of defying the caste system. This event came to be known as the *Kallumala Samaram* and marked a landmark moment in the history of anti-caste struggles in Kerala.

Kerala's public space evidently excluded sections of its population that had little or no access to modern education. The early public sphere was accessible only to those who knew English and had a modern education. The modern, educated Savarna men integrated the public sphere with the

¹³³ Malavika Binny, "Kallumala Samaram: A Turning Point for Caste Based Sartorial Politics in Modern Kerala," *Feminism in India* (2021). <https://feminisminindia.com/2021/01/11/kallumala-samaram-caste-kerala/>

culture of writing. Writing, publishing, and discussing were key activities of groups who were part of Kerala's public sphere. Moreover, the literature produced by these groups influenced the common people. Kerala was imagined as a linguistic terrain in the late nineteenth century, and it witnessed the absence of a nationalist movement. Moreover, only educated Savarna and Muslim men participated in the nationalist movement. According to KN Panikkar, caste reformation movements had to fill the vacuum that was left due to the absence of the movement of nationalism in nineteenth century Kerala. This was the time when a consciousness with regard to the cultural specificities of this linguistic terrain and a sense of belonging were simultaneously developing. The first Malayalam novel *Indulekha* by Oyyarath Chandu Menon was published in 1889. A number of magazines were produced in Malayalam during the second half of the nineteenth century. Those basically engaged in conceptualising issues in the public sphere that bypassed caste lines in the process of reforming the local cultural terrain. Thus, reformation in Kerala was rather a hub where various elements, including caste interests, mainly of upper castes, and linguistic identity, coalesced to produce new formulas of desire.¹³⁴ In the context of Kerala, the earlier literary public sphere attempted to amass and transform public opinion to embrace a new rational order that defied in clear terms the earlier *jati* (Caste) specific sexual systems and conjugal arrangements. Instead, a modern sexual moral order was prescribed and presented under the promises of modernization and a progressive future.

J Devika's works, while critical, have assumed the question of women as a homogeneous category, as many of her works continuously place Nair and Namboothiri Brahmin women

¹³⁴ K. N Panikkar, *History as a Site of Struggle: Essays on History, Politics and Culture* (Gurgaon: Three Essays Collective.2013), 148-149.

as representations of Malayalee women. Thus, the categorization developed by her with respect to negotiating women's spaces emerges as problematic. The public spaces that she refers to in relation to women's access and negotiations were unapproachable to various castes, like Pulaya, Parayas, and many others, in the early twentieth century. Devika observes about the gendered contexts of the 1920s in Kerala and suggests that during this time, debates around women's participation in public institutions gained momentum along with the universalising invocation of the category of 'women' and 'common good.' Places like Kochi and Thiruvithamkoor witnessed increasing participation from women in public and political institutions. Women were made eligible to sit in the popular assembly and legislative council, leading to their partial enfranchisement. This also gave rise to the demand for separate constituencies for and proportional representation for women. 1930s witnessed women members in political institutions supporting the needs of women as a political conscious category.¹³⁵

These analyses focus on women who are privileged in terms of their caste identity but have been denied public space due to Brahminical patriarchal norms. However, Devika's analysis gives a picture of early twentieth century Kerala, where Dalit women undertook their initial struggles to come out of their enslaved status. The *Kallumala Samaram* almost coincided with Savarna women's demand for reservation in education. These comparative studies help us learn the complexities of the women's question in Kerala as situated in the structures of caste

¹³⁵ Jayakumari Devika, *Engendering Individuals: The Language of Reforming in Twentieth Century Keralam* (Hyderabad: Orient Longman, 2006), 346-348.

Devika also argues that development has been deeply ingrained in the mindsets of Malayalees¹³⁶ from the mid-20th century onwards. The region was fragmented into three pieces during the colonial period for administrative reasons. This was primarily required to be set aside through a unification process in the immediate post-colonial period in order to consolidate the imaginations of a nation. The hectic discussions that led to such unification were mainly premised on the progressive potential of remaining united under a single title. These “progressive” imaginations of a nation were substantially influenced by the socialist ideologies that favoured an even distribution of resources and were later translated under the buzzword development. The whole cultural reconfiguration and practices within the region had to address development as a primary goal.¹³⁷

Kerala Modernity and Dalit Assertions

Kerala modernity as a term has been problematized in the writings of Dalit scholars since the 1990s, in their attempt to develop a critique of the nationalist-Marxist frameworks that celebrated the progressiveness of Malayalee modernity. The discourse of modernity and its various inquiries were based merely on linear-conventional Kerala history, thus, the diverse history of modernity in Kerala is deliberately muted in various ways in these narratives. Initially the scholarly discontent with colonialism was raised by the savarna educated men, articulated as a homorganic analysis of colonial modernity of Kerala. Sanal Mohan observes that in contemporary critical scholarship, there is an acceptance of the fact that the term modernity refers to a socio-economic and intellectual transformation that took place in the western world. However, as he points out, it

¹³⁶ Malayali or Malayalee is a term used to signify people from Kerala origin.

¹³⁷ Jayakumari Devika, *Engendering Individuals*, 195.

is difficult to understand all historical contexts of modernity as the same. While modernity is commonly understood as socio-economic and intellectual transformation, the non-European modernity was mediated through the colonial experience, as if often referred to as colonial modernity.¹³⁸

Modernity is often interpreted as cultural modernity, and it is conveyed by societal modernization. The formation and response of modernity among different social groups in India were based on their cultural privileges and historical conditions. For instance, the contests for democracy and presence in the nationalist movements of the Brahmin and twice born communities have been recorded and noted in the hegemonic histories of modernity.¹³⁹

The growth of modernity handheld by the lower-caste reformers did not become a part of discussion in mainstream Indian debates for various reasons. Jyothirao Phule , Savithribai Phule , Dr. BR Ambedkar, Narayana Guru, Ayyankali, Pandita Iyothidas, Tarabhai Shinde, Poykayil Yohannan and many others remain completely absent from nationalist and other debates in India. As Gopal Guru observes, the lower caste thinkers developed a unique conception of modernity. They evolved their own sense of modernity, drawing partly on colonial modernity as an initial condition. These thinkers never aimed at a “perfect modernity.” Thus, it might be suggested that the thinkers from the margins did not base their modernity on the “desi conception” as proposed by scholars looking for an alternative modernity. They borrowed intellectual resources from the

¹³⁸ P Sanal Mohan, *Modernity of Slavery: Struggles against Caste Inequality in Colonial Kerala* (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2015), 7.

¹³⁹ Sathese Chandra Bose and Shiju Sam Varughese, eds. *Kerala Modernity: Ideas, Spaces and Practices in Transition*, (Hyderabad, Orient Black Swan, 2015), 1-12.

west as per their need, as these resources were not available or accessible to them in the local epistemological field based on two basic reasons. First, historically they were denied access to Sanskrit language; and second, the upper castes refused to act as interlocutors to this knowledge.¹⁴⁰

Dilip Menon notes that colonial modernity brings its own critique of native customs and traditions.

To cite Menon:

Having once eaten the forbidden fruit of western knowledge, an uncompromised retreat into tradition does not seem possible... This manoeuvre so well charted by Partha Chatterjee in his studies concentrating on the Bengali *bhadralok*, allows a recognition of the superiority of western science and civilization in the material, 'outer' domain. Face (and soul) is saved by retreating into an 'inner' spiritual domain from which the colonial power is excluded. And it is from this 'inner' domain of national culture that 'nationalism' launches its most powerful, creative and historically significant project: to fashion a 'modern' national culture that is nevertheless not 'Western'.¹⁴¹

Partha Chatterjee's formulation displaces the centrality of the west and relocates the agency of the colonised. However, MSS Pandian problematizes Partha Chatterjee's argument as it represents a singular dominant national identity that is inadequate to represent the range of contexts. Pandian comments that if we "pluralise national community and national culture", the triumph of dominant nationalism over colonialism would emerge not just as a story of domination over colonialism but

¹⁴⁰ Gopal Guru, "Foreword" to *Kerala Modernity: Ideas, Spaces, and Practices in Transition*, eds., Sathese Chandra Bose and Shiju Sam Vagheseeds (Orient Black Swan: Hyderabad, 2015), x-xii.

¹⁴¹ Dilip M. Menon, "Caste and Colonial Modernity: Reading *Saraswativijayam*," *Studies in History* 13, no. 2 (1997): 291-312.

also over varied sections of subaltern social groups within the nation. The very domain of sovereignty that nationalism constructs in opposition to colonial domination is simultaneously a domain of enforcing domination over subaltern social groups such as lower castes, women, and marginal linguistic regions by the national elite. As Partha Chatterjee observes, colonial modernity also emerged as the foundation on which the Bhadrakol caste based their claim to the Vedic civilization as their tradition. MSS Pandian reads this articulation as a valorized opposition between colonialism and nationalism. Carrying inherently a hierarchization of different social groups that go to make a nation. Pandian argues that the normativity of a Vedic civilization, reinvented by the dominant discourse of nationalism, would fail to accommodate vast sections of Indians only as inferiors within the nation. As he puts it: It is not so much the triumph of non-modular nationalism over colonialism, but its inability to exercise hegemony over the life of the nation, is where we can locate the source of two competing modes of speaking caste.¹⁴²

As Sanal Mohan also observes, modernity is a process parallel to the formation of the nation-state and the establishment of the hegemony of the dominant social groups. This complicity is visible in the emergence of new cultural forms and new literary genres. He further says that Dalits were eager to embrace modernity in whatever guise it came whether in the form of the salvation missionary churches offered or in the form of liberation offered by secular or communist agendas, unlike the upper castes who held on to tradition even as they modernised. Dalit struggle in civil and political societies became fractured as religious divisions developed and as movements vied for resources from the government. Subsequently, dominant, social, political, and religious forces

¹⁴² Mathias Samuel Soundara Pandian, "One Step outside Modernity: Caste, Identity Politics and Public Sphere," *Economic and Political Weekly* 37, no. 18 (2002): 1735-1741.

easily intervened to enforce their hegemonic agendas. However, Mohan hopes, Dalit cultural interventions from the late 1990s onward and contemporary mobilisation focusing on the Adivasi Dalit land questions may be capable of creating a new politics of culture. Such interventions in the cultural spheres are capable of interrogating the hegemony of the public sphere in Kerala.¹⁴³

The above discussed arguments provide certain prime ideas of modernity and lower castes. Dr. Ambedkar's lifelong contributions towards the lower castes could be read as an effort to bring them into modernity as well as public life. His life itself is a significant site of modernity, which drew a great degree of inspiration from colonial modernity, which opened up critical avenues for the untouchables who could not access the privileges of indigenous or nationalist modernity. Ambedkar, criticises the Vedic tradition, as also the *Manusmriti*, and analyses it as the root cause of social inequality in India. The modernity imagined by the Savarna educated men of the nation, has been and continues to be criticised by Dalit-subaltern scholarship by using the theoretical base of Ambedkarism. The idea of Kerala's modernity, or Malayalee modernity, has been widely criticised by Dalits and lower caste intellectuals based on the generalisations and assumptions on which it is founded. The centrality of Savarna educated men in the Kerala modernity discourse determined the reformist, and later developmental and progressive formations of Kerala. The conception of social groups based on their position in the pyramidal structure of caste allowed those communities to primarily access the benefits of colonial modernity. Thus, my inquiry of Dalit women's engagements with the modernity of Kerala, or Malayalee modernity, draws on the analyses of social transformations of Dalits and other lower castes. In the Indian context, access to

¹⁴³ P. Sanal Mohan, "Social Space, Civil Society, and Dalit Agency in Twentieth Century Kerala" in *Dalit Studies*, eds. Ramnarayan S. Rawat and K. Satyanarayana (Durham: Duke University Press, 2016), 74-103.

public goods, property, and public institutions was denied to lower caste communities in the pre-colonial period. Moreover, the slavery system in Kerala assigned a miserable status to Dalit communities. The princely-states in Kerala in the colonial period followed barbaric systems of punishment for the lower castes. William Logan describes the inhuman punishments he witnessed during his visit to Kerala.¹⁴⁴ Malayalee and Tamil Brahmins were excluded from harsh punishments for any crimes they committed based on *Manusmriti* and *Sankarasmriti* laws. Because *Brahmahatya* (killing or violence against Brahmins) was considered as the highest sin and the Kshatriya rulers were afraid to invite such sin. However, while Brahmanical norms and *Manusmriti* influenced governance and life in Kerala, it hardly became a matter for debate in colonial Kerala. THP Chentharasseri, Kunnu Kuzhi S. Mani, Nellimukal Samual, and other non-academic writers have analysed how Brahmanism worked in the social life of Kerala.

The dominance of Brahmanism in modernity is a less discussed area in Kerala-colonial modernity studies. The public appearance and participation in colonial Kerala by Brahmin men itself were a blend of colonial modernity and Vedic norms. They were the only people recruited for civil service jobs in princely states. Also, the rulers of each princely state belonged to the Kshatriya caste, a caste that was lower to the Brahman caste in the varna system. Thus, Brahmins possessed an abundance of land, cows, and other material wealth because they belonged to a community at the top of the caste pyramid, positioned above the ruling caste. They were freely given lots of gifts, and could avoid punishment even when they committed a serious crime. However, the colonial system subjected them to the judicial and punishment system. The social construction of Brahmanism faced certain threats from the colonial laws and administration, as the courts and laws

¹⁴⁴ William Logan, *Malabar Manual*, Vol.2, (New Delhi: Asian Educational Services, 2004), 28-36.

came to direct their lives. In the novel *Saraswathivijayam*, (*the Victory of Saraswathi*) by Potheri Kunhambu, published in 1893, the Brahmin landlord who kills the Dalit man, for singing a song loudly, faces a criminal trial in the colonial court. The brahmanical right to kill is not recognized in this court. Thus, this novel narrates and imagines a certain kind of egalitarianism, which the colonial order establishes with its emergence. A Pulaya young man named Marathan (who is renamed Yesudasan after his conversion to Christianity) gets an education with missionary support and becomes a judge in the court. Later, in a radical move of the narrative, he marries the Namboothiri landowner's granddaughter, Sarswathi. This is considered a victory or *vijayam*, and this event lends the novel its title.¹⁴⁵ As Dilip Menon notes, *Saraswativijayam* was a radical novel for its time with its fierce critique of the injustice of caste and the emancipatory message of education for lower castes. The promise of equality and freedom brought forth by colonisation and the presence of missionaries stands in contrast to the stagnation and injustice of traditional society. In the novel, the Nambudiri and the Pulayan both achieve atonement, but they must take distinct paths and their objectives cannot be the same. It is this search for a greater humanity that permeates this work. Through his conversion, Marathan joins the realm of colonial modernity, which is characterised by the existence of the rule of law and the potential for personal social mobility. Menon's analysis demonstrates how conversion opened a new world for oppressed social groups, through allowing them access to the public space.¹⁴⁶

¹⁴⁵ Potheri Kunhambu, *Sarswathivijayam*, Thiruvananthapuram: Chintha Publication, 2013), 119.

¹⁴⁶ Dilip M Menon, "Caste and Colonial Modernity: Reading *Saraswativijayam*," *Studies in History* 13, no. 2 (1997): 291-312.

J Devika, a well-known feminist writer from Kerala, has attempted to articulate the elements that are included in the idea of freedom. She notes that the Malayalee modernity emerged within “new set of ideas, institutions, possibilities, agencies, constraints and hierarchies” that are not simply the interplay of restraint and possibilities but needs to be located within the social reformisms accorded to the Malayalee men and women, and the possibilities and agencies it opened for the Malayalee society.¹⁴⁷

While Devika, and most mainstream feminists in Kerala, focus on women’s role in the discourse of modernity, these studies do not document lower caste women’s agency in the process of modernity. Therefore, a reading of modernity from the Dalit or other lower caste women’s perspective is highly needed. I would like to look at various reformist movements that happened in Kerala from the 19th century onward to analyse the history of resistance and struggles for human dignity from subaltern locations. Thus, I would like to shift from the conventional historical reading of the Renaissance period and try to bring out the subaltern Renaissance. Moreover, the renaissance of lower castes has not even been recognized as a movement in Kerala history.

The emergence of Kerala’s modern public sphere was a consequence of the colonial education of the native dominant caste elite men. It was a creation of English education and print technology in the last quarter of the 19th century. The newly emerging public sphere of Kerala led to the creation of social groups like arts and sports clubs, nationalist discussion groups, and other reading groups among savarna-educated men. These groups were exclusively for men, and they excluded educated

¹⁴⁷Jayakumari Devika, *Engendering Individuals: The Language of Re-forming in Twentieth Century Kerlam* (Hyderabad: Orient Longman, 2006), 49.

women as well. The imagination of these reformist-social groups was male-centric. Devika has mapped how those groups excluded women and the later emergence of women's groups and magazines through the efforts of educated women from dominant castes.

Dalits, as a community, engaged with Kerala modernity in an ambiguous manner. As common critiques of modernity analyse the carrying of morality discourse and its denial of Kerala's indigenous culture and the controlling of bodies and even genders, Dalits scholars look at Kerala modernity in quite a different manner since their engagement with it was not in the same way that Savarna castes experienced it.

Kerala Modernity and Women's Sexual Agency

Kerala modernity places Savarna-educated upper caste-class men at its centre. Savarna feminist writer J Devika analyses the modernity project as a system that tamed the "women" of Kerala with Victorian moral consciences. The early Malayalam reforms with colonial influence restricted women's access to public spaces like clubs, community gatherings, and other institutions in late 19th-century Kerala. The women who got the opportunity to read and write had certain access to public spaces like reading and writing groups.¹⁴⁸ However, I would argue that the "women" in many Kerala modernity and history studies are Savarna Malayalee women. It does not represent the "Others" such as Dalit, Adivasi and Muslim women. The formation of the Nair Service Society (NSS) by Mannathu Padmanabhan Pillai in 1914 aimed at reformation of the Nair community through establishing the control over Nair women's morality. The formation of the Nair community with several sub-castes was codified as one identity. Simultaneously, the NSS

¹⁴⁸ J. Devika, "Imagining women's Social Space in Early Modern Keralam" (working paper), (Thiruvananthapuram: Centre for Development Studies, 2002): 329.

controlled Nair women's freedom and choice. Thus, Nair women were forced to marry from within the caste to protect their purity and goodwill, and eventually the practice of *Sambandham* with Namboothiri¹⁴⁹ men ceased.

Early Malayalam novels like *Indulekha* (1889)¹⁵⁰ by Chandu Menon, are a product of Kerala's colonial modernity. The protagonist of the novel, Indulekha is considered a liberated Nair woman and her choice of not marrying the old Brahmin character itself rejects the customary practices followed by Nair women in Kerala. The *sambandham*¹⁵¹ the system is critically analysed in this novel; and the chastity and sexual morality of the Nair women is reinvented and reinforced through the disavowal of the conventional system of having mere sexual relationship with Brahmin men. This demonstrates the anxiety over the sexual morality of Nair women in the community. As Ambedkar observed, women are the gateways to the caste system by engaging in endogamy to protect their caste purity. Here, the colonial educated men show their dissent to such oppressive customs as polygamy in the Nair community. The novelist Chandu Menon, who belongs to the Nair community articulates this position. The rejection of Brahmanical traditions and declaration of love for an educated man from her own community by Indulekha, an English educated woman, can be read as a progressive and modern decision in this novel. This novel proved influential for

¹⁴⁹ Kerala Brahmins also known as Namboothiri.

¹⁵⁰ *Indulekha* is a Malayalam novel written by Oyyarathu Chandu Menon, considered as the first ideal novel published in Malayalam literature.

¹⁵¹ *Sambandham* was a sexual (rarely marital) relationship between *Namboothiri* men and Nair women until early twentieth century *Namboothiri* Brahmin caste, the elder son could only marry within their own caste, forcing younger siblings to have relationships with Nair (Malayalee Sudra) women. Due to the matrilineal family structure of Nair families, women played a significant role in property ownership and kinship. Up to the early 20th century, this method was known as *Sambandham* among Nair *Namboothiri* communities.

many Savarna Nair young educated people. As Devika observes, Indulekha aims at the creation of a “new woman” who is suitable for the newly- emergent class of men in the context of changing property and kinship relations in the Nair community.¹⁵² However, such analyses are typically focused on class and capital, and not on caste analysis and the hierarchical difference between Namboothiri Brahmins and Nairs. The identity of Indulekha cannot be considered as only a woman, undertaking the project of emancipation through individual choices. Yet, mainstream Kerala women's studies places Savarna women at the centre of the debate and often women from all communities are represented through the metaphor of Indulekha. Thus, these studies have certain inherent limitations in representing the diverse thoughts of modernity and women in Kerala.

Sexual Morality and Kerala's Public Sphere

The sexual morality of Kerala is a prominent research area in modernity studies. Sexual morality and the concept of desire have been problematized by savarna feminist scholars. Sexuality and its control are being studied through the frameworks of governmentality, modernity, and patriarchy. Within a hierarchy of castes in Kerala, the Namboothiris stood at the top rung of the social ladder and were attributed ritual superiority. The demands for ensuring caste purity invariably imposed demands on female sexuality in the manner of controlling, confining, and regulating it as well as punishing sexual transgression. Caste and the state interact at very pertinent levels in gender relations while also shaping the conduct of women and the deployment of their sexuality. The

¹⁵² J. Devika, *Engendering Individuals: The Language of Re-forming in Twentieth Century Kerala* (Hyderabad: Orient Longman, 2006), 91.

question of Brahminical regulation emerges here; the Brahminical *Smritis* and *Shastras* were the foundation of the state, though the rulers of various princely states were Kshatriyas. Primarily Brahmin and other savarna caste men dominated public spaces like roads, temples, schools, and other government institutions. Men from these communities dominated the sphere of writing as well. This literary hegemony shaped the public sphere where the tastes and desires were constructed following the desires and norms of savarna men. The discourse of sexual morality is created through the savarna men's imaginations.

Therefore, I argue here that the discourse of sexual morality has largely been discussed as merely a question of liberal body politics in Kerala's public discourse. Many scholars have worked on such discourses on sexuality, from colonial modernity to liberalisation, and how they have had an impact on Kerala society. For instance, Rajeev Kumaramkandath observes the ways in which colonial modernity was involved in custodial practices among Savarna communities of Kerala. He further writes:

,Early modern Keralan modernization entailed a savage and passionate advocacy about the need to civilise society. This extensive propoganda was focused on disciplining the body, gendering a person's identity, and regulating bodily practises. The colonizer's early civilising mission was the main cause of the introspectiveness that pervaded the entire culture and served as the driving force behind all reformation discussions. By the end of the 19th century, the reformation discourse had already eliminated the backward conditions

that reigned here by carefully identifying traditions and practises, such as polyandry, sambandham, and marumakkathayam, from inside a contemporary logical framework.¹⁵³

The concept of sexual morality, or *Sadacharam* was not merely a product of the colonial moral system. The well-discussed idea of Victorian morality has influenced certain structures of moral education on an institutional level. Also, the moral regimens of the church and Christianity were practised through institutions. Different church educational institutions, especially, the Roman Catholic Church and its clergy, played a crucial role in shaping sexual morality and consciousness of sin among students.

The studies on notions of sexuality sexual morality in Kerala by K Rajeev and Sheeba K.M. while critical, do not really address the Brahminical as well as *Manusmritic* influences of morality. Kerala's concept of sexual morality is a combination of *Manusmritic*, colonial, and religious morals. The Malayalee Brahmins follow the *Smritis* of the Vedic tradition in their customs and conjugal practices, which influenced their sexual relationships with Kshatriya and Nair caste women since the pre-colonial period. He loses the chance to ascend to heaven. These customary practices are followed by the Malayalee Namboothiri Brahmins in their sexual relations with Kshatriya and Nair women since the pre-colonial period.

Sheeba points out that the controversy around the upper garment and the covering of the breast was a sign of a culture in transition. *Sambandhams* (liaison connections between the Namboodiri

¹⁵³ Rajeev Kumaramkandath, "Body and Desire in the Malayalee Public Sphere: Sexual Morality in Early Malayalam Magazines," *Kerala Sociological Society* 39, no. 2 (2011): 118.

male and the Nair female) and other marriage customs that had been crucial to upholding caste hierarchy were undermined by "Christian" and Victorian moral codes. It also indicates how newer caste identities were developing in relation to the issue of women, their attire, etc., which finally led to the creation of caste organisations. The younger generation started showing a new set of ideals and moral principles, that was facilitated into the modern age through reform practices. Female sexuality was being managed by the caste order and different caste groups organised different moral principles around issues of female sexuality and male-female friendships.¹⁵⁴

Morality Policing, and Savarna Women : The case of Tatrikutti's Smarthvicharam

The discourse of sexual morality is largely discussed as a general phenomenon in several studies on the sexuality of women as well as moral policing in Kerala. Thus, differentiating the fundamental concern of sexual morality from the experiential discourse of women on the basis of their identity provides a way forward to examine different aspects of the issue. The trajectory of the study of the sexual morality of women in Kerala places "*Tatri's case*" as a site for its basic analysis. *Tathri* was a Brahmin woman married to an old Brahmin priest. She was outcast from Brahmin identity when she had sexual relations with many upper-caste men. She was branded as a loose woman who lost the sanctity of the Namboothiri Brahmin community. She was subsequently tried by the brahmanical court. The process of trial was called *smarthvicharam*, and the man who led it was called *smarthan*. A group of Brahmin men accompanied *Smarthan* for the trial. It took many days to collect the information from Thathri through her maid (Dasi). This court

¹⁵⁴ K.M. Sheeba, "Caste, Sexuality and the State: The Changing Lives of the Namboodiri Women in the Twentieth Century," (Unpublished Ph.D. dissertation: Centre for Historical Studies, Jawaharlal Nehru University, 2002): 16-17.

happened in Tathri's house (*Illam* in Malayalam), during the early 1900s.¹⁵⁵ Several feminist scholars of gender studies and sexuality have looked at her case as a site to analyse the history of Malayalee women's sexual morality. Existing academic works place *Tathri* as a brave woman who interrogated caste codes in the brahmanical social order.

Caste codes in Kerala played a vital role in regulating women's sexuality. In Kerala, the codes of *Sankarasmriti* were joined with *Manusmriti* to create brahmanical norms. Chapter twelve of *Sankarasmriti* talks about moral practices (*Sadachara dharmangal*). It prescribes how Brahmins who have learned the scriptural texts must get respect, and they must not engage in activities that sully their caste purity. This chapter also lays down how a man should dress according to his caste status. In addition, it states that a man (savarna) should avoid meeting women who are menstruating or whose breasts are bare.¹⁵⁶

The patriarchal Namboothiri caste only allowed the eldest son in the family to marry from among the Namboothiris and he was allowed multiple marriages in order to accommodate Namboothiri women who were not allowed to marry outside the caste in order to maintain possession of their enormous land holdings and to ensure it was not divided. Namboothiri women had no possibility for sexual connections with lower caste Nair men, whereas younger brothers (*aphpans*) of the Namboothiri family could have relationships (*sambandham*) with Nair women. As the bodies and sexuality of women are bearers of caste codes, these codes determined the subordination of Dalit

¹⁵⁵ Aalankodu Leela Krishnan, *Thathrikkuttiyude Smartha Vicharam*, (Kozhikode: Mathrubhoomi Books 2016), 53-59.

¹⁵⁶ Sankara, *Sankarasmriti Laghudharmaprakasika with Malayalam Commentary 1906*, ed. TC Parameswaran Moosada (Thrissur: Bharatavilasam Press).

https://archive.org/details/Sankarasmriti_Laghudharmaprakasika_with_Malayalam_Commentary

and other lower caste women. Caste codes, from the Brahmin Namboothiri caste to the Ezhava women, differed based on their caste and gender location. Kerala Brahmin women were known as *Antharjanam*; they wore upper clothing and used an umbrella to hide their faces when they went out. Brahmin women did not go out alone; a maximum of three servants accompanied them. These ways of protecting them and considering them as domestic beings showed the orthodoxy and higher position of the Namboothiri Brahmin community. At the same time, Nair women were sexualized because, as *dasis* (female servants), they had to form temporary sexual relationships (*sambandham*) with Nambuthiri men. . However, it was considered a sign of pride for Nair women to have a sexual relationship with Namboothiri men; even though such relations were not officially recognized by the caste system. As I have discussed earlier, in the early 20th century savarna, educated men formed sub-caste organisations initiating the regulation of the sexuality of Nair women.

The Literary Public and Sexual Morality in Kerala

The print media were crucial in the development of the Kerala public sphere in the late nineteenth century, but due to cultural injustices, caste practices, and gender discrimination, the vast majority of people were shut out. Early literary masterpieces like *Indulekha*, *Kundalatha*, and *Parangodi Parinayam* also had a significant impact on the dominant castes' moral standards. Rajeev K observes that the early periodicals sought to create and advance an ideological framework that would be self-explanatory within modernity's progressive, nationalistic circuits. In the developing social spaces and realities, body, gender, and desire were given a significant place. To cite:

This evidently stood in contrast with, or so as it was widely represented, the previous modes of dealing with these questions ‘rather loosely’ or with complete disregard for the larger

‘social interests of Malayalees’ (*Malayaleekalute thalparyangal*). The recurrence of this term, Malayalee, throughout this narrative space was a signification of the emergence of a new identity consciousness defined in linguistic terms that would further encourage the rearrangement of the cultural and mental world by directly translating this consciousness to new forms and themes of desire. An instance in this context would be the discussions and debates in magazines around passing a marriage act mainly for communities that followed *marumakkathayam*. The magazines played an important role in expressing the diverging concerns around the forthcoming act even before it finally came into effect as Malabar Marriage Act in 1896. The forthcoming act was predominantly addressed as a brave and valid attempt to systematise “the marital relationships of Malayalees.”¹⁵⁷

Since the 1990s, various identities like Dalits, Adivasis, women, and sexual minorities have gained visibility in the social sphere of Kerala. These new engagements have led to various discussions around the public sphere of Kerala society. J Devika discusses how hegemonic Kerala modernity has been premised upon the representation of “authentic” Malayalee women:

For the historian of modern gendered subjectivity in 20th-century Keralam, the 1920s and 1930s are a particularly interesting period. This is so because in these years we find repeated instances of appeals being made, opinions being voiced on behalf of such identities as ‘women of Keralam’, ‘women of Tiruvitamkoor’ or ‘of Kochi’, etc., or

¹⁵⁷ Rajeev Kumaramkandath, “The Discursive Formation of Sexual Subjects: Sexual Morality and Homosexuality in Keralam,” (Ph.D. Dissertation: Manipal University, 2013), 65.

sometimes simply on behalf of 'women.' Despite references to national or community affiliations, such appeals were addressed to a general audience in the newly emergent Malayalee public sphere... [This] gestures at a common condition of insularity...from the openness and mobility promised by modernity uniting all Malayalee women, otherwise differently situated. Importantly, much of these came from women who had been exposed to modern education, were members of the emergent middle classes and largely hailed from *jati* groups that had taken a lead in the highly uneven and complex process of the transformation of *jati* groups into closely-knit modern communities in Keralam.¹⁵⁸

Kerala's Public Space and Dalits

Kerala's public space was historically shaped by the nineteenth and twentieth century social reform movements that focused mainly on caste oppression and inequalities. When the nationalist and communist movements intensified during the early twentieth century, the question of caste dissipated in the mainstream public space.

Though caste continued to exist as a deceptive category in shaping the socio-political realm, this public space failed to mediate any explicit debate on caste, which is true for sexuality as well. This refusal to engage with caste renders the public space as a space where there is an absence of caste, while most of the cultural transactions are founded on caste arrangements. The absence of an explicit discourse on caste in the public space helps mask the presence of caste in socio-cultural transactions, and vice versa.

¹⁵⁸ Jayakumari Devika, "Beyond Kulina and Kulata: The Critique of Gender Difference in the Writings of K. Saraswati Amma," *Indian Journal of Gender Studies* 10, no. 2 (2003): 202.

In Kerala, dominant caste men determined public social engagements. The strict rules of purity and pollution that continue to be practised in overt and covert forms in Kerala prohibit lower castes from accessing the public space. Their caste identity and lack of power and resources restricts entry into the public sphere of Kerala. There are several efforts made by social reformists and thinkers such as Ayyankali, Sree Narayana Guru, Pandit Karuppan, Poyayil Yohannan, Aarattupuzha Velayudhappanikkar, and Kantan Kumara from lower caste communities to democratise and redefine the idea of public life, endeavouring to create more egalitarian community and public spaces for those from subaltern castes. Furthermore, there have been large efforts made by Dalits to be part of the process of modernity by embracing Christianity since the late nineteenth century. As Sanal Mohan illustrates, due to the missionary interventions, the slave castes were integrated into literacy from the mid-19th century. While this literacy was confined to those who became members of the missionaries, the agenda was to enable the reading of religious texts. However, the function of literacy expanded beyond this agenda.¹⁵⁹ Samuel Nellimukal observes how Christianity interfaced with modernity for the lower castes of Kerala, and religious conversion facilitated the slave castes to obtain few privileges of public good.¹⁶⁰

The movements of the lower caste are very critical even though they remain less accounted for in Kerala's history. We hardly find mention of the Dalit and lower caste reformers that I have mentioned above in the history textbooks of Kerala. Ayyankali was not included in Marxist leader

¹⁵⁹ Sanal P. Mohan, *Modernity of Slavery: Struggles against Caste Inequality in Colonial Kerala* (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2015), 9.

¹⁶⁰ Samuel Nellimukal, "Keralathile Samoohyaparivarthanam: Samoohya Charithra Padanam" (Social Transformation in Kerala: A Socio-Historical Study), (Kottayam: K S Books, 2003), 61.

EMS Namboodiripad's book on Kerala history titled *Kerala, Society and Politics: An Historical Survey* (1984). Dalit and subaltern scholars have increasingly highlighted Kerala's dominant modernity discourse and its negligence on lower caste Renaissance. Within the imagination of the dominant caste scholarship of the region, modernity has largely been a site of negating indigenous experience; it did not and could not account for the subaltern struggles to acquire human status in a caste-ridden society. In addition, the imagination of rights, and citizenship was unknown for slave castes like Dalits. The imagination of rights and citizenship were inaccessible to and exclusionary of the slave and Dalit castes.

The movements for modernity from the Brahmin reform movements and Nair Movement by NSS (Nair Service Society and even Sree Narayana Dharma Paripalana Yogam (SNDP) have been discussed and studied in several academic works. Kerala witnessed community-wise reform movements in the late nineteenth century. The Brahmin and Nair communities experience many reforms within their castes. Municipalities, including Syrian Christian communities, are also involved in public activities to claim their Malayalee identity and have dialogue with the state. The "Malayalee Memorial"¹⁶¹ for claiming civil rights for the savarna castes and Muslims, Vimochana Samaram and Ezhava Memorial are a few examples of initial public space activities in colonial Kerala. The Malayalee Memorial was a memorandum submitted by the people of Kerala to King Sreemoolam Thirunal of Travancore princely state in 1891. This memorandum was signed by

¹⁶¹ Malayali memorial was a memorandum submitted by people of Kerala to King *Sreemoolam Thirunal* of Travancore princely state in 1891. This memorandum was signed by more than 10000 people including dominant caste Hindus, Christians, Muslims and Ezhavas for demanding a job in civil service for people in Kerala. The demand and claim for Malayali identity in the public agitation starts from here, however Dalits and other lower castes were not included in the newly emerged Malayali community in the 19 th century.

more than ten thousand people, including Hindus, Christians, and Muslims, demanding jobs in the civil services for people in Kerala. The demand for and claim for Malayalee identity in the public agitation starts from here, however, Dalits and other lower castes were not included in this newly emerged Malayalee community in the nineteenth century. Ezhava memorial was organised by Dr. Palpu. This mass memorandum was signed by 13000 representatives from the Ezhava community, placing the demand for jobs for the educated members of the Ezhava community before the government.

The life of the lower castes in colonial Kerala was miserable. The inhuman lives assigned to Dalits in Travancore and other princely states are described by missionary scholars like Samuel Mateer and William Logan in the late 19th century. The missionary, Reverend Henry Baker points out his experiences in Changanassery (central Kerala) market, where he witnesses buying and selling of slaves. The price of a child slave was between 6 and 12 rupees. It was a huge amount in the 1880s.¹⁶² Untouchability was not only the foremost obstacle prohibiting Dalits from the public spaces; it denied them a dignified human life. They had to maintain a distance of seventy-six steps from a Brahmin and fifty-six feet from a Nair. Ezhavas had to maintain the distance of thirty six feet from a Brahmin and 12 feet from a Nair; other lower castes also were also subjected to a similar fate continuing into the late 19th century. Untouchability or “*Ayitham*” was practised in the caste society based on strict principles of purity and pollution and denied Dalits the access to public spaces.¹⁶³ The social movements by the lower castes were fundamentally movements to access the

¹⁶² Rev. Henry Baker, *British India with Notes on Ceylon, Afghanistan, and Tibet*. No. 72 (USA: Government Printing Office, 1915). 68.

¹⁶³ T H P Chentharasseri, *Ayyankali* (Thiruvananthapuram: Prabhath Book House, 1979), 76.

public and come out of untouchability. The earlier women's movements among Savarna women can also be read as movements to access the public space. Caste and the rules of patriarchy did not allow certain social groups and women the liberty promised by modernity. This struggle or contestation in the early 20th century in Kerala witnessed the emergence of self-respect and public space access movements among lower castes and Dalits. Dalits put effort into becoming unified as "*Sadhujana* " in 1907 under the leadership of Ayyankali, it later developed as the "*Sadujana Paripalan Sanghanm*". For the savarna male reformers involved in the anti-caste movement, the issue of temple entry was a prime concern, as the temple was the major public space at that time. The *avarna* reformists like Sree Narayana Guru, Arattupuzha Velayudha Panicker, and Sahodarn Ayyappan sought reform within the Hindu religion and made efforts to eradicate untouchability from its social spaces. However, temple entry was not even a concern for the Ayyankali movement. Moreover, the Pulayas organised in the region who converted to Christianity claimed the church as their social space, and the church provided certain privileges to them compared to the non-converted lower castes. Thus, Dalits, specifically in the Cochin and Travancore regions, imagined entering social spaces other than those provided by Hinduism. Thus, a different history and framework of modernity, as conceived by the Dalits, based on material and epistemological aspects can be read as the consequence of the Reformist movement from the Dalit movement.

The linguistic identity of "Malayalee" is formed and consolidated in the Kerala public sphere from the late nineteenth century onwards. It signifies a Malayalam speaking community, generating strong community and national feeling under colonial rule. In 1981, A memorandum called the Malayalee Memorial was submitted before the the native ruler of Travancore in 1891 for the

inclusion of the people from Travancore into high civil service jobs. Despite the caste disadvantages that the Ezhavas had faced, by the late nineteenth century they had been able to use the paths made possible by colonial modernity to join the so-called Malayalees, or Nairs, in the public sphere and be part of the above petitioning group. Ten thousand people, mostly Nairs, with a small number of Syrian Christians and Ezhavas signed the petition to express their displeasure with the Travancore government's hiring practices of what they referred to as “foreigners,” that is, non-Malayalee Brahmins. As scholars have noted, “Ezhavas had a better position than Dalits, who had historically been agrarian slaves. In spite of the caste disabilities earlier experienced, by the late nineteenth century, the Ezhavas were able to use the spaces opened up in the context of colonial modernity to enter the public domain along with the so-called Malayalees, or Nairs.”¹⁶⁴

Sree Narayana Guru and the Formation of *Avarna* Public space

Born into the Ezhava community, Sree Narayana Guru later attained sainthood and became a scholar of Hindu philosophy in the late 19th century. As a Hindu, Guru adhered to the spiritual path, but he also propounded a place for *avarna* philosophy in it. As a result, the Guru disapproved of *Chathurvarna* and other customary Hindu practices. There are other examples from Guru's life that demonstrate his radical vision, such as his efforts to install "Ezhava Sivan" as a protest against Brahminizing Hindu deities. Narayana Guru followed the same framework of thought defined by Sankaracharya (Advaita), however specifically with the intention to invalidate the attributed genuineness of caste and untouchability. Because he challenged the logic of those practices from within the very same knowledge system that reinforced them, his approach was extraordinarily

¹⁶⁴ P. Sanal Mohan, “Social Space, Civil Society, and Dalit Agency in Twentieth Century Kerala” in *Dalit Studies*, eds. Ramnarayan S. Rawat and K. Satyanarayana (Durham: Duke University Press, 2016), 79.

distinctive and powerful. Guru promoted activities like common worship and inter-dining among people across castes in temples and ashrams. Guru stated: He strongly believed that: "There is no harm in inter-marriage and inter-dining as their caste is the same, whatever the religion, dress, language, etc. of humans."¹⁶⁵ He made an effort to get access to, transform, and democratise the public areas for members of lower castes. Many members of the lower castes were deeply influenced by Narayana Guru's Avarna philosophical ideas. The philosophy of Narayana Guru had an impact on social reformers like Ayyankali, a poet from the Ezhava caste named Kumaran Asan (1873-1924), as well as many others. A prime illustration of Ayyankali's impact are Kumaran Asan's literary works, which represent the protest against untouchability and other forms of caste discrimination.

Guru thought of the public as a place where individuals from different locations, castes, genders, and religions might gather. These interactions among people help to create a social environment that is accessible to Kerala's lower castes. In this context, "social" refers to a socially inclusive setting that may develop a sense of belonging to a group. Narayana Guru gives the concept of community (*samudayam* in Malayalam) a new meaning. He envisioned a community as a human collective that might be seen as a form of alternative public space that was open to members of any caste, class, or religion. The activities of Narayanguru gave the lower caste movement new dimensions, and as a result, one of his followers, Dr. Padmanabhan Palpu, founded the religious reform organisation Sree Narayana Dharma Paripalana Sangham (SNDP) for the benefit of the community.

¹⁶⁵ Sree Narayana Guru, *Jaathinirnayam* (1921), 2.

Sanal Mohan points out that it was in the early half of the 20th century that the modern civil society emerged in Kerala. It was an outcome of the struggle against the social and public sphere, organised through hierarchies of caste. In this context, Sree Narayana Guru becomes an important leader of the Ezhava community spearheading the social struggle against caste disabilities. The economic mobility of the Ezhava community during the second half of the 20th century led to growing middle-class among the community, this made the movement possible to some extent.¹⁶⁶

Ayyankali and the Dalit Public Sphere

Ayyankali was born on August 28, 1863 in Thiruvananthapuram district. The caste discrimination he experienced since his childhood as a child turned him into a leader of the anti-caste movement in Kerala who would fight for the basic rights of the lower caste groups, including access to public places and schools. The Term *Sadhujana* (depressed community) was used by Ayyankali to manifest the slave castes (Dalits) in early twentieth century Kerala. His thinking was beyond the boundaries of his own caste; he imagined and worked for the upliftment of the oppressed communities due to caste and therefore he prioritised entry into education rather than temple entry and inter-dining movements. The *Sadhu Jana Paripalan Sangham* (SJPS movement), which was formed in 1907, laid the foundation of contemporary Dalit political mobilizations and the ushering of the ideas of modernity in subaltern communities of Kerala. Ayyankali's entry into a public area defying norms that rendered it officially off-limits to Dalits was his most important political move. He circumvented the prohibition on the Pulayas and other Dalit communities barring them from using the public road, by riding on the road in a decorated bullock cart in 1898, a method of

¹⁶⁶ P. Sanal Mohan, "Social Space, Civil Society, and Dalit Agency in Twentieth Century Kerala" in *Dalit Studies*, eds., Ramnarayan S. Rawat and K. Satyanarayana (Durham: Duke University Press, 2016), 79.

transportation only available to the members of the upper caste. In the years to come, access to the public sphere will This realm's imagined communities were not those of national identity, and may even have been antagonistic to it. In contrast to an arena dominated by political speech. The other arena represented a space of "localised, familial and fictive kin-based activities, frequently articulated in terms of religious and familial resonances."Id become a key component of the movement. Those who supported Ayyankali in other southern Kerala regions mobilised locally, which resulted in a number of open conflicts between Dalits and people from upper castes in various parts of Travancore.¹⁶⁷

Over the course of Kerala's history, there have been numerous instances of lower caste members protesting in public. It can be argued that the evolution of struggles for dignity is also influenced by the pyramidal caste structure within the lower castes. Few Ezhava men got educated and were able to voice their communities' needs in public and to the government by the middle of the nineteenth century, when the anti-caste efforts of Ezhavas began. However, until the early 20th century, slave castes like the Pulayas, Parayas, Kravas, and Vettuvass remained untouchable as well as "unseeable."

Conclusion

In this chapter, I explored all the formations that work as counter-histories of the established Brahminical ways of seeing Kerala. This chapter analysed the historical background of the Kerala Renaissance, which has been a major force in formulating the present dominant "moral values" of the Malayalee society. This chapter critically analysed the various social groups' engagement with

¹⁶⁷ P Sanal Mohan, "Social Space, Civil Society, and Dalit Agency in Twentieth Century Kerala," 87.

the modernity of Kerala. Further, the chapter traced the histories of different social groups and their engagement with the social reformation of women in their communities. Moreover, the chapter reflected upon how Dalits in Kerala engaged with modernity and its impact on a reframing of morality.

Chapter –IV

Resistance to Caste and Moral Codes: A Review of Dalit and other Lower Caste Women's Struggles in Kerala

This chapter tries to review the struggles of lower caste women against caste moral codes that existed in Kerala in the 19th century. There were several struggles carried out by lower caste women in Kerala for claiming various civil rights that were not under any recognized women's political movement, but they may be seen as the foremost struggles organised against caste patriarchy. In a caste-based society, basic human rights were denied to Dalit and other lower castes in the nineteenth century. As I have mentioned earlier, in Kerala, the wearing of upper clothing was not permitted to men and women from lower castes and Dalits. Channar (Shannar) women who converted to Christianity started wearing upper clothes in the early nineteenth century in southern Travancore, an act for which they were brutally attacked by savarna men from the locality. Women from other lower castes, such as Ezhavas, also started to wear upper clothing. These women were assaulted in their villages and localities. Notwithstanding violence faced by them, the lower castes protested and eventually gained the right to enter public spaces and wear upper garments and even gold ornaments. Kerala's caste structure was most clearly demonstrated by the gender and caste differences in how men and women used their bodies. Each caste was easily recognised due to differences in movement, haircuts, clothing, mannerisms, etc. The women of the lower castes of Channar, Ezhava, and Pulaya, for whom an exposed breast was a sign of low status, were most humiliatingly and inhumanly impacted by such embodied diktats. The Nair women wore an upper garment, but they took it off in front of people who belonged to the higher

caste or the ruling class as a sign of respect. The Nairs were higher than the Shanars but lower than the Nambuthiris.¹⁶⁸

The efforts of Dalit and other lower caste women to maintain their physical integrity when they entered the modern era do not find much place in the mainstream records and literature of Kerala. In three phases, the upper cloth movement affected the lower castes and Dalits and had an impact on their right to practise certain religions, such as Christianity, for instance, in the case of Channar women in the middle of the nineteenth century. Although these women weren't organised as a women's movement, these struggles were a part of the quest for self-respect and human rights of their communities. However, Dalit women's participation in the upper cloth movement happened only in the early twentieth century. It can be called the third phase of the movement. Therefore, this chapter tries to examine why Dalit women's participation in the upper cloth struggle is different from that of other lower caste women. What are the factors that lead Dalit women to struggle to ally with struggles for public road entry, education and other civil rights rather than with mass movements like the temple entry protests? Untouchability was not only the foremost obstacle for Dalits to reach the public; it also denied them a human life. Pulayas had to keep seventy six steps from a Brahmin and fifty six from a Nair, Ezhavas had to keep thirty six feet from a Brahmin and 12 feet from a Nair; other lower castes also had to do similar things in the 1980s. Untouchability or "*Ayitham*" existed based on the norms of purity and pollution and denied Dalits access to public space. The social movements against the lower castes were fundamentally movements to access the public and come out of untouchability. In the early twentieth century, Kerala saw the birth of

¹⁶⁸ Dr.T B Premjith Kumar, *Keralathile Sthree Saktheekaranavum, London Missionary Prasthanavum (London Missionary Movement and Women Empowerment in Kerala)*(Thiruvananthapuram: Reyvan Publications, 2014).55-57.

self-respect and public space access movements among lower castes and Dalits as a result of these contestations. Dalits made an effort to reunite as "*Sadhujana*" in 1907, alongside other lower caste communities. Later, under Ayyankali's leadership, it developed into the Sadujana Paripalan Sangham (SJPS).

The savarna congress leaders such as M K Gandhi, K.Kelappan and A.K Gopalan were reformers involved in the anti-caste movement, so temple and inter-dining entry were a major concern for them as the temple was the main public space at that time. The *avarna* reformists like Sree Narayana Guru, Arattupuzha Velayudhappanikker, and Sahodarn Ayyappan sought reform within the Hindu religion and made efforts to eradicate untouchability from its social spaces. However, Dalits in the Travancore region did not imagine having any kind of reform as a part of Hinduism; temple entry did not become an issue for the Ayyankali movement.

Dalit Women in Public Spaces

Dalit women's representation in the different public spaces in Kerala needs to be analysed in detail. Dalit women were present in the Ayyankali movement as equals to Dalit men. They were part of the historical process. When Dalits formed a community in the name of *Sadhujana* under the leadership of Ayyankali, the honour of women became the central basis for forming the community among the untouchable castes. The primary step to initiating the struggles for self-respect by the Dalit communities of Kerala started with asserting the bodily rights of Dalit women. Since Dalit women wore stone ornaments as a symbol of their slavery, this symbol was also ascribed other meanings, such as the easy accessibility of their bodies. Dalit women were protesting for their basic right to cover their breasts. The upper caste men turned to violence during each struggle for Dalit emancipation. Even Ezhava and Muslim men were part of these

violent movements in southern Kerala.¹⁶⁹ Although never recorded in the women's history of Kerala, historians from the Dalit community observe it as a major milestone in the movement for rights of Dalit women. These protests had shaken the caste society. Dominant caste men reacted by disrobing Dalit women in public places. In one instance, a Dalit woman's ear was also chopped off for wearing a blouse in public.

Dalits were denied access to public areas by Travancore's rulers by the end of the nineteenth century, but the local bureaucracy and upper castes effectively prevented this from happening. Intense opposition to the Pulaya using public roadways led some missionaries to comment in the early 1890s that such limitations would only be lifted if strong movements formed from Dalit communities. Ayyankali established a school in his hamlet in 1904 since it was difficult to accept Dalit students to already-existing institutions. On the very first day after it opened, the upper castes destroyed and burned the first school he founded¹⁷⁰.

They would become more convinced of the value of education as a result of Ayyankali and his group's battles to secure the right to education. The slave castes in traditional culture were denied access to education. Even though the cost of educating the next generation was beyond the resources of the Dalits and the government was not providing financial assistance, Ayyankali recognised the severity of the situation. The importance that Ayyankali accorded to the educational development of Dalit groups may be seen in his quote that he aspired to see ten graduates in his community. Reiterating that Pulayas and other Dalit people were never permitted to learn or take part in intellectual life and knowledge production is equally crucial.

¹⁶⁹ Kunnukuzhi Mani and Anirudhan, *Mahatma Ayyankali: Ayyankaliyude Ariyappedatha Charithram (The Unknown History of Mahatma Ayyankali)* (Kottayam: D C Books, 2013), 43-54.

¹⁷⁰ THP Chentharaseeri, *Ayyankali (Biography)* (Thiruvananthapuram: Prabhath Book House, 2012), 85.

Women from the slave caste were not allowed to enjoy the rights acquired by other lower caste women. Women from Pulaya, Paraya, and Kuravas had to wear stone ornaments on their necks as a symbol of slave status. They mobilised under the leadership of Ayyankali in 1915 and abandoned their stone ornaments in a public meeting. This chapter will try to analyse different phases and trajectories of struggles against Brahminical Moral codes by Dalit and other lower caste women in Kerala.

The inhuman conditions of the women in the community were brought to the forefront in a huge public event to remove the stone ornament in central Travancore at that time. Ayyankali challenged caste norms that denied the right to the “polluted castes” to dress in a dignified manner. Further, the untouchable women were not allowed to wear ornaments made of gold or silver, they were forced to wear stone necklaces, displaying their subjugation. The Dalit women were also not allowed to cover their breasts with upper cloth. Coming under the egalitarian influence of Ayyankali, the Pulaya women in south Travancore discarded the stone necklace, which was a reminder of the legacy of slavery and covered their breast with upper garments. Following this, Dalit women in other parts of Travancore were also moved to discard stone ornaments and wear upper cloth. These caste “violations” led to confrontations between Pulayas and Nairs in different parts of Travancore. Eventually, Ayyankali facilitated an agreement between Nair and Pulaya leaders. Following the settlement, a mass meeting was held at Quilon town, where, in the presence of Ayyankali and Nair social reformer Changanacherry Parameswaran Pillai, thousands of Dalit women publicly threw away their bead necklace. This was a great victory for the Pulayas and other

Dalit castes. The historical event is known as the Kallumala Samaram (Stone Necklace Protest) of 1915.¹⁷¹

Their representation in various public programmes had a revolutionary impact on the community. Dalit women were represented in various public spaces like community organisations, Churches, Sadhujana Paripalana Sangham and spiritual organisations Prathyaksha Raksha Daiva Sabha (PRDS) in the early twentieth century. There are fewer studies coming out on their representation in these above mentioned spaces. The founder of the PRDS, established in 1910, Poyikayil Yohannan, hailed from the Paraya caste. His parents were labourers attached to a Syrian Christian landlord. Like any other child of the agrestic slave castes, he was assigned the daily chores such as herding cattle and working in the paddy fields on the property owner's rubber estate. He was baptised at age five. As he grew up, Yohannan was moved by the Christian message and became devoted to the missionaries. However, two incidents radicalised him. One was the enforced disinterment of a Dalit Christian; the other was the Church's refusal to sanction the proposed marriage of a Syrian Christian woman to a Dalit Christian man. These incidents made him aware of the caste prejudices that riddled the Church.¹⁷²

The PRDS developed alternative institutional frameworks for their adherents along with a profoundly different interpretation of the Bible right from the outset. The movement's membership skyrocketed within a few years as it slowly grew to include other villages in Travancore. Poykayil Yohannan urged his followers to create schools and to pursue modern education by acquiring

¹⁷¹ THP Chentharasseri, *Poykayil Appachan: jeevacharithravum Pattukalum (Poykayil Appachan: Biography and his Songs)* (Thiruvananthapuram: Mythri Books, 2010), 9-23.

¹⁷² THP Chentharasseri, *Poykayil Appachan: jeevacharithravum Pattukalum (Poykayil Appachan: Biography and his Songs)*, 28-29.

riches in the form of land as much as their limited means permitted. Mass demonstrations were also held to demand access to public spaces.¹⁷³ Njaliyakuzhi Simon Yohannan, Poyikayil Yohannan's second-in-command, briefly oversaw the movement after his passing in 1939. Poyikayil Yohannan's second wife, Janamma, eventually took control of the movement's operations during the power conflicts that followed.

Dalit women's representation in the anti-caste movement was precisely crucial because their struggles for self-respect and bodily integrity led to many movements in central Travancore. P.Sanal Mohan's recent work on women and religiosity has analysed how women from untouchable communities refashioned their lives compared to other women from the community, imbuing it with dignity through their engagement with the church. He writes:

Although there are references to women, especially the wives of the *mooppans* (elders) of certain Dalit communities such as the Pulayas, occupying a position of importance in the kin group, they do not seem to have acquired any significant position of leadership in local Dalit communities. In the late 19th century, in the aftermath of the legal abolition of caste slavery, the *mooppans* were entrusted with the task of providing labourers to the landlords. Oral traditions convey the fact that sometimes the mooppan's wife was given the additional burden of safeguarding young slave women workers when they went for seasonal works, such as harvesting in the paddy fields of the great backwaters. Yet, we do not come across evidence to suggest that the *mooppan's*¹⁷⁴ wife occupied any ritually significant position.¹⁷⁵

¹⁷³ P. Sanal, Mohan, *Social Space, Civil Society, and Dalit Agency in Twentieth Century Kerala*, in *Dalit Studies*, eds., Ramnarayan S. Rawat and K. Satyanarayana (Durham: Duke University Press, 2016), 88.

¹⁷⁴ *Mooppan* is the male head of the clan who controls the sub caste community.

¹⁷⁵ P Sanal Mohan, "Women and Religiosity: Dalit Christianity in Kerala," *Economic and Political Weekly* (2017): 51.

Dalit women's conversion to Christianity has been marked as a turning point in the history of the self-respect movement of Dalits. They found many ways to escape from untouchability and caste slavery by claiming a new identity. It also opened new possibilities in public space for people to interact with the world and claim their citizenship, as human beings. Thus, the slave castes transformed themselves into modern individuals. Also, the Church spaces gave them the skill of articulation and the roles of leading prayers and singing sessions in the different congregations, though they remained under the "father figure" of the Church system. Thus, the membership of the Church allowed Dalits, and specifically, the Dalit women of Kerala to be part of a spiritual life rather than simply as stigmatised and sexualized bodies.

Sanal Mohan quotes from W.S Hunt (1918)¹⁷⁶ for evidence of slave caste women converting to Christianity. Before the mass movement phase of "conversions," there were instances of two Pulaya women joining the CMS in the southern parts of Kerala. As Hunt narrates, from available information, both of them appeared distressed.

One of them was Kali, later christened as Lucy, a slave sold to the European captain of a ship who was to take her to Java (Hunt 1918:161-97). However, she escaped to the mission compound in Cochin and pleaded with the Ridsdales, an Anglican missionary family, to

¹⁷⁶ W S Hunt, *The Anglican Church in Travancore and Cochin, 1816-1916, Vol. I* (Kottayam: Church Missionary Society Press, 1920), 104.

save her. Eventually, they allowed her to remain with them and the missionary subsequently referred to her as a person who grew in faith.¹⁷⁷

Although the CMS missionaries had first encountered Paraya slaves in Alleppey upon their arrival, they were yet to decide on their work among the slaves, which was initiated only in the late 1840s. Until that point, the Anglican missionaries of the CMS were more concerned with the traditional Syrian Christians of Kerala, aiming at modernization.

Slave experience and Dalit women's Sexual Agency

In Kerala, among the lower castes, the majority of the Dalits were slaves and were transacted as commodities. There was the prevalence of forced slave trade, one that is comparable to the slavery of the African American people. In Kerala, agrarian slavery was an integral part of caste society in pre-colonial and colonial times. As Sanal Mohan observes: Hindu religious ideology legitimised slavery as the principal means for the coercive appropriation of labour power". He used the term "caste slavery" to define the unique form of social oppression and exploitation that existed in Kerala in the mediaeval period that included the transactions of untouchable men, women, and children.¹⁷⁸

In this study, I would like to trace the historical linkage between the experience of slavery and lowest position in the past, and the present agency and identity of Dalit women. I will examine the context of lower caste women ie; Dalit women, in terms of a history where they had been

¹⁷⁷ P Sanal Mohan, "Women and Religiosity: Dalit Christianity in Kerala" *Economic and Political Weekly* (2017): 51.

¹⁷⁸ Sanal Mohan, *Modernity of Slavery: Struggles Against Caste Inequality in Colonial Kerala*, (New Delhi: Oxford Univ Sanal Mohersity Press, 2015), 149

treated as the women from a slave caste community and were denied the ownership of their bodies as has been the practice in any system of slavery in the world. Dalits, especially from Pulaya, Paraya, and Kuravar castes, were sold into slavery in Travancore, and were transacted as property. The historical record says women slaves were expensive, and the owner even had the right to kill them.¹⁷⁹

In this chapter, I would like to adopt certain theoretical tools from the African American women's slave experience in order to build a theoretical base for this study. As bell hooks rightly points out, the sexual exploitation of black females at the time of slavery is linked to present manifestations of interlinking racism and sexism She reflects upon the

As a group, black women are in an unusual position in this society, for not only are we collectively at the bottom of the occupational ladder, but overall social status is lower than that of any other group. Occupying such a position, we bear the brunt of sexist, racist, and classism oppression... Black men may be victimised by racism, but sexism allows them to act as exploiters and oppressors of women. White women may be victimised by sexism, but racism allows them to act as exploiters and oppressors of black people. Both groups have led liberation movements that favour their interests and support the continued oppression of other groups.¹⁸⁰

Patricia Hill Collins asserts that the question of black women's sexuality needs to be seen not as an individual question, but as an institutional and structural question. She adds that black women's

¹⁷⁹ Baker, Henry D. *British India with Notes on Ceylon, Afghanistan, and Tibet*. No. 72.(US Government Printing Office, 1915), 66

¹⁸⁰ Bell Hooks, *Feminist Theory: From Margin to Centre* (Boston: South End Press, 1984),15.

sexualities are linked to the power structure of racism. For instance, rape as a specific form of sexual violence is embedded in intersecting contexts of race, gender, and class.¹⁸¹ For Dalit women too, the intersections of caste, gender, and class produces multiple and simultaneous oppressions. Rape and other sexual assaults upon Dalit women is conceived within the Indian social context as a “normal” event.

In this chapter, I would like to bring Black women scholars’ arguments on their sexual agency as a theoretical base to understand Dalit women’s sexual agency as it surfaces in the sensibility of Kerala’s ‘public’ or its imagination of “bad” women. Black feminists observe how the sexualized image of black women is saddled with the notion of dirtiness, or how it might produce a visual response. Black women scholars like Miller-Young look at the efforts of black women to adhere to “respectability politics” as a mode of resistance and dismantling the racist and patriarchal representation of black women asexually promiscuous, inviting, rape, abuse and stigma.

A politics of African American women’s respectability first emerged in the late nineteenth century in post-emancipation Christian women’s activist circles. This “respectability politics” seeks to counter the racist stereotype of the lascivious and deviant black woman by upholding and embodying an image of gender and sexual normativity evocative of a patriarchal ideal of feminine virtue.¹⁸²

¹⁸¹ Patricia Hill Collins, *Black Feminist Thought* (Boston: Unwin Hyman, 1990), 224.

¹⁸² Mireille Miller-Young, *A taste for brown sugar: Black women in pornography* (Duke University Press, 2014), ix.

Dalit women's resistance and claim to citizenship in a movement where they upheld the signs of their servitude, such as the stone ornaments, made it possible for Dalit women to enter education in Kerala.

In this chapter, I try to analyse the historical lineage of humiliation faced by Dalit women and the paradigm shift in modern times. While, in the past, women of the lower and slave castes had experienced sexual violence and degradation, they have now become the subject of policing in Kerala's modern public space. The policing of Dalit women is historically connected to their enslaved images and trajectories from in the past. Jenny notes how Dalit and other lower caste women's bodies are constituted as immoral, and pitched against the bodies of upper caste women who must be "protected" based upon their purity, chastity, and docile femininity.¹⁸³

.Dalit women slaves were regarded as "precious" property, valued much more than the male slaves because of their reproductive capacity. Dalit slaves were the property of the masters, and children born to a Dalit woman slave became the property of their mother's master. Their father and father's master have no right over them. As I have stated before, Dalit women's bodily experience of/in slavery can be compared to the experiences of African Americans or Caribbeans women in slavery. bell hook records how the white male slave master thought that the African woman would make a "perfect slave" since she had been taught the technique of submission to a higher authority as per the traditions of her society. Given the enormous amount of work needed to be done in the

¹⁸³Jenny Rowena, "The 'Dirt' in the Dirty Picture," *Round Table India: For an Informed Ambedkar Age* (17 June, 2012)

American plantations, slavers looked at the African woman as a valued slave who could work hard in the field as well as handling a wide range of domestic tasks.¹⁸⁴

In Kerala, there are very few academic studies done on Dalit women's narrations on slave experiences where they were perceived as sexual objects. A slave woman's life in the 19th century is described by Samuel Nellimukal drawing on writings and records of the missionaries. He records that Kerala had several free slave markets in the eighteenth century; people who were born slaves were assigned the untouchable status in society. Changanacherry, located in central Kerala, was one of the main hubs of the slave trade. It served as a centre for the purchase and sale of slaves by local landowners and foreign merchants. He cites the missionary Reverend Butler, who described the physical and mental situations of slaves as extremely miserable when compared to those of average people.¹⁸⁵ Clearly, these slaves were physically unfit because proper food, clothing, shelter, and medical care were not provided to them. The slave women were in a situation worse than their male counterparts. They had to spend the entire day working in the landlord's fields. Additionally, they were required to carry out household duties after labouring. They were paid a wage in paddy, with which they cooked rice that very day otherwise they would not have enough food at home to feed their children. Moreover, they were required to start working right away immediately following child birth and were not permitted to breastfeed the infant while they were at work. Slave women often lost their newborns in the paddy fields, where animals or ants bit the babies, as their mothers could not mind them while toiling in the fields.¹⁸⁶

¹⁸⁴ Bell Hooks *Ain't I A Woman: Black Women and Feminism* (New York: Gloria Watkins, 2015).

¹⁸⁵ Samuel Nellimukal Samuel Nellimukal, *Keralathile Samoohyaparivarthanam: Samoohya Charithra Padanam*'' (*Social Transformation in Kerala: A Socio-Historical Study*), 27

¹⁸⁶ Samuel Nellimukal, Samuel Nellimukal, *Keralathile Samoohyaparivarthanam*, 27-28,

As noted by Sanal Mohan:

[A]vailable historical information does not allow us to make full use of the notion of moral economy, since the slaves remained permanent outsiders due to caste pollution, economic marginality and oppression, unlike the peasant communities of England (Thompson 1993: 259-351) or those of South East Asia (Scott 1978). All the available sources— native landlord records, colonial accounts and missionary reports—unanimously agree that the wages paid to the slave labourers of untouchable castes were very meagre. In the mid-19th century in Travancore, the wages paid to a male slave were three-quarters of an edangazhi, which was a measure of 600 grams. Women would be paid even lesser. In such a situation, the slaves used to pilfer standing crops of rice or some tubers or roots for their survival, which was ignored by landlords in certain contexts as they knew very well that such acts were necessary for the survival of the slave labourers.¹⁸⁷

While portraying the extreme plights of slave women based on missionary records, Mohan also foregrounds how the conversion to Christianity empowered these women. He refers to the career of the Bible women from the slave castes, “who were able to visit upper caste homes, carrying portions of scriptures, and pamphlets and other printed materials.” This also speaks of how they were deployed and found an alternative space within the missionary setting.¹⁸⁸ The Church

¹⁸⁷ P. Sanal Mohan, “Women and Religiosity: Dalit Christianity in Kerala,” *Economic and Political Weekly* (2017): 52

¹⁸⁸ P. Sanal Mohan, “Women and Religiosity: Dalit Christianity in Kerala,” 55.

hierarchy acknowledged the importance of women and the domestic ideal in the missionary enterprise, and they were well aware that educated women were essential to the community's future. Some of the CMS missionaries emphasized the importance of Christian women in caring for families and raising children as early as the second half of the 19th century, when they started working among the slave castes.

Moral Codes and Lower Caste Women's Struggles for Dignity

In Kerala, the body and how it was used, for both men and women, served as the best representation of the caste structure. Each caste was easily recognized and placed by the embodied differences in movement, haircuts, clothing, mannerisms, etc. The women of the lower castes of Shanar, Ezhava, and Pulaya, for whom an exposed breast was a sign of low rank, were most affected by this. The Nair women, who belonged to a caste that was higher than the Shanars but lower than the Nambuthiri, did wear an upper garment, but they would take it off out of respect for people who belonged to the higher caste or the ruling class. Women of all castes were bare breasted before the Nambuthiris as a result of the linking of the covering or revealing of the breast to their caste status.¹⁸⁹

Hardgrave observes that Colonel Munro, who was the resident of Travancore at the time, ordered in 1812 that:

[T]he women converted to Christianity be granted permission to cover their bosoms as obtained among Christians in other countries. In May 1814, the Government of Travancore

¹⁸⁹ Paul Manavalan, *Kerala Samskaravum Kraisthava Missionarimarum*, (Kerala's Culture and Christian Missionaries) (Kottayam: DC Books, 1990), 119

issued a Circular Order allowing lower-class female converts to cover their bodies with a short bodice or jacket, similar to what the women in the Syrian Christian and Muslim Mapila communities wore. However, they were not allowed to dress in the more aristocratic fashion; no Shanar women were ever to be allowed to wear clothes on their bosoms as the Nair women.¹⁹⁰

The Upper Cloth Struggle

The first struggle for upper cloth, known as the Channar (Nadar) riot, which happened in 1822, was a great beginning to the self-respect movement of the lower caste women. This movement originated in Travancore (now south Kerala) among the Channar women who converted to Christianity. The upper cloth movement could be read as a movement for self-esteem and against the SavarnaBrahminical moral codes of the 19th century. Moreover, it is a text about reading the struggles and performativity of self-assertion by lower caste women in public. It was an important site for social reforms in Kerala in the early nineteenth century. Kunnukuzhi Mani notes that women from the Nadar caste had to face continuous violence from upper caste men in south Travancore. Many deeply dehumanising customs emerged there, for instance, the Channar bride had to spend the first night after her wedding with the upper caste landlord. In the early 19th century, a large portion of the population of the Nadar community converted to Christianity. They joined the London Mission society and their children joined missionary schools. Gradually, the women from the community started wearing jackets. It was considered a “crime” and an act against the morality designed by the upper caste people of that time. This led the Savarna men to

¹⁹⁰ Robert L Hardgrave jr, “The Breast- Cloth Controversy: Caste Consciousness and Social Change in Southern Travancore,” *The Indian Economic and Social History Review* 5, no.2 (1968): 177.

stop Channar women on their way to the Church and forcibly remove the upper garment. In response to the Nadar women's complaints, which were brought to his attention by missionaries, Diwan Munro issued an edict requiring Channar women who became Christians to wear upper clothing. In 1822, Nair men attacked Channar women, forcing them to strip in front of the public in Kalkulam Market in Thiruvananthapuram. The missionaries filed a case on behalf of these women, and the court gave an order on it that was in favour of Channar Christian women. However, the attacks from the Savarna men continued who also tried to attack the children of Channar communities studying in the missionary schools.¹⁹¹ This incident triggered the Channar Rebellion, and as a result of it, in 1829, Rani Laxmibhayi (the queen of Travancore princely state) gave an order that provided the right to wear upper clothing to Channar Christian Women.

However, the situation of non-Christian Channar women and other lower caste women like Ezhavas remained the same. Later social Reformers like Arattupuzha Velayudhapanikkar have made tremendous contributions to strengthening the upper cloth movement of the Ezhava women. However, it has not been cited as much as the Channar struggle, which found a space in subaltern history. All these struggles for covering the body were not merely to claim human status, they were a statement against the existing moral codes of that time. The following struggles, *Marumarakkalsamaram* (protest for covering upper body) by the lower caste women in 19th century and *Kallumala Samaram* by the slave caste women in the early 20th century (the protest led by Ayyankali for abolishing wearing pebbles and stone chains on Dalit women's necks), may be considered struggles for claiming lower caste self-respect and agency. As I have reiterated, in Kerala the body and its deployment have been dictated by the caste structure, the covering or

¹⁹¹ Kunnukuzhi S Mani, *Pulayar Noottandukalil (Pulayar in Centuries)* (Thiruvananthapuram: Mythri Books, 2014), 27.

uncovering of the upper cloth was based on the caste hierarchy within the lower castes.¹⁹² In many works, the long struggle by lower caste women to gain the right to upper cloth has been discussed and recognised as a revolutionary effort by them to claim and participate in J Devika notes that, “the new combinations of modesty and aspirations to mobility in social hierarchy were evident in the breast cloth resistances of Travancore in the first half of nineteenth century.”¹⁹³

Upper Cloth Movement among Ezhavas and other Lower Caste Women

Though the Christian Channar women got the right to wear upper cloth, the Travancore princely states passed an order for ‘breast tax’ for lower caste women and proclaimed that lower caste women other than Christian Channar should not cover the upper part of their body. Breast tax was meant for lower caste women who wished to wear an upper garment. Kunnukuzhi Mani observes, the government issued those orders only as a punishment for Channar struggle. However, Nadar women got immense support from the British queen Elizabeth as the Travancore princely state was under British rule. The British queen’s interest in people who embraced Christianity determined the decision of the princely government, and in 1829 Channar Christian women were allowed to cover their upper bodies. However, later the Savarna men started to question other lower caste women like Ezhavas and others over their right to wear the blouse.¹⁹⁴ The process of enforcing the uncovering of the chest for women followed a pyramidal structure. This custom shows how

¹⁹² Ajay Sekhar, “Representation of Caste and Gender margins in Post-Colonial Indian Fiction”(Ph.D. Thesis, School of Letters, M.G University, Kottaym, 2007).124-125.

¹⁹³ Jayakumari Devika, *Engendering Individuals: The Language of Re-forming in Twentieth Century Kerala*. Hyderabad: Orient Blackswan, 2007), 7.

¹⁹⁴ Kunnukuzhi S Mani and P.S Anirudhan, *Mahatma Ayyan Kali:Ayyankaliyude Ariyappedatha Charithram*, (Kottayam: DC Books, 2015), 74.

Lower caste women's agency and "morality" has been determined by the caste and sexual desire of Savarna men. The nineteenth-century story of Nangeli is one of brave defiance against the repressive social apparatus of the Travancor and sacrifice for her community people. The royal officials coercively extracted the horrific "breast tax" from non-dominant caste Ezhava women according to the size of their breasts once they had passed puberty, a system known as *Mulakaram*. Nangeli, who lived in Cherthala, bore the humiliation of paying the "general" breast tax just like any other Ezhava woman. In protest, Nangeli determined with rage that she would not pay the tax ever again. As an official knocked and asked for the payment, Nangeli cut off her breasts and presented them to the royal officials in protest of her symbolic "final settlement of the tax."

Nangelis individual struggle may be read as an allegory of the self-respect protest among Avarna Women. Devika points out that the "breast-cloth Struggle" of the nineteenth century in south Thiruvathamkoor encompassed both the struggle over jati and the question of feminine modesty. The upper cloth would represent the upper caste Channars' symbolic equality with the upper caste Nairs. The Thiruvitamkoor king agreed that women should dress modestly, but he forbade this particular kind of clothing (the upper cloth) that showed Channars and Nair were symbolically equal.¹⁹⁵

Nangelis protest by presenting her own mutilated breasts on a banana leaf to her oppressors is unique in the world.¹⁹⁶ Nangeli is the site of the self-respect struggle of Avarna women, Yet, she has not been iconized like the many savarna iconic women being celebrated in Kerala. The

¹⁹⁵ Jayakumari Devika, *Engendering Individuals: The Language of Re-forming in Twentieth Century Kerala*. (Hyderabad: Orient Longman, 2007), 255

¹⁹⁶ Dalit Bandhu, *Mulachi Parambu, (The land of Mulachi)* (Vaikom: Hobby Publications, 2017), 50

sacrifice of *Nangeli* could be read as a major event of resistance in the history of struggles in Kerala. However, this history has hardly found a reference even in the feminist rewritings of history. Moreover, the place where Nangeli made her sacrifice of life, known by her name as *Mulachiparambu*, was later renamed Manorama Junction. This demonstrates how modern reforms slowly erase the Avarna struggles and replace those with savarna legacies.¹⁹⁷

Later in 1859, *Melmundu Samaram* /*Ethappusamaram* (upper cloth movement) started in Kayamkulam in Travancore. Arattupuzha Velayudhappanikker led the movement. It is said that once an Ezhava woman walked on the road with her breasts covered by an upper cloth, an action that irritated the Savarna men. As a result, they caught her, tore off her upper cloth, and fixed a small, tender coconut on her breasts. This incident led to a protest, later Arattupuzha Velayudhappanikkar distributed upper clothing to all lower caste women in the area, and they walked on the public roads. After that incident, no Savarna men stopped them on the road. Later in 1859, all lower caste women got the freedom to wear upper clothing except the Dalit women. Notably, these struggles were not only for wearing cloth; they also claimed the public space for those most marginalised by caste and gender, a space that was dominated and accessible only to the caste elites. Another significant struggle by the lower caste women was the “Mookkoothi Samaram” (nose pin) protest for wearing a nose ring, which was only allowed for upper caste women in the Travancore region of Kerala. Valsa writes:

The scarcity of historical accounts available on this incident speaks volumes about a range of strategies of inclusion and exclusion in historiography. Mookkuthi Samaram is

¹⁹⁷ Thekkumbhagam Mohan, *Adima Garjanangal* (Kottayam: Sahithya Prasavarthaka Sahakarana Sangham, 2010), 36.

discussed in connection with Aarattupuzha Velayudha Panicker (1825-1874) whom some historians describe as an unsung hero... Velayudha Panicker came to know that near Pantalam, an Ezhava woman was humiliated for wearing the nose-stud and her nose-stud was ripped off by the savarnas. Immediately, Panicker got many nose-studs made and his attendants took them to Pandalam in baskets meant for carrying seeds. Panicker and his companions accompanied on horseback. The noses of all avarna women who had come to the market were pierced and they were made to wear the gold nose-stud. After that, no savarna of Central Travancore dared to humiliate women who used the nose-stud or any other forms of ornaments.¹⁹⁸

The *Kallayum Malayum* Movement (*Kallumala Samaram*)

The third phase of the Upper Cloth struggle, known as *Kallayum Malayum* movement, which took place in Southern Kerala on 19 December 1915, spearheaded by the slave caste women towards the abandonment of the stone ornaments, a symbol of their slave status. Slave caste women were forced to wear these ornaments to cover the upper part of their bodies. Significantly, this struggle happened after eighty years of Channar Christian women's struggle. It cannot be characterised merely as an effort to become modern or adopt Victorian moral codes, as the idea of wearing the upper garment is largely approached in the dominant Savarna liberal feminist imagination. For Dalit women, it was resistance emerging from their enslaved status, a struggle for self-respect and a reclaiming of bodily integrity and agency. The *Kallayum Malayum* protest was one of Kerala's

¹⁹⁸ M. A. Valsa, "Dalit Women Empowerment Struggles in Pre-Independent Kerala," In *Proceedings of the Indian History Congress*, 79 (2018): 586

most significant historical events. Thousands of Dalit women, men, and children assembled at the large Stadium (now Lal Bahadur stadium) in Kollam town under the leadership of Ayyankali. Newspapers like *Mithawadi*¹⁹⁹ covered this revolutionary event. Chentharasserry quotes Mithawadi:

Ayyankali spoke on this occasion about the reforming of the Dalit community in various ways. He emphasised the significance of the community's (oppressed) development, progress, as well as the significance of discipline and a proper dress code. Additionally, he stressed that the Savarna community is the one that opposes the progress of the untouchable community. Later, he explains how ornaments made of stone should be abandoned because they symbolise slavery. As a result, Ayyankali called Dalit women to the stage and asked them to destroy the ornaments in front of the crowd. According to the *Mitawadi* (Mitawadi News Paper, January 1916), Kollam had not previously witnessed this kind of public meeting.²⁰⁰

The Perunadu Rebellion, which broke out in early 1915, was sparked by a Dalit woman who entered the public market while wearing the upper clothing. Dalit women from various regions of Kollam put on a blouse known as *rowkka*. Men from Muslim, Nair, and even Ezhava communities entered these Dalit villages and openly insulted the people. Later, Gopaladasan, a young Dalit leader and Ayyankali's supporter, went to Perinadu and called for a public meeting. A gang of Savarna men arrived with sticks and assaulted the individuals gathered there. They also set fire to

¹⁹⁹ *Mitawadi* was a newspaper published from northern Kerala during colonial rule.

²⁰⁰ T H P Chentharasseri, *Ayyankaaliyude Jeevacharithram (Biography)* (Thituvananthapuram:Prabhath Book House, 2012), 90-91

the homes of the Dalits. The Sadhujna movement put a great deal of effort into the Kallayum Malayum Struggle as a result of the catastrophe.²⁰¹

Slavery rendered the lives of the Dalit women subhuman and situated them as objects that upper caste men could freely access in public; they were mere bodies and not persons. In Kerala, dress norms and physical distances served as indicators of caste and its hierarchical structure. Consequently, the struggle by the slave castes and other lower caste groups contains untold stories of human dignity and the slave experience. The transition from half nakedness to dress may be read as a transcending act that created an emancipatory space in public. The *Kallayum Malayum* protest by the Dalit women was both a claim over their own bodies and a move to destroy the existing power relations that humiliated them and produced them as erotic bodies/subjects. T. M. Yesudasan points out that, there were several cruel strictures against the Dalits, most importantly that they were not allowed to wear any clothing above the waist and below the knees, and this rule applied to both men and women. Moreover, the women had to wear a sort of bread called *Kallayum Malayaum*.²⁰²

Though the *Kallayum Malayum* movement is very significant in the subaltern readings of Kerala history, it has not been given sufficient attention mainstream feminist history writing. My study reads it as the entry of slave women into modernity and an effort to break the intricacies of caste codes. Moreover, it was an attempt to claim their agency to redefine social positions and privileges. The struggles for covering the upper body could be read as a struggle for attaining human status and decency for the women from the lower caste; however, the long gap between

²⁰¹ T H P Chentharasser, Ayyankaaliyude Jeevacharithram (Biography), 96.

²⁰² T.M Yesudasan, "Caste, Gender, and Knowledge: Towards a Dalit Feminist Perspective" in *Grassroots Political Colloquium*, Department of Political Science, University of Delhi, 1993.

each upper cloth struggle is noticeable. Even after the abandonment of stone ornaments, Dalit women have continued to deal with the dehumanising notions about their bodies that prevailed in Kerala society as untouchable beings and as erotic subjects. Thus, the Dalit women are situated in a specific history within the larger experiences of women in Kerala; a history that has not been much received adequate focus or engagement in mainstream feminist writings.

Kayal Sammelanam (The Backwater Conference)

There were significant struggles in the Cochin Princely State around the turn of the 20th century over the freedom to walk on public roads, education, and several kinds of other civic rights. The most important was the rising demand for self-dignity and equality that stood out in these movements. Among the series of mass campaigns and anti-caste struggles that took place in the first half of the 20th century, the Kayal Sammelanam ranks among the most prominent. It is also known as the Meeting on the Backwaters. This movement was organised by the *Pulaya* (untouchable) community of Cochin. Krishnethi Asan, K.P. Vallon, and Pandit Karuppan were in charge of organising the Pulaya community in Cochin. In 1913, they formed a group called Pulayar Mahasabha.²⁰³

Dalits in Cochin were prohibited from participating any public gatherings. As a result, Pandit Karuppan and Krishnethi Aasan decided to hold the gathering on Kerala's well-known backwaters. People arrived on small boats at a specific place on the backwaters and moored their boats together to build a sea platform. On April 21, 1913, hundreds of Pulaya and other oppressed

²⁰³ Vinayan M C, "Subaltern Mobilisation and Resistance:A Historical Exploration of Pulayas the Untouchable of erstwhile Cochin", *IOSR Journal of Humanities and Social Sciences* 22,no.10(2017):30-31.

people gathered on the backwaters of Mulavukadu, Panambukadu, and Vaduthala for the Kayal Sammelanam. Among those present were family members of well-known Dalit politician Dakshayani Velayudhan. Dakshayani was so moved by this historic event that she named her book "The Sea Has No Caste."²⁰⁴

Dalit women who got education as a result of the Dalit movement had their own individual struggles and contributed to society, trying to change its regressive ways. Dakshayani Velayudhan, hailing from a Dalit family, was born on July 4, 1912, on the island of Bolgatty in Cochin. The first Dalit woman graduate from Kerala, she went on to become a leading scholar.

She became the first and only Dalit woman elected to the Constituent Assembly in 1946. In the course of the Constituent Assembly debates, Dakshayani supported B R Ambedkar on a number of issues with respect to the Scheduled Caste community. She would remain a member of the assembly and also the transitional parliament from 1946 until 1952. Dakshayani Life and achievements remains a great inspiration for Dalit women aspiring for rights and a place in the public sphere. She overcame great caste barriers of a time when she was not allowed to draw water from public wells, walk on public roads and visit public markets notwithstanding her education and job in a government school.²⁰⁵

It may be argued that accessing public space for Dalit women was more than a woman's question in the early twentieth century because their experiences as slave communities determined their citizenship claims. The reformist men from Dalit and other lower castes also made efforts to

²⁰⁴ Aswini KP, "The Sea has no Caste: Kayal Sammelanam," *Medium*, April 2019.

<https://dalithistorymonth.medium.com/the-sea-has-no-caste-kayal-sammelanam-3a63e8be7ff7>

²⁰⁵ Cherayi Ramdas, *Ayyankalikka Aadarathode* (A Tribute to Ayyankali) (Ernakulam: Uparodham Books, 2009), 167-68.

safeguard the bodily integrity of women in their own communities. however this cannot be adequately engaged within a liberal feminist discourse. Ayyankali's remarkable struggle for the education of Dalit children and starting of *Penpallikkudam* (a school for girls) in Ooruttambalam can be taken as a great reformist effort for emancipation of Dalit women. The struggles of Ayyankali and his friends to establish the right to education was founded on their faith in the emancipatory potential of education. Traditional customs forbade the slave castes from having access to education. Ayyankali understood the gravity of the problem despite the fact that the cost of educating the next generation was beyond the means of the Dalits. Sanal Mohan writes:

Ayyankali realised the urgency of the need to educate the new generation even though it was beyond the Dalits' means, and financial support from the government was not forthcoming. Ayyankali's statement that he wished to see ten graduates in his community is often recalled to show the importance that he attributed to the educational development of Dalit communities. It is also important to reiterate that Pulayas and other Dalit communities were never allowed to learn or participate in intellectual life and knowledge production. Ayyankali and other representatives of various Dalit communities raised the issue of education in the legislative assembly of Travancore.²⁰⁶

²⁰⁶ P. Sanal Mohan, "Social Space, Civil Society and Dalit Agency in Twentieth Century Kerala" in *Dalit Studies*, eds., Ramnarayan S. Rawat and K. Satyanarayana (Durham: Duke University Press, 2016), 85.

Nevertheless, the struggle of the Dalit women against caste moral codes has not been considered a significant site for Kerala's feminist history writing. Various movements against sexual violence in the 1990s were shaped by the involvement of Dalit women. Women from the PRDS (Prathyaksha Raksha Daiva Sabha) and other socio-spiritual Dalit groups, had an enormous amount of women's participation in their public gatherings. Janamma, the wife of Poykayil Yohannan, took up the leadership of the PRDS after his demise.

In Kerala, communist organisations merged in 1940, and Dalits and members of lower castes joined the party. Dalit women eventually joined communist parties and participated in the CPI(M) mass movement; the CPI expressly identified these women as agricultural labour activists. There was no umbrella Association for the Pulaya community, unlike the Nairs of Namboodiris who had their own associations. Therefore, the Pulayas were gradually drawn to sub-caste politics and soft Hinduism by adopting some Hindu customary practices after the formation of the sub-caste groups. The transformation from Sadhuujana to sub caste identity can be read as an entry into the Hindu fold. Dalit castes never followed upper caste systems like the dowry; instead they had the practices of *penpanmam* according to which the bridegroom's family had to provide money for the bride's family.²⁰⁷ In the course of time, Dalit women of sub-caste organisations started wearing the *mangalsutra* and *sindoor* (vermillion) in the parting of their hair as a symbol of marriage, following the dominant Hindu practice. Thus, an assimilation into the dominant upper caste ideology has been happening, which moves away from the progressive and iconoclastic histories of the anti-caste struggles.

²⁰⁷ THP Chentharasseri, *Ayyankali: Jeevacharithram* (Thiruvananthapuram: Prabhath Book House, 2012), 72.

Women from lower castes and socio-economic groups began working as labourers in coir and other factories in Alappuzha and Cochin in the late 1930s. However, they were not given the same treatment as male labourers in terms of pay or rest periods. Women employees have been organising since 1941 to address concerns such as *moopan* harassment, lack of maternity benefits, arbitrary termination from employment, wage reductions, and availing of crèche facilities. The establishment of the women's factory committees started in this context. The fight for maternity benefits was one of the first battles waged by women of these classes/castes. They had to continue working in the factory throughout their pregnancies, which had an adverse effect on their health while raising the company's revenues. Velayudhan records:

Since 1941, women workers began to be organised on issues such as arbitrary dismissal from work, wage cut, maternity benefit and creche facilities and harassment by *moopans*. Women's factory committees also began to be set up. Among the early struggles conducted by women were on the issue of maternity benefit. An employer in the Darragh Smail Company argued that since women became pregnant at home, the management was not responsible for any maternity benefit payment. The women retorted that they did not work to please the management but to give themselves and their children a better life. ²⁰⁸.

In the 1980s, independent women's groups dealt with feminist ideas that evolved in Kerala. Though every political party had its own women's wing, this small group of women did not become a part of it. Therefore, these groups had a homogeneous idea of women's questions and they focused on women as a single identity. The active members of these groups were from upper caste

²⁰⁸ Meera Velayudhan, "Caste, Class and Political Organisation of women in Travancore," *Social Scientist* (1991): 72.

communities; however, women from various castes and communities joined together as informal groups and addressed the women's question, Sara Joseph, an author and college lecturer, founded Manushi, a women's organisation. She started the *pennezhuthu* (women's writing) tradition in Malayalam literature and created feminist fiction. Between 1986 and 1987, Bodhana, yet another feminist organisation, arose in Kerala's Kozhikode area. It discussed and highlighted the crimes against women. K. Ajitha was the driving force behind this organisation. In the middle of the 1980s, Dalit women from Thiruvalla founded a group named *Grameena Vanitha Prasthanam* (Village Women's Organisation).²⁰⁹ This group was led by Achamma John, Enayammal, and Lovely Stephen Rosamma, who focused on issues of domestic and sexual violence.²¹⁰ The educated savarna and lower caste women became active members of these groups, and they criticised the general patriarchal structure of the system through public sphere activities. However, structural oppressive systems like Brahminical-savarna patriarchy have hardly been critiqued by savarna women scholars of Kerala in a sustained manner.

Similarly, women from the fisher folk community also faced discrimination within the public while selling fish. They were prohibited from using public transportation. The fishing communities toiled under a low standard of living and these groups ranked among the most economically and socially backward in Kerala, as well as being the lowest in the caste hierarchy. The women from this community established a core group inside the "Swathanthra Malsya Thozhilali Federation" in 1980 to push for their own

²⁰⁹Praveena K.P, "Tribute: KJ Inayammal (1953-2017)," *Dalit Web* (2 October, 2017).

²¹⁰ Personal a personal interview by myself as a part of the project titled "Gendering Governance or Governing Women or? Kerala State, India: Politics, Patriarchy, and Democratic Decentralisation Of Kerala."

https://www.researchgate.net/publication/242530988_Gendering_Governance_or_Governing_Women_Politics_Patriarchy_and_Democratic_Decentralisation_in_Kerala_State_India

demands on behalf of the broader fishing community. 'Theeradesa Mahila Vedi' (Coastal Women's Front) is the name of the female wing. In 1979, women selling fish on the streets marched to the secretariat carrying their baskets, demanding the facility to ride on public transport. To cite Hapke in this context:

[G]ender further compounds women's disadvantage in the changing geography and political economy of fish trade. Women's mobility is constrained by household responsibilities, lack of access to transportation facilities (until only very recently), and cultural norms of gender that restrict women's movements through public spaces and their interactions with non-kin men. This is significant because men dominate the upper echelons of the marketing system in both centralised landing places in Kerala and large wholesale markets in urban areas such as Trivandrum city.

Hapke adds that in addition to these economic drawbacks, social restrictions bar women from forming alliances with those holding power, and they must deal with physical harassment from men in the prevailing environment.²¹¹

As a result of the fierce campaign that women organised and led, they were provided with special vehicles for transportation. These struggles have been addressed as a women's labour question, however, within the mainstream progressive as well as feminist discourse, the questions of caste and pollution underlying and driving the movements have been undermined.

²¹¹ Holly M.Hapke, "Development, gender and household survival in a Kerala fishery," *Economic and Political Weekly* 36, no. 13 (2001): 1106.

Conclusion

In this chapter, I have tried to elaborate on the history of struggles by lower caste women that are not properly accounted for, in feminist writing nor in the linear history of Kerala. In fact, linear and programmatic history writings addressed these struggles as riots by particular castes. This chapter primarily focused on the absence of lower caste and Dalit women in the representation of the women's movement in the public sphere of Kerala. Moreover, this chapter tried to analyse how the historical context of the resistance against moral codes is linked to the violence faced by Dalit women.

Chapter V

Policing of Dalit Women's Sexual Morality: Experiences in Present Kerala

In terms of its economic and social position, Kerala is regarded as the most developed among the states in India. Kerala is known to have diverse cultural and community groups in all walks of life, participating in a range of political and regional contexts; thus the cultural identity of the state is distinctive in comparison to other Indian states. In addition, Kerala is identified as the hub of progressive politics and values due to the influence of the left political front on its social and cultural traditions. However, as this chapter intends to foreground, the state of Kerala has been faced with, right from its first communist elected government, with questions emerging from the denial of fundamental rights, security, and protections for women, Adivasis, transgender people, and Dalits. Numerous studies reveal that Kerala's development and progressivism are myths when it comes to Dalits and Adivasis. As Sreekumar notes:

Most such attempts to find a pre-history for the Kerala model have lined up one or more of the following factors: (a) benevolent monarchies which pioneered enlightened social policies, (b) Christian missionary interventions especially in education and health, (c) social reform movements (mainly caste reform movements in which the oppressed castes sought a range of redress from temple entry to modern education), (d) radical mobilisation and active grassroots organisations initiated by the left. In the post-independence period Kerala made history by being the first in the world to elect a communist government democratically.²¹²

²¹² Sharmila Sreekumar, "The land of 'gender paradox'? Getting past the commonsense of contemporary Kerala," *Inter-Asia Cultural Studies* 8, no.1 (2007): 34-54.

Furthermore, it is remarkable to consider how caste and gender intersect in Kerala, a state that proclaims itself progressive. Numerous instances of moral policing have been reported, allegedly done by the dominant political parties too. Similar to how Shriram Sena served as a moral police force in Karnataka, the role of “Left Parties” was crucial in suppressing activists who demonstrated in front of Kerala's secretariat in support of the Chengara land Struggle. Therefore, in this chapter, I would like to critically examine how caste and gender intersect with moral policing in the self-proclaimed progressive framework of Kerala. I would also like to explore how brahminical patriarchy works, not just as a set of norms followed by upper caste males but as a hegemonic ideology that is deeply internalised within the Dalit community as well. This chapter also examines the present manifestations of moral policing that exist in the customary practices of Kerala. The caste codes are formed by brahminical patriarchy in a Hindu dominant order, but they are widely internalised by all the communities, notwithstanding the fact that there is a wide range of caste practices across India, and they have regional variations. While the norms governing purity and pollution continue to determine the maintenance of caste endogamy, accessing lower caste women for sexual pleasure does not have the status of a crime. The paradigm of sexual dominance—the brahminical patriarchy's control over women's sexuality and the associated language of "honour" and "shame" with its complicity in power, force, and authority—have allowed male members of dominant castes to exert control over Dalit women's bodies. Ironically, when sexual abuse occurs in Indian society, Dalit women's bodies considered as "polluted" and "untouchable" transforms into "touchable."²¹³

²¹³ Aloysius Irudayam, Jayasree P Mangubhai and Joel Lee G, *Dalit Women Speak out: Caste, Class and Gender Violence in India* (Delhi: Zubaan, 2011), 177-178.

Kerala's caste order was maintained/controlled by Kshatriya rulers under the spiritual dominance of Namboothiri Brahmins. There are several studies on the sexual morality of Malayali by dominant caste feminist scholars; however, they often slip back into the notion of Malayali women as a monolithic identity, with similar experiences. However, these analyses centre Savarna Hindu women, thus Dalit, Adivasi and other women from minority locations find their specific contexts left unaddressed.. DalitAdivasiAs we have seen, women inKerala, even before its official emergence as a state, witnessed several struggles by lower caste women for wearing upper clothes. Women from all communities had to remain bare breasted before the Brahmin men; the Dalit women, belonging to the lowest rung of the social hierarchy, had to stay bare breasted before all. This chapter foregrounds how the Brahminical system worked to maintain caste purity through hierarchizing and monitoring women's bodies by enforcing caste norms in differential ways. The study of caste and in relation to the shifting constructions of sexual morality call for more attention. Further, this chapter discusses how caste patriarchy uses sexual morality to oppress Dalit women and prevent them from claiming citizenship rights or right to justice.

This chapter problematizes the question of untouchability and sexual exploitation / sexual domination of Dalit women in the context of the simultaneous untouchability/sexual availability of Dalit women's bodies. Additionally, it tries to explore the relation between the histories of caste slavery and sexual exploitation and the differential history of Dalit women's engagement and enlightenment modernity of Kerala. What are the specific ways in which women's experiences and bodies are structured within the caste order, and how does the new order of sexual domination/enslavement of erstwhile untouchable women question the so-called vibrant rational state? How are Dalit women placed in the public domain, and in what ways do sexuality, family structure, and community orientation make them more prone to violence in the public sphere and

the routinization/invisibilization of such violence? The hegemonic imaginations of lower caste women's sexuality and agency are deeply rooted in the histories of untouchability and slavery. Therefore, I wish to inquire into the interrelations between the present manifestations of violent moral policing and sexualization of Dalit women and their embodied experiences of slavery and sexual violence in the past.

Protests against Moral Policing and Kerala Public

The protest against moral policing incidents in the present and recent past of Kerala was hyper visualised by the media, especially the vandalization of the Kozhikode DownTown hotel²¹⁴ and many other moral policing incidents by Hindu fundamentalist groups protesting against the transgressions of “Indian morality”. However, the rage over incidents of moral policing, is often driven by a dominant liberal discourse, and fails to take into account the violations and control that lower caste women face in the public sphere. I would like to compare the hypervisible discussions around and against moral policing issues with the more invisible instances and contexts of moral policing issue, and, further, how the hegemonic imagination of the sexual morality of lower caste women plays a critical role in maintaining this distinction. Moreover, this chapter elucidates the impact of recent resistance movements like “Kiss of Love” and ‘Kiss in the Street’ against moral policing and how these protests, embedded in a liberal framework, ignore the caste question. “Kiss of Love” (KOL) was a campaign organised by social media activists to protest against the moral policing spearheaded by Hindu extremist groups in Kozhikode DownTown Hotel, in February 2015. The protest in Kochi got wide attention in the media, especially social media, however the

²¹⁴ A coffee shop in northern Kerala's Kozhikode city- “DownTown” was vandalised by a group of people, later identified as part of the Bharatiya Janata Yuva Morcha, by way of protesting against the public display of affection by some couples there.

Hindu extremist group and Muslim hardliner groups responded to the protest in the same manner. Members of certain Muslim groups entered the demonstration with buffaloes to indicate that Kiss of Love protesters are merely animals.²¹⁵

In the contexts of KOL, Dalit feminists initiated a serious conversation about moral policing. They raised an important point for discussion: how can a body be both beloved (suitable for kissing) and freely accessible? In addition to their general opposition to moral policing, they brought up their specific concerns into the debates, foregrounding the prevalent belief that Dalit women lack sexual agency. It is essential to consider the perspectives of Dalit and other lower caste women on various recent movements, such as the recent online Speak-out campaign by Dalit-Bahujan women and the 2015 “Kiss of Love”/ “Kiss in the Street” movement, because these subaltern perspectives addressed the unexplored component of caste-gendered moral policing.

During the Sabarimala entry campaign, men and women from both upper and lower castes were seen on the public highways obstructing young women from entering Sabarimala in protesting against the diktat that restricted young, menstruating women from entering the temple. It was a highly contentious situation; while the women who upheld the religious norms barring the entry of young women into Sabarimala were ready to commit suicide to defend their religion, the men turned violent and abusive. The women who believed in the gender based diktat were willing to wait till they reached menopause to enter the sacred temple. I would argue that this was a moment that unsettled and questioned Kerala’s progressive image, making visible the cracks –the inherent misogyny and homophobia and bigotry. The major objective of this chapter, is to inquire how the

²¹⁵ K K Shahina, “Love is not sex, Kiss is not Love” in *Chumbikkunna Manushyar Chumbikkatha Manushyar*, ed., Unni R (Kottayam: D.C Books, 2014), 80.

Dalit women experienced moral policing differently in certain incidents that have been only characterised as caste or gender based violence. I will look at a few case studies of violent attacks, to bring out the caste-gender based discriminations faced by women in Kerala. The question that arises from these instances and contexts are: Why Dalit women's bodies violated with more impunity when compared to the bodies of upper caste women? Human rights activists, When acts of moral policing such as the incident of DownTown Motel or the KOL protest happened, alongside mainstream feminists, Dalit Bahujan feminists, Dalit activists rallied to condemn the acts of violence and surveillance on moral grounds, and this emerged as a central point of discussion in the Malayali public. The focal point of the debates was the issue of morality, or *sadaacharam*. The act of kissing in public was an act of protest that occurred in various cities in Kerala as a consequence of the liberal progressive resistance to the prevailing idea of religious morality. Even though Dalit women had perspectives that were distinct from those of the general morality debate, they participated in the struggles and conversations surrounding the Kiss of Love protest. However, in the dominant liberal imagination, all bodies were viewed as equal. Dalit women, on the other hand, addressed the issue of “respectability”--how certain bodies were considered respectable and certain bodies were not; how the body in the public sphere was forever marked by caste, class, gender and sexuality.

Moral Policing and Dalit Women

In Kerala, the Dalits, women, Adivasis, and sexual minorities are severely victimised by moral policing. During the Muthanga and Chengara land struggles, the state used its power through agencies like the police to suppress the genuine rights of the landless Dalits and Adivasis. Simultaneously, a public sphere emerged where the dominant caste, mainstream media, and major political parties like the left and right joined together and became a dominant voice to protect and

endorse the state. The state as well as the public sphere had put enormous violence on the people who struggled for their basic rights. In the case of moral policing in Kerala the bearers of so called morality obstruct the engagement of the public sphere. Carmel Christy observes the public discourse around womanhood, which reveals the dynamics of the absent-presence of caste that shapes Kerala's public space. "The absence of an explicit discourse on caste in the public space helps to mask the presence of caste in sociocultural transactions and vice versa." This absence-presence often marks the multiple identities of the subject and destroys how these identities are constituted/performed in various cultural sites.²¹⁶

The upper castes always bring up the question of sexuality when they seek to demean a Dalit woman regarding her merit, notwithstanding the contextual histories in which she is placed, such as a set of labour or social relations, her desire to pursue education or fall in love with a particular person.

Let us look at the representations of Adivasi women in Kerala's mainstream discourse. Beginning in the late 1990s, Adivasi the discussions about unwed mothers in these communities permeated Kerala's discourse; however, there was scant attention to how these women were exploited. Men migrating to Adivasi regions routinely exploit Adivasi women, and then abandon them. The state hardly held these Non-Adivasi men accountable or responsible for their exploitative actions. However the term "unmarried mothers" was associated with Adivasi women, thus denigrating their bodily integrity as well as morality. C.K Janu , the noted Adivasi Leader, talks about the strict moral values that exist within the Adivasi community regarding sexual relations and menstruation.

²¹⁶ Carmel Christy K J, *Sexuality and Public Space in India: Reading the Visible*(London: Taylor & Francis, 2017), 63.

Janu, as a woman, faced several kinds of political interrogation, police brutality, cyberbullying, and so on. Janu was criticised for taking a serious political stand. As a woman who led the foremost struggle for Adivasi land rights (Muthanga Samaram in Wayanad, 2003, and *Kudilketti Samaram* and Nilpu Samaram in Trivandrum 2014).²¹⁷ She was still not given the status of a leader and an activist in the public space. Janu, as a leader interrogated the politics of both the left and right government, perpetuating exploitative land relations through use of political power, as she demanded the forest rights for the Adivasis.²¹⁸ Janu's faced social media racist bullying after she bought a new car. One of the main accusations made against C.K. Janu during the "*kudilkettusamaram*" (building huts and squatting) in front of the Kerala Secretariat in Thiruvananthapuram was that she wore silk saris and appeared on TV channels with makeup, branding her as "foreign funded person." The Adivasi struggle may have been successful in gaining the attention of the general public, "however it also put an unconscious emotional pressure on Janu to imitate the activist model created by Kerala's dominant public."²¹⁹

The question of justice is closely related to one's perceived societal morals. As Rekha Raj observes:

[A] mass formed within seconds punishes the people who have been caught for immorality. The mass has some commonalities; class, either caste or political predominance all of which relate to their local hold. This local clutch is nothing, but they

²¹⁷ Rupesh Kumar, NilpuSamaram:Redefining Political Struggles in Democracy(December 2014)
<https://www.roundtableindia.co.in/why-should-the-international-media-discuss-the-standing-strike-in-kerala/>

²¹⁸ C K Bhaskaran, *Januvinte Jeevithakatha* (Kottayam: DC Books, 2004), 43-56.

²¹⁹ Rekha Raj, "Politics of Gender and Dalit Identity: Representation of Dalit Women in the Contemporary Dalit Discourses of Kerala," (Ph.D., Mahatma Gandhi University, 2016), 230.

exercise power with their belongings in the particular space. As an act, there is a group forming suddenly in the public space to protect the so-called morality in morality policing. At a close look, we could see that women are absent in the group, and the men who belong to it can raise their voice as representatives of their own community in public. Then the public itself becomes an exclusive category, with differences in the exercise of power. However, the majority of people who have been victimised by moral policing are from the lower caste minority communities.²²⁰

Morality policing and lower caste women are differently correlated, because the discourse itself places them as transgressing its norms. The dominant discourse of morality located lower caste women as the other of upper caste women. J. Devika analyses how upper caste women who broke their community restrictions were treated with contempt at the beginning of twentieth century. She notes how the family and social reforms are controlled by the upper caste men and how they identified a cultured woman with their caste and class. If an upper caste woman broke a restriction, she would be referred to as Kulata and lose the good will of a jati or caste.²²¹ The analysis clearly brings out who is a Kulata, and who comes under the category of Kuleena. Further, in films and literature, lower caste women, especially Dalit women, are portrayed as “sexually loose.”

Rowena contradicts this hegemonic version of the present as emancipatory and progressive by reminding us of the case of Chithralekha, which didn't happen in the 1930s, but 75 years later, in 2005. She was a Dalit woman who wanted to drive an auto rickshaw yet was constantly harassed

²²⁰ Rekha Raj, “Thettukal: Kandupidichava, Kandupidikkathava,” *Mathrubhumi Weekly* (3 June 3, 2012), 19.

²²¹ Jayakumari Devika, “Imagining Women’s Social Space in Early Modern Keralam,” (working Paper) (Trivandrum: Centre for Development Studies, 2002): 9.

by the OBC men belonging to the trade union of the CPM. They burned down the auto which was the sole source of her livelihood and just like Rosy, Chithralakeha was also driven out of her village and had to live in another village in great secrecy, fearful of being killed or assaulted and she had to carry out a long struggle before getting back to her village and driving her auto again.²²²

Njan Lyngikathozhilali Nalini Jameelayude Athmakadha (The Autobiography of a Sex Worker. 2005), an autobiographical work by Nalini Jameela came as a cultural shock to the Malayali public sphere. While Jameela did not overtly talk about her caste identity, her social location could be identified as lower caste, The Kerala public had so far looked at the autobiographies of lower caste women with sympathy when they spoke of poverty or other social plights. But Nalini openly revealed her identity as a sex worker, a mother, and a documentary maker. This was an unprecedented experience for the Malayali literary public that encountered a woman so strongly talk about the sexual hypocrisy and voyeurism of Malayali men.²²³ The appearance of Nalini's autobiography gave a new meaning to the feminist understanding of autobiographical studies, in a context where most of the celebrated autobiographies of women from dominant castes had talked about their lives and achievements as women who entered public life. However, Nalini broke all the existing modes of autobiographical narratives by women. As Nalini identifies herself as a sex worker, mother, wife and lover; her multiple identities and experiences within/of public life provide insights into the existing power relations of society. Shamshad Hussain observes that the feminist discussions around Nalini Jameela's autobiography produced certain anxieties about the question of choice in sexuality. Even in feminist arguments, an element of sexual morality underscored the discourse, although the feminists justified their arguments as a part of their

²²² Jayakumari Devika, "Imagining Women's Social Space in Early Modern Keralam," 11.

²²³ Nalini Jameela, *Ente Aanungal (My Men)* (Kottayam: DC Books, 2018), 49.

concern against sexual exploitation and trafficking.²²⁴ Clearly, Nalini's engagement with her own life as a sex worker deeply embedded in social and sexual relations refused the victim status. Thus, it could not fit into the mainstream and governmental trafficking discourse.

Carmel Christy observes that the access to and constitution of public space in Kerala is still fraught with unequal power relations. She notes how gender and caste dynamics work in cinema, media and law. She examines a serial rape case that came to be known as the "Suryanelli case.". Christy analyses how those three modern institutions share symbiotic relationships while constituting Kerala's public space by shaping the social, administrative, and cultural spheres.²²⁵ Kerala's public space is conceived as a domain where ideal womanhood gets constituted in tandem with the power structure maintained by cultural institutions such as caste and religion.

Suryanelli Serial Rape Case

The Suryanelli serial rape case in Kerala emerged as a sensational event in the 1990s. A high school student from Kerala's Suryanelli in the Idukki District "eloped" with her boyfriend on January 16, 1996. He kidnapped her, blackmailed her, and later turned her over to a mafia, leading to her sexual assault over forty days in various parts of Kerala by forty-two men. Politicians, professionals, and many other prominent people are among those accused of rape.²²⁶ After this crime came to light, the case was widely publicised and sensationalised in the Malayalam Print

²²⁴ Shamsha Hussain, "Laingikatha Aaveshicha Bhoothangal" in *Keralam: Laingikatha Linganeethi*, ed., KM Venugopalan (Thiruvananthapuram: Sign Books, 2006), 133.

²²⁵ Carmel Christy K J, "The Politics of Sexuality and Caste: Looking through Kerala's Public Space" in *Kerala Modernity: Ideas, Spaces and Practices in Transition*, eds., Sathees Chandra Bose and Shiju Sam Vaghese (Hyderabad: Orient Black Swan: Hyderabad, 2015), 126-145.

²²⁶ P.Jaseela, "Innum Polichu Suryanelli". (Suryanelli: Still burns), Madhyamam opinion (2010 January) <https://www.madhyamam.com/opinion/open-forum/sury>

and visual media. In Kerala, in the 1990s, "The Suryanelli Case" served a significant role in shaping the public conversation around sexual violence. The print media was the main channel for the dissemination of news and reporting the details pertaining to the case. The subtleties of the legal discourse surrounding the Suryanelli case also aid in understanding how the media and the judiciary work together to shape the conversation about women's sexuality in public. Christy argues that The absence of caste in public spaces in Kerala hides the numerous identities of the women subjects and obliterates the ways in which these identities are constructed and performed in a variety of cultural contexts, including media, the judiciary, and cinema.²²⁷

Subsequently, in many cases involving Dalit women, they have been routinely represented in both the material and literary public spheres, as erotic subjects, or bodies that are easily accessible to the dominant castes. We can find several examples from media, cinema, and other popular literature that deploy such stereotypical imagery of Dalit women.

As I have discussed before, the body was the site on which caste hierarchy was inscribed during the colonial period, each caste was identified by gait, hairstyle, attire and so on. The upper cloth movement brought out the extreme degradation of women, especially of women of the lower/slave castes in a society where they did not have the right to cover their breasts. Their bodies were the properties of upper caste men.

²²⁷ Carmel Christy K J, "The Politics of Sexuality and Caste: Looking through Kerala's Public Space," 12-28.

Women's Experience in Malayalam Cinema and Dalit Women's Perspectives

Moral policing is used against women from many sectors based on their presence in public places, particularly women who are working at certain times and locations. For instance, women have historically been underrepresented in the film industry because those who chose to act in films were stigmatised as having loose sexual morals. Right from the days of the first female actor P.K. Rosy, women in cinema have been looked upon as being immoral. Notwithstanding these barriers, few of them, like KPAC Lalita, Sreevidya and Kaviyoor Ponnammamma, carved a good position for themselves in the industry. However, the women who played the vamp or supporting characters, would be demonised and sexualized in real life as well, appearing as a figure outside patriarchal control. The actor Vadlapati Vijayalakshmi (2 December 1960 – 23 September 1996), better known by her stage name *Silk Smitha*, routinely played such characters in South Indian cinema. Her bold presence was a challenge to the sensibilities of upper caste Malayali male audience.

Her rebellious and disobedient body served to re-emphasize the upper caste female body's docile nature and caste purity: Analysing the success of her biopic *Dirty Picture*, Rowena writes:

[W]ith the support of the savarna feminists and media, this film has been able to generate a national consensus regarding its feminist possibilities. However... the issue of caste in the creation of the star persona of Silk Smitha remains lost or silenced. Indeed, there is a serious problem in a film attempting a loose bio-pic of a vamp figure like Silk Smitha without talking of the film culture, which systematically and clearly marks all vamps as belonging to non-upper caste communities. By doing this and succeeding in making it look like a feminist issue, the film not only silences the caste issues regarding Silk Smitha's life, it also allows the fair-skinned Tamil Brahmin, Vidya Balan, located within the Hindi film

industry, to make use of the image of a dark-skinned South Indian actress. And by silencing the caste issue involved, it helps her build her upper caste female heroine self over the subaltern vamp hood of Silk Smitha.²²⁸

Additionally, soft porn movie culture emerged in the late 1990s, attributable to Shakeela , Reshma and other non-Malayali woman actors who were simultaneously the objects of scandal and “celebrations” in the Malayalam public sphere. As Darshana Mini Sreedhar observes:

It was Shakeela who emblemized the growing popularity of soft porn, its mass appeal among both homegrown and diasporic audiences, and its subsequent disappearance from the cinemascapes. The emergence of Shakeela in these films as a sexually liberated woman who gives her desires a free outlet without subscribing to moral edicts destabilised Kerala’s hero-centric, mainstream film industry for a while, leading to what was popularly called Shakeela *tharangam*—the “wave of Shakeela”.... When obscenity cases were filed against Shakeela, none of the men or women’s groups advocating gender equality supported her, making it her personal battle to fight alone. This points to her gendered precarity, especially given her image as a soft-porn star and the subsequent marginalisation she faced as social and cultural forces tried to constrain her.²²⁹

P.K. Rosy, a Dalit woman from Thiruvannthapuram, was the first female actor in Malayalam cinema. Her life experience in Kerala's public space served as a classic example of moral policing.

²²⁸ Jenny Rowena, “The Dirt in the Dirty Picture: Caste, Gender and Silk Smita,” *Roundtable India*, (17 June, 2012).

²²⁹ Darshana Mini Sreedharan, “The Rise of Soft Porn in Malayalam Cinema,” *Feminist Media Histories* 5, no.2 (2019): 52.

She had to escape to Tamil Nadu after being brutally attacked by a group of upper caste men on a public street in Kerala. Jenny Rowena unpacks the rage and resentment that Rosy incited in Nair landlords:

It is no wonder then that the Dalit female body of Rosy aroused such hatred and anger in the Nair landlords. She was pretending to be Nair, but even then they knew that hers was a body that they had strictly forbidden any kind of entry or space in the public sphere. Yet she was standing there instead of the Nair woman that the landlords could not bear to see on screen at that time, but demanding a legitimacy that they would not even grant even to Dalit men. The mirror that was to reflect their modern self was sending back the image of the Dalit woman that they never acknowledged even in real life except to exploit and use sexually. It is no wonder that the Nair men tore the screen in anger –Thus the mirror that mirrored the wrong image was broken and the Dalit body of Rosy was banished from Malayalam film history itself.²³⁰

Rosy: The Lost Heroine

The first female actor in Malayalam cinema, Rosy (screen name), was discovered through the writing of Kunnukuzhi S Mani. In a 2019 in-person interview in Trivandrum, he stated that Rosy (Rajamma) was a daily wage labourer in addition to acting in Kakkarishi natakam (folk drama), and it was an evolutionary activity for a woman from an untouchable community to enter the theatre arena during those times.²³¹ Mani describes how P.K. Rosy, the first female actor in

²³⁰ Jenny Rowena, “Locating P K Rosy: Can A Dalit Woman Play a Nair Woman Role in Malayalam Cinema today?” *Round Table India* (23 February, 2013).

²³¹ Personal interview with Kunnukuzhi Mani at Thituvananthapuram on February 13, 2009.

Malayalam film, turned into a "tragic heroine" in her actual life in his essay on P.K. Rosy in the *Chithrabhoomi* weekly. The public embraced the female lead of the first Malayalam film, *Vikadakumaran* (1928), very favourably. When the Nair men found out that Rosy, a Dalit woman, had portrayed the part of the Nair woman in that film, they reacted violently and tore down the screen of a Trivandrum capitol theatre. They demolished the house after attacking Rosy's family members, therefore, Rosy had to leave her home that very day and flee to Nagercoil, Tamil Nadu, where she would remain till her death.²³² Rowena writes:

Mainstream discourses... enhance the progressiveness and castelessness of their present with this new and attractive museum piece called P K Rosy.

For example, the documentary, *Story of Rosy* (K Sanal) in spite of its immense usefulness in bringing alive Rosy's story is also somewhere structured along this "violent past-wonderful present" format. ...This is surely a way to talk about the present as being casteless and situate the violence that happened to Rosy as something belonging to an early era. Such a narrative, only works to add to Kerala's caste-blind claims to progressiveness and enhances the present as being completely devoid of such caste violences which would oust women from both cinema and other public spaces in Kerala. However, if only we open our eyes and look around, we can say loudly that this is so untrue.²³³

In Malayalam movies, Dalit, Adivasi, and fisherwomen are portrayed as lacking chastity or as sexually deviant. In Malayalam films, women from Nair and Syrian Christians are portrayed as

²³² Kunnukuzhi S Mani, "Charithram thedi Durantha Naayika Durantha Nayika," *Chithrabhoomi Cinema Weekly*, (24 June, 2004): 13-14.

²³³ Jenny Rowena, "Locating PK Rosy: Can a Dalit woman play a Nair role in Malayalam cinema today?" *Round Table India* (23 February, 2013).

modest and submissive. Social realist films from the 1950s, such as *Neelakkuyil*, (directed by P.Bhaskaran and Ramu Karyattu), one of the pioneer movies showed the love relationship between a Dalit (Pulaya) woman and an upper caste man. The protagonist, Sreedharan Nair, is a schoolmaster who is in a romantic relationship with an agricultural labourer named Neeli. Later, Neeli became pregnant, and Sreedharan Nair found it difficult to continue a legitimate connection with her because it violated his caste norms. Rowena and Jenson observe that notwithstanding her significance in the narrative, Neeli is neither a vital link in the emerging social contract, nor does the movie seek to depict the desires and sufferings of Dalit women. Neeli's character's primary objective is to effeminize the Dalit community, which is an essential tactic that allows the movie to, on the one hand, elaborate caste discrimination in a controlled way in order to contain the radical energies that such narratives could unleash, and, on the other hand, establish the ideal Communist figure to represent and speak for the Dalits. The Dalit protagonist's femininity was a critical representational strategy for accomplishing the terms of the social contract that the film intended to effect because the movie only grants adult men the agency of political deliberation and action. In order for the Communist figure to symbolise the former, the Dalit community was silenced inside the film's representational horizons by gendering it..To cite Jenson:

The film does not make any attempt to represent the desires and distresses of the Dalit woman, nor is Neeli an important link in the emergent social contract despite her prominence in the narrative. The primary function of Neeli's character is to *effeminize* the Dalit community, a crucial strategy that enables the film, on the one hand, to elaborate the issue of caste discrimination in a controlled manner so as to contain the radical energies

that such narratives could unleash, and on the other hand, to institute the ideal Communist figure to represent and speak for the Dalits.²³⁴

Later in the 1970s and 1980s, in movies featuring upper caste males playing the leading roles, a woman with a fragile moral code would appear to distract his attention from his true goals, or a lower caste woman servant would live in his home to keep him entertained on boring days. Famous films like *Elippathayam* (Adoor Gopala Krishnan, 1981) and the young woman servants in *Neelathamara* (Yousafali Kecheri, 1979, Lal Jose, 2009) offer their bodies to the property owner's son as he waits for the results of his legal exam.

Moreover, in films and literature, lower castes, especially Dalit women, are portrayed as sexually loose or “forward” women. We can trace the historical lineage of such perceptions. Due to the strictly enforced caste endogamy, Dalit women could never become “wives” of upper caste men, but their bodies remained customary accessible, and would become “touchable” when it came to the sexual pleasure of upper caste men. Similarly, the hypersexualization of Dalit women's bodies in popular movies and literature can be read with the trajectory of their slave experience.

Comedy Shows and Policing Dalit Women

The policing of women's bodies is a universal phenomenon, especially in entertainment media such as cinema, comedy shows, serials, web series, and crime YouTube channels that reproduce the Brahminical male gazes on women from Lower castes and women in general. Comedy shows are broadcast as prime time programming on all popular Malayalam TV channels. Misogyny and

²³⁴ Jenson Joseph, “Revisiting Neelakkuyil: On the Left's Cultural Vision, Malayali Nationalism and the Questions of ‘Regional Cinema,’” *Thapasam: A Bilingual Journal of Historical and Cultural Studies of Kerala*, (2013): 49-50.

the supremacy of the upper caste are key factors in the stereotyping of women in visual media. In a caste-based culture like India, entertainment consists solely of hypersexualizing the bodies of women, making fun of their skin tone, and body shaming them. However, in the mainstream entertainment media programmes, women with dark skin or women from specific communities are used as symbols for sexual accessibility.

Early 2010 saw the emergence of Malayalam television networks, including Asianet, Amrita TV, and Mazhavil Manorama. In the programmes featured on these channels, village life would always feature a dark-skinned woman (referred to as a "*chechi*" or elder sister by Malayalis) who routinely are sexually licentious and accessible to men. However, in these presentations, any woman who represented A Nair Tharavadu (Nair elite house) never became a sexually loose character. The perpetuation of stereotypes about women in places with distinct social structures, such as Dalit colonies. and the Brahmin Malayalam slang or hegemonic Valluvanadan language (spoken by Savarna elites mostly) was superior to the colloquial Malayalam she spoke. In contrast, a Nair woman from the *tharavadu* would never be portrayed in the same manner. The spatial and linguistic codes would signal a woman's caste and social location. She would be judged depending on whether she came from a *tharavadu* or a Dalit village; whether she spoke the hegemonic Valluvanadan form of Malayalam (spoken by Savarna elites) or colloquial Malayalam. Vedicvachan Kovil Vilasini, for instance, was a woman character from a lower class-caste location who became very popular in a Mazhavil Manorama show.²³⁵ She depicted a lower caste woman

²³⁵ Vedicvachan Kovil Vilasini aanu TThaaram , Comedy Skit, Oru Chiri Oru Bumper Chiri,,youtube Video,4:23, Posted by "Mazhavil Manorama" August 202,(236) വെടിവെച്ചാൻ കോവിൽ വിലാസിനിയാണ് ഈ സ്കിറ്റിലെ താരം. |MazhavilManorama|Oru Chiri Iru Chiri Bumper Chiri - YouTube

in lungi and half blouse, with a lean, dark body, who spoke to men in a register loaded with double meaning. In Malayalam comedy shows, men used to play the roles of women. In the 1990s, comedy skits were the main attraction of Malayalam stage shows in foreign countries as well.

The particular characterization of women in comedy shows is clearly imagined through the gaze of Malayalee men towards women from lower caste-class backgrounds. Women in the spaces like fish markets, public bathing ponds or rivers are portrayed as triggering Malayali men's erotic gaze. As bell hooks writes:

The connection made between the realm of representation in visual media and the capacity of black women to construct themselves as a subject in daily life. The extent to which black women feel objectified, dehumanised, and devalued in this society determines the scope and texture of their relationships.”

This can be applicable in the realm of comedy shows in Kerala too. As I have discussed, moral policing is widely understood as surveillance on a couple's intimate behaviour in a public space. However, Dalit women's experiences of moral policing needs to be read differently. Therefore, I have taken a few case studies of caste-gendered attacks faced by Dalit women in different time periods and different parts of Kerala.

Rekha Raj talks of the complexity of Dalit women's experiences of resistance to moral policing as. She points out that while it is important to take into consideration, as feminists have demanded, the distance between the workplace and home and working hours of women.²³⁶ However, she raises a crucial contradiction, societal attitudes fail to take into account the experiences and

²³⁶ Rekha Raj “Thettukal: Kandupidichava, Kandupidikkathava” (Wrongs found, to be found), *Mathrubhumi Weekly* (3 June, 2012): 20.

transportation/travel issues of labouring Dalit women. While Dalit women routinely face sexual harassment in their workplaces, it is normalized, and their daily experiences of violence are dismissed as a result of their own lack of morality. Significantly, such hypersexuality is projected not just on to individual Dalit women but as something that is passed on generationally, from their ancestral women. Lovely Stephen foregrounds how the public responds to the rape of a Dalit woman; she recalls:

Fifteen years ago in our Kurichi village, a Dalit student by name of Amminikutty was raped and murdered. She had gone at dusk to buy mango and dried fish, and the next morning her body was found hanging from a young coconut tree on the side of a road. A protest was organised by a group of people, they demanded that those guilty be punished. However, the students of the girls' school at the nearby Mandiram junction itself did not participate in the protest. The truth of the matter was that the teachers did not allow them to. The reaction of a woman was; "The cat goes around and creates all kinds of trouble. What can the citizens do? Within a few days a former non- Dalit student of the same girl's school, Jolly Mathew, then a college student, was raped and killed. On this occasion, the teachers of the girl's school took the initiative and called a huge protest meeting at Mandiram junction. The people from around the area spoke at length on the girl's many fine qualities. Such differences in the reaction are seen all the time in our rural area. We do not pay attention to these or do not take the trouble to analyse them- the truth is, we take our time over It.²³⁷

²³⁷ Lovely Stephen, "The Issues of Self liberation", in *The Oxford India Anthology of Malayalam Dalit Writing*, eds., M. Dasan, Pratibha S, Pradeepan Pampirikunnu and C S Chandrika (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2012), 280-81.

To bring in another example, a Dalit woman named Rajani S. Anand committed suicide by jumping from the building of Kerala state Higher Education department office in 2004. A bright student, Rajani had made an effort to alter her caste destiny through education. She had bravely entered the domain of technical education, a sphere that, in the normal order of events, would have been unavailable or unwelcoming to her. By getting admission into a computer programme through the “merit list,” her example ran counter to the “unmeritorious” tag that is often attached to Dalit students. Rajani killed herself because she was unable to finish her professional degree due to the inadequate government stipend and the banks' refusal to provide her with a loan. . However, what emerged as an issue in the Kerala public sphere was not the gross injustice that led to the death of a bright young woman, but the issue of her sexual morals and sexual life. Rekha Raj observes Rajani S Anand's suicide is legitimated by the state through referring to her ‘loose morals’, founded on the hegemonic imagination of the women in the community which she belongs. Rajani's aspirations could not be fulfilled and she was denied the right to education. However, the left parties and the mainstream Medias of Kerala visualised it as an issue of privatisation in higher education.²³⁸ Rekha Raj writes:

Most Dalit girls become sales girls with low wages...They are forced to remain shackled within oppressive institutions and are unable to choose the new knowledge domains like IT or management... The above-mentioned Dalit experiences were the ones that Rajani

²³⁸ Rekha Raj, “Rajani's Suicide,” G.Arunima, trans. in *Exercise of freedom :An Introduction to Dalit Writings*, eds., K. Satyanarayan, Susie Tharu (New Delhi: Navayana, 2013), 102.

attempted to challenge, knowingly or unknowingly... However, the equation that a Dalit woman is a bad woman/immoral woman persists on the strength of social prejudice.²³⁹

Another example of the relationship between caste and moral policing emerges through the instance of Chithralekha, a Dalit woman autorickshaw driver. She has been subjected to unthinkable torture since 2005 at the hands of the male auto drivers at the Kannur Edaat auto rickshaw station. The people attacking her are Centre of India Trade Union (CITU) members belonging to the Communist Party of India (Marxist) (CPIM) members. On October 11, 2005, they wrecked her car. They even attempted to kill her by hitting her with an auto on October 14 of the same year. They set fire to her autorickshaw, which was parked in front of her house, on December 31. In addition, she was called "*polachi*" for resisting the attack of CPIM men. Chithralekha was severely morally policed by the men among her colleagues, for asking for equal rights in the workplace. She received solidarity from Dalit activists and feminist activists from all over India. However, Communist Party activists, including women, did not positively respond to her cause.²⁴⁰

According to Jenny Rowena and Carmel Christy, the local CPI (M) goons and the auto drivers union changed their strategy once the issue went outside the purview of the local auto stand, and they began smearing her reputation with widely disseminated poster campaigns. Through these posters, Chithralekha came to be associated with the stereotypes of a sexually licentious woman, a drinker, the child of a sex worker, a talker who does not listen, and a person who does not know how to behave appropriately. The CITU, CPI (M), and their propaganda machine alleged that Chithralekha used the caste issue to cover up her own questionable morality. With such a vicious

²³⁹Rekha Raj, "Rajani's Suicide," 101-103..

²⁴⁰ Personal Interview with Chithralekha, at Payyannur, 2017.

campaign against her, Chithra completely lost all local support; even female auto drivers were convinced that she was a “bad” woman.²⁴¹

As a result of her alliance with feminist and Dalit activists, Chithra was able to organise a sizable demonstration and generate significant media attention for her cause. They called a Dalit women’s convention in her hometown. Her issue got enormous media support, and feminist, social activist students and many like-minded people expressed solidarity with her. A feminist group organised a three days vehicle rally in Payyanur town, to explain Chithralekha's situation to the public. It was a first time experience for the public of Payyanur, north Kerala, where Dalit women lived in an inferior situation compared to south Kerala.

Similarly, in many cases of violence against Dalit women, as Rowena and Christy note in their study, sexual and gender violence were deployed by the traditional and modern political alliances as potential venues to reproduce “the hegemonic caste and gender structures of a casteist patriarchy through the use of the tool of sexual morality” against victimised women. With reference to Chithralekha’s case, they observe that the narratives around the incident did not sufficiently account for the caste and gender oppressive structures within which the atrocity is embedded. Instead, all media representations made use of the already available discourses of progress to quibble over questions of caste and gender. The framework of progress through which Kerala has been represented since the 1970s and 80s is used not only to initiate discussions about caste, gender, and sexual violence but also simultaneously to cut short and regulate such discussions rather

²⁴¹ Carmel Christy K.J. and Jenny Rowena, “Burning of an Auto Rickshaw: Caste, Class, Class and Gender in the Urban Space of Keralam,” (Unpublished Project Report of Sarai- CSDS Independent Research Fellowship, New Delhi, 2007)

abruptly.²⁴² The courts and the larger justice system too works within Brahminical frameworks, seeing Dalit women as sexual subjects. In Chitralkh's case, the public prosecutor said Dalit women like Chitralkha couldn't ask for it because she was born into a community with no claim on sexual morality.²⁴³

To bring up another instance of such caste/gender based injustice, the police played a vital role in further shaming and victimising a Dalit woman, Shiney, a Dalit girl in Kottiyam Kollam, who was sexually abused by random men. In addition, she later killed her own brother in the name of shame. When this case came to light in 2005, the media was eager to look at Shiney's social location and family background in order to examine their moral history. They found her father had left the family and that it was a woman headed Dalit family. The media then started making up stories about Shiney's personal life and 'questionable morals.' Additionally, the police acted as the media's informant, and some policemen commented that she was not chaste by her very birth because she belonged to a scheduled caste.²⁴⁴ This kind of a comment from the police itself shows the casteist and sexist norms inherent in the state and its institutions.

Jisha, a 29-year-old Dalit woman and a law student at the Government Law College, Ernakulam, was discovered brutally murdered on 28 April 2016 at her home in Perumbavoor in Ernakulam. She was living with her mother, a casual labourer. While the post mortem report would reveal that Jisha was not sexually assaulted, yet the media reported sexual abuse immediately after the murder became known. Later, a labourer from West Bengal named Ameer ul Islam was caught by the

²⁴² Carmel Christy K.J and Jenny Rowena, "Burning of an Auto Rickshaw: Caste, Class, Class and Gender in the Urban Space of Keralam," (unpublished manuscript).

²⁴³ Personal interview with Chitralkha by the Researcher, July 2018.

²⁴⁴ Maya S, "Shinyude mozhi: Oru Postmortem Report," *Madhyamam Weekly*, (2005):39-41.

police as the culprit. Jisha's murder fueled hate towards non-Malayali labourers, who are detested in Ernakulam district. While Jisha's mother received some financial support from the government, later, the media and public unleashed surveillance on Jisha's mother and sister. There was public scrutiny over their standard of living and usage of money and other activities.²⁴⁵ These policing efforts were reflected in social media trolling including highly offensive and insensitive TikTok videos.²⁴⁶ Jisha's mother, Rajeswary, faced social media trolling for visiting a beauty parlour. The troll commented on her morality, highlighted that she married twice, and that she got government compensation at the cost of taxpayers.²⁴⁷ I would like to emphasise that in a state with progressive credentials, a victim's family was called out for receiving compensation. This points to the underbelly of the progressive public.

Pembilai Orumai

The moral policing against the Pembilai Orumai activists has been a focus of discussion in Kerala's Public sphere. In a rare show of strength in the history of labour resistance, around 12,000 low caste tea plantation workers in Kerala struck work in September 2015 for almost a month. They demanded an increase in daily wages from Rs. 232 to Rs. 500—on par with the basic minimum wage of other manual labourers in Kerala, a 20 percent annual bonus, and improved welfare measures, specifically with respect to health and medical facilities. They demanded an end to the

²⁴⁵ Anagha Jayan E, "It is outright shaming: Jisha's mother responds to social media trolls," *Onmanorama.com* (13 April, 2018).

²⁴⁶ Jisha' Mother Rajeshwary Trlolls, youtube video, Uploaded by "Pathuz Love", April 2022
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=wyripA7tTk>

²⁴⁷ Jisha's Mother about Beauty, Youtube Video uploaded by, "Filmy new", may 2018,
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=RHOda2qnpko>

alliance between the trade union leaders and the plantation companies. The strike stood out because it was entirely organised and led by women, and it was organised autonomously by the workers, without letting the trade unions direct its course.

What has not been discussed enough in the media is the fact that the women workers who were part of the strike are Dalits, whose ancestors had been imported as indentured labourers to the colonial plantations in Kerala from Tamil Nadu. Resisting the mighty multinational plantation company and powerful trade unions, these Dalit women protesters came to be known as *Pembilai Orumai*²⁴⁸, which translates as Women's Unity.

The strike was a historic event, and it posed a serious challenge to Kerala's much admired developmental standard. Kerala has received much praise for having achieved human development targets comparable to those of economically developed nations. As an alternative to neoliberal, free market policies, its purportedly equitable economic model has been emphasised. Its 'pro-poor' initiatives, however, had mostly ignored the plantations and its workers. The majority of plantation workers have remained impoverished. Landless labourers laboured inside the oppressive plantation system because the land reforms of the 1960s and 1970s did not help them. The female workers were at the receiving end of caste and racial prejudice much more than the men of their community. The term "*pandi*," which denotes inferiority, based on the dichotomy between the modern and the non-modern and the resourceful and the "unresourceful", best describes the Dalit Tamil workers of the plantations. The racist colonial stereotype of Tamil plantation workers as hardworking but stupid showed how resourceless Tamil women were portrayed to be. During the *Pembilai Orumai* strike, there were loud reiterations in the media and

²⁴⁸Pembilai Orumai is a Tamil word that means women's unity.

the public sphere of the racist colonial stereotype which portrays Tamil plantation workers as hardworking but stupid.. The strike was presented by many commentators, including trade union officials, as an anarchist action that could not be regarded as a legitimate form of workers' resistance.²⁴⁹

Later, an MLA from Peerumedu, made a slut shaming comment on *Pembilai Orumai* activists to demoralise them and keep them under the control of the communist party.²⁵⁰ However, its leaders like Gomathi did not step back from struggling. Therefore, she had to face consequences from the public and leave activism, although later, Gomati was elected as a member of Panchayat in Peerumedu. The stereotyping and vilification of the *Pembilai Orumai* activists reveals the fissures in the dominant progressive and developmental discourse of Kerala.

#Metoo Campaign and Moral Policing

Dalit-Bahujan women have recently launched a campaign to speak out about their experiences with sexual harassment, which up until recently was mostly surrounded by silence in the Kerala society. On social media, many women started to share their stories of being the victims of progressive Savarna/-Dalit men's sexual harassment in their workplaces, in social settings, and in activist spaces. By rejecting victimisation, they adopted a political stance against sexual assault

²⁴⁹ Jayaseelan Raj, "The women strike back: the protest of Pembillai Orumai tea workers," *OpenDemocracy.net* (4 February, 2016).

²⁵⁰ T A Ameerudeen, Kerala's Women Plantation Workers Return for another fight -Against 'Sexist' minister M Mani, Scroll in. April, 2017
https://www.google.com/search?q=pembilai+orumai+mm+Mani&sca_esv=562439563&sxsrf=AB5stBhRn69MC18wOiNz4X3ZoiWeLijNMA%3A1693804470258&ei=tmf1ZLKqD-6b4-EPos-uyAI&ved

and addressed it on social media. The hypocrisy of well-known progressive political spaces in Kerala was also examined by them. The men in the progressive groups would criticise their young women colleagues and co-activists as being "moralistic" if they did not agree to their sexual demands. Dalit women during the speak-out campaign spoke up about how they repeatedly encountered such harassment from these "liberal intellectual/ activist" men couched in progressive language. While Dalit women rejected the status of *Kula Sthree* (chaste women), men from their own community demanded that they adopt and adhere to the norms prescribed that status.²⁵¹

As PraveenaThaali writes:

The campaign to protect the sexual predators has emerged because the Brahminical value system of India has always seen Dalit-Bahujan women as morally suspect. Practices like the Devadasi system and sexual slavery are still prevalent in many parts of India to assure impunity for upper caste men and their access to the Dalit woman's body. The Brahminical value system legitimises rape as part of the Hindu patriarchy, and consequently rape and any other sexual assault on Dalit-Bahujan women have been normalized in India. Groups with varying vested interests to maintain status quo in relation to caste and gender would counter this movement by Dalit-Bahujan women against Hindu patriarchal culture.²⁵²

²⁵¹ Praveena K P, "Rejecting Victimhood: The Online Speak Out Campaign in Kerala Against Harassment," *GenderIT.org* (9 October, 2018).

²⁵² Praveena K P, "Rejecting Victimhood: The Online Speak Out Campaign in Kerala Against Harassment," *GenderIT.org* (9 October, 2018).

For Dalit Bahujan women, accessing the social media which is often an "elite space" is just as difficult as trying to enter physical public places. The self-reflexive activities of Dalit women are drawing some attention in cyberspace and have the potential to go beyond their everyday lives and become political articulations. Few Dalit-Bahujan women, despite their constraints, participated in the current cyberfeminist movement by using the internet as an alternative forum and bringing up the topic of sexual harassment in public discourse. Notably, many women from the mainstream feminist movement were uncomfortable with lists appearing on social media naming the harassers. They felt it was a process of "naming and shaming" bypassing the due process. The rejection of victimisation and public humiliation might be seen as a victory over Brahminical patriarchy. These inquiries undoubtedly questioned the direction of the mainstream Indian feminist movement as well. Additionally, they used the internet/social media to oppose India's value system, which justifies rape (especially upon the bodies of lower caste women) as a Brahminical patriarchal tradition. Through social media interventions, the protests and resistances by Dalit women went beyond the concept of a campaign to become a right-based movement that called out for a bridging of the gap between private and public exhibition.

Additionally, we need to consider how some terminology used on social media serve as a metaphor for demoralising Dalits, particularly women and Dalit women. *Sadhanam* (object) and *Charakku* (sexualized object) are two local expressions that generally represent women as commodities. Further, phrases like "Pokku case" or "Vedi" (terms used to indicate sexual immorality) are frequently used to portray women as liberated and open to sex. Another phrase that is frequently used in Central Travancore is "*kannali*" which is used to refer to cattle but also to women who have little to no control on their sexuality. With the popularity of social media, the above mentioned terms are frequently used in the space to humiliate and abuse women. However, one

notes that men and women from Dalit communities are being bullied in cyberspace by references to their status as inhabitants of Dalit colonies. The derogatory term *colony vanam* is a common comment of upper caste men on social media to insult Dalits.²⁵³ Dalit colonies are spaces viewed as the hub of immorality within the popular sensibilities of the Malayalam public sphere. Therefore, the morality of the Dalit colony is being highlighted while erasing the questions of poverty, landlessness and other issues that directly interrogate the Kerala model of development. Therefore, I would contend that social media creates a ‘private public’ to attack Dalits and other subaltern groups. In this sense, the caste and social relations of the physical-geographic sphere of Kerala is replicated in social media.

Conclusion

This chapter was an analysis of different incidents of violence faced by Dalit women from the 1990s to the present in different parts of Kerala. Dalit women experience moral policing differently from other women due to the intersection between hegemonic notions of sexual morality and caste. The specific understanding of Dalit women's positioning in Kerala society and the prevalent ideas about their lack of chastity/morality are related to the experience of slavery. The historical roots of Dalit women's sexual agency, self-determination, and choice are linked to the sexual coercion and violence against them. Additionally, Dalit women's geographic and cultural contexts play a role in normalising sexual violence directed at them.

²⁵³ <https://www.facebook.com/arun.yobzz.96/>

Conclusion

This study intended to examine the various perspectives on moral policing in Kerala, with specific focus on how Dalit women are morally regulated in Kerala's public spaces. Therefore, the focus of this investigation was on how gender, caste, and class categories contributed to the formation of moral standards. Additionally, this thesis explored how certain groups are excluded from the Indian public sphere because of caste, class, religion, and language supremacy.

Through this study, I found that Dalit and other minority communities are not well represented in the Indian public sphere, which affects decision-making. The public realm in India lacks both civility and democracy. This led to the emergence of a counter public from within the oppressed groups. The self-respect movement of lower caste communities and women began in the late 1970s in Maharashtra. The Ambedkarite movement has created a counter public through literary and political engagements in Maharashtra, which is evident in the Marathi Dalit literature. In the Indian context, dominant caste and class groups wield authority over the public sphere, thus, influencing popular sensibilities. The Habermasian idea of a public sphere is one that is democratic and open to all. However, the European normative public sphere has been criticised by feminist researchers from the west for being bourgeois and dominated by white men. Dalits and other minority groups in India have similarly problematized the public sphere as exclusive and exclusionary since it is deeply regulated by caste, class and religious identities.

India's public sphere, since its emergence from colonial modernity, has been formed and designed by the upper caste middle class English educated men. Consequently, Therefore, its structure and arrangement, designations of the private and the public, are marked by the specifically re-imagination of gender. As upper caste, women are marked as the bearers of the spiritual while men

inhabit the material, public spaces. A public sphere, so constituted through upper caste norms, was clearly closed to entry and interventions of Dalit groups.

Against this backdrop, it is essential to look at the counterpublics constituted by Dalits influenced and empowered by Ambedkarite and Phule ideologies. In addition, women have struggled to be part of form their own counterpublics to address the issues of gender oppression. However, Dalit women, who bore the multiple axes of caste and gender oppression, it has been an uphill task to be part of the the counterpublics of their own community and in the alternative, counter public spaces constituted by upper caste women. I have argued that caste capital and privilege facilitated dominant caste women's access to the public, making their battle much easier than that of Dalit women. While they needed to fight the constraints of patriarchy in their own community, they did not have to deal with the enormous historical disadvantages of caste.

Additional significant restrictions include the prevailing norms of untouchability and seclusion from access to the facilities of the public sphere. In Kerala, Dalits were long prohibited from using public areas like markets and roads, continuing into the colonial era. They are also denied access to healthcare, education, and numerous other fundamental rights. Thus, in the early twentieth century, a crucial issue for Dalit struggles was to win the right to access public spaces and institutions.

The current dominant 'moral values' in Malayalee society were developed as a result of the Kerala Renaissance and Modernity. Kerala's many caste groups have interacted in a variety of ways with colonial modernity. When modernity arrived, the dominant caste introduced reforms within their own communities, and at the same time, the missionary discourse attempted to transform lower caste communities from a dehumanising position to a human status. The dominant caste

communities used the worlds opened up by modernity to create their community organisations. However, for Dalits, it was a different battle, they were fighting for the basic right to live as humans at the time. Such preoccupations for survival restrained Dalits from organising as a group and aim at community reform.

Evidently, Kerala's public spaces excluded parts of its populace who had limited or no access to contemporary schooling. The early public realm was exclusively open to people with modern education and knowledge of English. The public realm was created by the educated modern savarna men who always had the writing tradition. Writing, publishing, and discussion formed the pillars of these modernising groups. Additionally, the literature emerging from these groups had an impact on the populace. Kerala was thought of as a linguistic region in the late 19th century and there was no nationalist movement there. In addition, only educated savarna and Muslim males participated in the nationalism movement.

The core of this thesis is understanding the trajectory of moral policing in the specific contexts of Dalit women in Kerala. While Kerala projects its progressive image, the traditional caste codes are still prevalent when it comes to the social and material realities of women from lower castes. Although their bodies are visible, they remain invisible. The struggle obtaining human or citizenship status by Dalit women is positioned against the entire brahmanical system, not just patriarchy. However, as I have argued, in dominant historiography their battles to become visible in society are often negated, posed as riots or acts of anarchy. The hegemonic imaginations about sexuality of Dalit women are linked to their caste and slavery experiences.

Caste, class, and gender are critical factors that affect a person's ability to enter and be respected in public spaces. *Sadacharam* or caste governed gender/sexuality norms is determined by

Brahmanism in a reformist, developed, and progressive state like Kerala. The place of a person within the caste system's pyramidal structure directly determines how they are perceived through the dominant norms of sexual morality. The historical past of a group or person continues to dictate their current position in public spaces. My core chapters examined some occurrences in the recent past that raises concerns the continuing presence of moral policing, shaped through invisible caste assumptions, that determines perceptions of Dalit women's respectability or the lack thereof. Brahminical patriarchy portrays Dalit women as exaggerated sexual objects, narratives that appeal to and reaffirm the preexisting public sensibilities in Kerala.

The media and the general population, who view Dalit women as vulnerable targets for abuse, have normalised the violence experienced by Dalit women. Through re-presenting, their sexual agency/assertion satirically—as hypersexual or morally depraved--these dominant conceptions make an everyday assault on Dalit women through a range of visual and social media. I have argued that Savarna feminist perspectives have failed to historically engage with the deeply casteist attitudes that regulate Dalit women's bodies. Because of this lack of comprehension permeating mainstream as well as feminist discourses, news organisations and media outlets rarely take the sexual assaults against less privileged women seriously. The historical roots of Dalit women's sexual agency, self-determination, and choices are linked to and emerge from the sexual coercion and violence against them. Additionally, Dalit women's geographic and cultural contexts play a significant role in normalising sexual violence perpetrated against them. The stereotypes of Dalit women in literature and the visual media re-enact and reproduce these forms of violence and abuse, constantly representing them as the other of the “ideal woman.”

The brahmanical patriarchal control of Kerala's public life is an overriding factor that shapes the media's apathy towards the issues impacting Dalits and Dalit women. Therefore, educated

members of the lower castes have established their own online news media in order to voice their opinions. Certain incidents and issues that would have otherwise been erased or censored, have attracted public attention due to such media channels.

A counter public was made possible in India by online media outlets such as Countercurrents, Round Table India, Dalitweb, Savari, Utharakalam, Dalit Voice, Dalit online Movement and many other online publications. Furthermore, due to the emergence of alternative social media, the mainstream media is compelled to cover transgender, Dalit, and Adivasi concerns in their news stories.

However, the mainstream discourses in Kerala continue to stigmatise, and sexualize women from Dalit and subaltern groups. The dominant media and public perceptions of Dalit women as vulnerable as well as accessible targets for abuse, continue to normalise the violence experienced by Dalit women. Assertive Dalit women become subjects of crude satire and comedy that sexualize and dehumanise them routinely in visual and social media on an everyday basis. Simultaneously, educated Dalit women have used social media to challenge as the Brahminical patriarchal tradition which legitimates the sexual abuse and subordination of Dalit women. Through social media, interventions such as speakout, Dalit women's solidarity and collectives have pushed beyond the idea of a feminist campaign to become a rights-based movement seeking to bridge the gap between private and public forms of marginalisation. Thus, they attempt to enable a public sphere that recognizes how the "private" oppression of Dalit women seeps into the public and through such recognition, enable a more emancipatory and democratic public sphere.

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Respectability and Public Space: Analyzing Caste-Gender Problematic of Moral Policing in Kerala

Praveena K Prabhakaran,

Research Scholar, Centre for Human Rights, University of Hyderabad.

Abstract: This paper would problematize how caste and gender dynamics work in the act of moral policing IN Kerala. It also examines the different trajectories of moral policing against lower caste women, especially Dalit women in the context of Kerala. Given that caste, class and gender emerge as categories that determine a person's very entry and respectability in public space, I would like to look at certain recent instances that brought the question of Dalit women's respectability and invisible moral policing in to discussion. This paper tries to analyses how the hegemonic imaginations created around Dalit women's sexuality and agency produce them as inhuman objects. Brahminical patriarchy projects these women as extreme sexual subjects and such narrations persuade the popular sensibilities of the Kerala's public sphere.

Key words: Respectability, Caste and Gender, Dalit women, Moral Policing, Slavery, Sexual harassment, social media, public Sphere

This paper analyse how social media-based campaign during #metoo movement played a significant role in creating the debate on experiences of sexual harassment faced by Dalit- Bahun women in South India. The social media campaign popularly called as the #metoo campaign has significant differences in structure to approach cyberspace's attention on sexual harassment in the academic- activist spaces. Social media being used as serious platform to discuss, questions of consent, intersectionality, patriarchy and power relations, within the well-known "progressive spaces". In general, women's availability in public and virtual space makes certain temporal notions on the basis of morality, chastity in Hindu value system; therefore "consent" would be a multilayered phenomenon for Dalit women.

This paper is an attempt to narrate the speak-out movement (called as #hetoo) led by the Dalit-Bahun women in Kerala in 2018. It was part of the large discussion on #metoo campaign which got the public attention in the social media platform particularly through Facebook. The campaign was called as #hetoo to question the patriarchal notions and the sexual harassment by the men who also engage in the social movement spaces in Kerala. This campaign in Kerla was started by Dalit – Bahun women to narrativize the experiences of sexual harassment faced by Dalit-Bahun women. These attacks had happened in their work place, within friends' circles and political spaces. Surprisingly, the women faced attack and criticism from their Malayali so called upper caste and Dalit male friends, who are known for their political activism and progressiveness. These women used social media as a platform to reveal their experience in order to get support and solidarity from the public. Kerala never

Dublin, 28th April 2019

**Letter of Participation at the Third Ireland India Institute Conference
on South Asia, 2019**

This letter confirms that **Praveena Kannangattukuzhiyil Prabhakaran** has attended the Third Ireland India Institute Conference on South Asia, 24th - 26th of April, 2019 and presented a paper titled *Unheard Voices: Narrativising #Hetoo campaign in the Cyberspace*, held at All Hallows DCU Campus.

The conference was organized by the Ireland India Institute, Dublin City University.

Yours Sincerely,



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This is to certify that

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Caste, Sexuality and the Public Space: A Study on 'Moral Policing' in Kerala

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