# Gender, Caste, Spatiality, and Local Development in Kerala: A Dialogue

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CDS
Thiruvananthapuram

# GENDER, CASTE, SPATIALITY, AND LOCAL DEVELOPMENT IN KERALA: A DIALOGUE

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## ABSTRACT

This paper is a dialogue between the two authors. The first author reflects on her fieldwork in dalit neighbourhoods in the Palakkad district of Kerala; the second author offers comments on how these insights may enrich research on the early shaping of the Kudumbashree – and the kinds of neighbourliness that it fostered – in the 1990s.



***Keywords:*** *Gender, Caste, Local Development, Kerala*



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# I

## *Sharika Thiranagama*

Despite dominant narratives of Kerala that highlight its seemingly caste-free associational public, I suggest that we acknowledge and describe how caste discrimination and caste consolidation might persist in people's homes and is naturalized within the 'private'. I propose that this seeming private needs to be reconsidered, and given materiality instead, as what I call a "private-public" and what Hugo Gorringe calls a "semi-public" (2005, 180).[1]

While rural areas are often understood through the figure of the 'village', a spatial image that is as much conceptual and nostalgic as it is illusory, rural localities are themselves complex layered spaces, which rather than representations of past caste segregation, continue to transform and embed new ever-mutating caste sociality. These caste-structured neighbourhoods are also where women live their everyday life. This sets the context for the in-between space of the rural neighbourhood, conceptualised as a 'private-public' – an everyday dense social space and life that is integrally structured around gender and contemporary caste formations. I borrow the term from Jürgen Habermas (1991, 40–41) while significantly reconceptualizing it and, following Seemanthini Niranjana (2001) in understanding it as a socio-spatial register.

Thus, in this short essay, I want to describe and thus, set up for analysis 'the neighbourhood' as it emerged historically and ethnographically from the material practices of Dalit women's lives. While this essay does not take the Kudumbashree program explicitly, I suggest that understanding the program as an integral part of a suite of dense social municipal local schemes that had fundamentally transformed and strengthened the very possibility of a neighbourhood within Dalit colonies, means also thinking about the neighbourhood deeply as a gendered arena in which caste-differentiation continues to shape and constitute social and convivial life.

This essay draws on ethnographic fieldwork conducted by myself and my friend and research assistant, Vinu Palissery, between June 2015 and June 2016 in Palakkad district. The bulk of my fieldwork was with Dalit and Ezhava households in three different colonies in one large rural panchayat in eastern Palakkad. Kcolony comprised a mixture of OBC Ezhava and Dalit Kanakan Cherumar labourers and Ezhava landlords. O and P were single-caste colonies of Dalit Pulaya and Dalit Paraya castes respectively.

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1 Fieldwork was funded by the National Science Foundation (US) for the project "The Local Level Social Life of Global Ideologies."

## PUBLIC AND PRIVATE: THE NEW "PRIVATE"

There is an extensive literature on notions of public and private. I have previously reviewed these in relation to the literature on South Asia (see Thiranagama, 2019). Here I will just briefly introduce a few concerns around the 'private' which has always been a central concern of most feminist writing. Weintraub usefully characterizes four major organising types of public/private distinction (1997, 8–34): the liberal-economist model; the republican-virtue model; public sociability; and gendered private/public. I paraphrase his argument in the following paragraphs.

The "liberal-economistic model," is dominant within policy and legal debate (for example, the phrases "the public sector" and the "private sector"). The public/private distinction is between the state and the market economy. The non-governmental is not "civil society" but the market. The private here functions to naturalise and economise issues of public good. Benhabib remarks: "in this context, 'privacy' means first and foremost noninterference by the political state in the freedom of commodity relations, and in particular non-intervention in the free market of labour power" (1992, 108).

The "republican-virtue" model, dominant in the humanities and social sciences sees the public realm as the realm of political community and citizenship and distinguished from both the state and the market (e.g. Arendt [1958] 2013; Habermas 1991). As Weintraub points out, this model sees the family and household as characterised by hierarchy and forms of domination and cannot provide a model for collective action. Within this stream of debate, critiques of a seemingly stable (Habermasian) bourgeois public have stressed instead historical formations outside of bourgeois understandings of space (Ryan 1992) and the importance of understanding a concept of multiple simultaneous and overlapping publics, including that of subaltern publics. In one of the most influential formulations of counter publics, Nancy Fraser (1992) suggests that rather than one unified public sphere, stratified societies generate multiple publics whose relations to each other are also shaped by differing relations of inequality, subordination and domination, as well as style. In particular, she points to "subaltern counter publics": parallel discursive arenas where members of subordinated social groups invent and circulate counter-discourses to formulate oppositional interpretations of their identities, interests, and needs" (ibid., 123). In general, as Asen argues, in contemporary writing, writing on public as forms of political community increasingly stress notions of multiple, segmented, and overlapping publics (2000, 424–425).

The third model of the public, heavily sociological and urban centered, is the public as the realm of "public sociability". For example, Richard Sennett [1976] 2017 traces historically and sociologically how public and private realms evolved and became possible in Europe from the eighteenth century onwards. Public sociability is integrally linked to transformations of urban life and its potential to generate forms of spontaneous and heterogeneous sociability (e.g. Young 2011, cf discussion of Young and Sennett in Thiranagama, 2018). This understands the private

as an 'intimate' sphere, the world of the family, 'the personality' and intimate relations. Many theorists in this vein, lament the growing importance of the family as privatization that erodes collective heterogeneous sociability.

The fourth distinction emphasises gendered notions which link the private to the family and the public to the larger social and economic order. This is epitomized by feminist explorations of the exclusion of women from public worlds. Rosaldo's (1974) suggestion that women are relegated to the lesser valued domestic/private and men to the valued public has been criticized for extrapolating a particular Euro-American history into a structural distinction which flattens both the history which it emerges from and different global trajectories. However, even as feminists criticize this distinction, this set of arguments generated critique of the naturalization of the seemingly invisible and natural private world of the household and exploring instead the histories of how these forms can be constructed collectively.

While there have been multiple articles and books on the concept of the public, the idea of the private has primarily been explored by feminist writing. In addition, while writing on Dalit communities has naturally stressed public life and public space given the rigid exclusion and reprisals against Dalit communities in public life and space (e.g. Narayan, 2011;Waghmore, 2013), in my research, I hope to explore the question of Dalit "privates" at the same time as querying rigid distinctions between public and private imported from a largely Euro-American canon. For anthropology and sociology, prioritizing sociability and spatiality can help us concretely understand the shifting spatial relations that social forms emerge through and designate and naturalize as private and public, in this case by focusing in on gender and caste relations (Niranjana, 1997; 2001; Abraham, 2010).

I wish to emphasize the feminist (fourth) perspective that does not take notions of public and private for granted but asks about the gendered way in which sociability and civility is understood and lived. Indeed, as Fraser (1992) and Benhabib (1997) argue, within political discourse, the economization of interests and the market, and, the intimate and familial as private, mean that both realms and the inequality within economic life and familial, intimate life are rendered as non-political and beyond justice. For Benhabib, it is important to understand that most struggles for justice in the twentieth century have forced that which has been designated private as public (1997, 94, 100). In designating certain spaces as understood as (and thus shaping social action) not-public while not entirely private, this essay retains this feminist emphasis that these spaces are intimately political and within the realm of justice.

At the same time, I suggest some qualifiers around the specificities of structures of caste and race in shaping public and private spaces and designations. For example, in the Euro-American literature, Gillian Rose (1993) in her reflection on feminist arguments around the private, highlights how feminist arguments around the critique of the private as a necessarily oppressive domestic space

have folded in racial assumptions that have ignored racism and the long history of work among black women. Rose points to the critique made by Black feminists such as Barbara Omolade (1994), Evelyn Higginbotham (1993), and Patricia Hill-Collins (1990) that for Black families, and Black women whose lives were bound up with associations with work and enslavement: refusal to work outside the home and investment in homes could be understood through refutations of racism. Rose suggests, following Hill-Collins "the private was not always equivalent to the domestic home, for example; rather, 'private' could refer to black community spaces beyond the reach of white people, both men and women" (Rose op. cit., 161–162). Higginbotham (op. cit.) for example, explores how the politics of domesticity and respectability became integral to nineteenth century Black women and an emerging Black middle-class' attempt to refute racism and discrimination. Powell (2014) shows how nineteenth and twentieth century Black women's clubs for young women and girls, including mother's circles, sought to create through forms of respectability "an extended form of private sphere, where they could share their expertise on public matters and exercise, through their activism, a pragmatic influence on the well-being of their families and neighbours".[2]

Black feminist works on racism, respectability politics, and new expansions of the private stress the creation of new community spaces and spheres which translated into new forms of activism mobilized around women. This scholarship shows us how important it is to understand the complex political constitution of who is naturally assumed to be in possession of intimate private lives into which work and mobility come as new features, and for whom, these are historical and structural sites of discrimination, humiliation and subordination. Gopal Guru (2012) centres space and experience in India around these lines. He argues that rather than seeing experience as unfolding simply from space, firstly, the constitution of spaces through power, hierarchy and domination produces differential experiences for different social groups, and secondly, this differential experience produced through one's social location also can provide new concepts and emancipatory vocabulary which seeks to transform and comment upon one's experience within the space (ibid., 70–82, especially 79).[3] Experience is never just a context, but also what is produced through these concepts, wielded or imposed by different social groups. Thus, in understanding spaces as shifting and relational, one cannot ever forget the simultaneity of the occupation of spaces by different groups, individuals, and households, which not only renders some traversals more fluid than others but also organizes the experiences of social groups around particular cultural hierarchies made spatial – such as "the shadow" of the "untouchable" that Guru beautifully explores (ibid., 82, 84–86). For example, Black feminist thought maintains a focus on social location, power and hierarchy within space, and the quest for justice and its manifestations in new kinds of spatial imaginaries and traversals within oppressive spaces, at the same time as

2 https://journals.openedition.org/nuevomundo/67421#tocfrom1n3.

3 Guru in much of his work stresses that a conceptual and interpretative vocabulary is always necessary to act upon and understand one's existence and experience differently ( e.g. Guru 2009a and 2009b).

providing attenuated structural critique of the ways in which new forms of respectability can curtail the transgressive potential of new private and public spaces and spheres. This is immensely important in understanding Dalit women's domesticity, houses, neighbourhood and visiting practices not in blanket terms, but as aspirations and spatial forms that have been formed through deeply oppressive caste practices of segregation and subordination.

Thus, there are two propositions I want to pay attention to. Firstly, following Rawat (2013) I want to emphasize attention to spatiality and caste in forming Dalit neighbourhoods. Rawat (ibid.) argues that while "impure occupation" has occupied much of the literature on caste and Dalit life, this has ignored the formative nature of spatial segregation in Dalit life and thus Dalit publics: the experience of extreme spatial segregation and denial of access to public space and goods producing Dalit caste neighbourhoods that become formative in "producing Dalit consciousness", in relation to exclusion as well as community building. Rawat suggests that "by historicizing the social experience of Dalit actors in their localities and the formative role of separate Dalit villages, we can distinguish the singular function of a spatial modality in constituting their consciousness" (ibid., 1064). This I think necessarily adds to and complicates an account of gender and space as relational and shifting, by also asking us, pace Guru (op. cit.), if there are distinct gendered spatio-social experiences formed also around political mobilization and recognition of humiliation and subordination that differ in kind not in degree from other experiences. I do not offer an answer in this essay, but it seems to me to be an important question asked in the American context by Black feminists and in India by Dalit scholars, which disallow an easy move that combines upper caste and Dalit gendered perspectives without interruption (see also John 1996, 3076).

Secondly, I would like to emphasize a feminist critical angle on the gendered modalities of space. I base my analysis partly around the arguments made in an important essay by Devika and Thampi (2010). Devika and Thampi discuss how the simple fact of expansion of social and physical mobility, has not necessarily implied "women's autonomy" given the

> "spatial perspectives which mediate women's mobility and perpetuate their subordinate status across diverse physical and social spaces. In turn, how women negotiate gender-coded spaces in their everyday lives and spatial parameters matters substantially to the specific contours of women's agency" (ibid., 3).

They suggest that we have to pay critical attention to the "gender coding of spaces alongside the expansion of women's mobility" (ibid.). Devika and Thampi thus suggest three significant shifts within Kerala to scaffold analysis through. Firstly, an expansion of women's participation in public and political spaces and work was made possible by a re-coding of the home, away from deeply caste-specific households and norms, into a new middle class "respectable" home, in which caste and patriarchal histories were re-sedimented into gender norms that reintegrated upper-caste norms as universal femininity. Continuing stringent moral, social and sexual regulation

of working women, alongside the cultivation of a femininity that was always dependent on the home and the domestic even while outside it, qualifies other trends. Thus, secondly, in the 1990s, when one sees a large-scale expansion of women within the public, firstly through the mandating of 33 percent representation for women in the local bodies, and the creation of Kudumbashree which "aimed to improve the economic well-being of families through women", these self-help motifs harnessed the idea of "feminine influence" and concern for the domestic and familial as the means by which women's participation could be made necessary, authentic and politically legitimate. This dovetails with, thirdly, the shift in state and party political mobilization from a large-scale collective mode to a welfarist mode which now targeted the provision of resources to individual families and households (ibid., 28).Welfare targeted and reinforced the individual household as the primary means of mobility. Thus, Devika and Thampi argue that "Kudumbashree groups operate within an implicit set of spatial regulations and practices, which neutralize the transgressive possibilities of women's mobility into paid work" (ibid., 15), for example by having most meetings within the neighbourhood, and with older women watching over and regulating younger women's behaviour (ibid.). While Kudumbashree women participate in public functions, these are regulated in such a way to reproduce social occasions that underline hierarchies and minimize agitational modes: "women are thus not released into the public; rather, the distance between the space of labour and the space of women's immediate social interaction is blurred" (ibid., 17). Devika and Thampi's essay does the difficult work of complex argumentation, that Mary John (1996) calls for, in broadening how we might think about gender, development and the economy by focusing in on the frames of intelligibility that shifted how women's work is inherited differentially in relation to caste and class and party politics (John 1996, 3071).

To Devika and Thampi's arguments, I want to think through what this might mean in relation to Dalit neighbourhoods and spaces. I would like to think through these points by offering a processual account of the neighbourhood as an evolving historical project. If we are to understand the spatial perspectives and gender-coded spaces, I suggest we pay close attention to the space of the neighbourhoods in which working women, whose households are constituted through long histories of manual labour, inhabit and build convivial support networks. Moreover, while the literature on India and on Kerala abound with accounts of dominant caste or bourgeois families, whether they are described in relation to class or their caste, there is very little documentation of the ordinary lives and family structures of Dalit communities.[4] Not least, this means we draw our models of domesticity through the ways in which upper caste models are adopted, without considering the spatial, caste and historical situations and positionality into which such dominant models of respectability become compelling. Thus, I want to see how neighborhoods, homes, respectability and sociality are aspirations and achievements in deeply caste structured worlds.

4 Saradamoni's work stands out as a rare exception (e.g. Saradamoni 1980, Mencher and Saradamoni 1982). In addition, Caroline and Filippo Osellas (2000) on OBC Ezhava communities provide a masterful counterpoint to the heavy emphasis on Nair and Namboodiri families in the literature on Kerala.

This requires close attention to what constitutes inside/outside, a distinction Dipesh Chakrabarty suggests in characteristic of Indian modes of publicness, drawing a bifurcation between the space of the inside and the outside in Indian forms of sociality (1992, 541–547).Spaces like the bazaar and public thoroughfares in neighbourhoods are outside. The inside is the 'home', the space of kin, community and the familiar. Kaviraj (1997) argues that for the Bengali middle classes the home was a space not of privacy but of comfort, protection and stable patterned life. For Chatterjee (1993), the inside becomes mobilized as a cultural interior against the colonial state, women and the home thus come to constitute cultural substance. As Pandian (2002) points out, Chatterjee's exploration of the spiritual interior posed by the Bengali *Bhadrolok* against the colonial regime, appears as a project of domination as soon as it is posed against other social groups within the nation: "if we foreground dominant nationalism in an oppositional dialogue with the subaltern groups within the nation – instead of colonialism – the divide between the spiritual and material, inner and outer, would tell us other stories – stories of domination and exclusion under the sign of culture and spirituality within the so-called national community itself" (ibid., 3). The home is implicitly a space where caste is upheld, though the latter proposition is not explored by Chakrabarty or Chatterjee. For Chakrabarty, it is the outside that needs investigation, an ambiguous space full of risk and desire where the public can flourish as a meeting of strangers. The inside seems self-explanatory.

This essay in contrast follows Niranjana's (1997; 2001) explicitly gendered approach to the question of inside-outside, highlighting how in villages, much of what was understood around gender was embodied and articulated through spatial registers and idioms. The inside may also, if considered in relation to kin and community, be spread over many different households within a space. Moreover, if the inside is only defined around the familiar and known, then it contracts and expands according to that which is familiar and known; thus, the outside is produced by the gendered caste-determined inside rather than ipso facto at the beginning of analysis. Niranjana draws attention to this in her study of village clusters in Karnataka and her use of the vernacular '*olage/horage*' (inner/outer) distinction. She suggests that the shifting boundaries of '*olage* and *horage*' are deeply gendered:

> for women in this context, the *olage* signified the family and the caste group, whereas for men, it represented not these alone, but the entire village (*uru*); within their village (the inner sphere for men), they too were required to follow caste rules. In juxtaposition the *horage* (outside) for men, represented by the public nature of the town/city, is a space where caste rules could be suspended until the person's re-entry into his *uru*. (1997, 116–117).

Because olage is set up as a moral domain, Niranjana points out that "woman, and the manner in which she inhabits space, becomes a key to preserving the parameters – physical and moral – of

the group" (2001, 55).[5] Similarly, I propose that caste and gender structured observance of caste rules and spatial interactions, and that the minutiae of caste observation rests within the everyday highly feminized life of the rural neighbourhood. More largely, I follow Janaki Abraham's (2010) suggestion that "labelling spaces as 'private' and 'public' prevents a nuanced understanding of spaces produced through every day practices" and that rather than fixed categories, spatial, moral and political designations of space as inner/outer, or 'private/public' shift as they are embedded within everyday contexts and spaces. In this line of reasoning, the contemporary neighbourhood needs to be understood as a spatial, moral, social project, one that emerges out of specific histories of residence.

However, I hesitate to call this space of the rural neighbourhood 'an inner', given that the neighbourhood derives from a history of work, labour and caste segregation in which upper-caste interiors constituted continual exteriors for others. This attention to caste structures' spatial matrices is imperative when a conversation is located within Dalit concerns.[6] Instead, I call this dense household-to-household sociality within the locality, a 'private-public', a term taken from Habermas in an effort to avoid endless neologisms (1991, 40–51). 'Private-public' here denotes the everyday life of the locality where outwardly-orientated, heavily gendered and unequal but sentimentalized households maintain networks of conviviality, affiliation, loyalty and often inequality. Gorringe suggests something similar, arguing that the Dalit cheri (domicile/colony) can also be understood as a realm of security, "'a semi-public' space between the private lives of individuals and the public life of the street" (1990, 180.) This is the space of comfort, community, the inside that Chakrabarty, Niranjana, and Kaviraj designate. Unlike them, I suggest this can also be the space of discomfort, disrespect, and negotiation around inter-caste relations, where Dalits are continually reminded that they are Dalits. Thus, I also pay continual attention to the caste-structured nature of interior and exterior, in this case through the 'neighbourhood' which I also call the 'private-public'. The rural residential colonies I researched, as with all Dalit areas in Palakkad district, while being places that people had lived in for generations, were not understood as residential areas until the 1970s. Instead, they were agricultural workplaces built upon deep histories of caste segregation – 'structures of feeling' which cannot be sensed without this caste and agricultural history. It is here I will start.

5 Niranjana further suggests that as women's agency "comes to be manifested…in the ways in which they insert themselves into existing social-spatial grounds" that "the modalities of action and speech that characterize this insertion, while expressive of dimension of inside and outside spaces, are also ways of negotiating within their contours (even, at times destabilizing them)" (2001, 92). This is certainly one direction that an analysis of Kudumbashree as a neighbourhood activity could be taken, though I do not take it here.

6 Niranjana (2001) at times treats different caste inhabitations as perspectives that can be interchangeably invoked as forms of difference. Here, I try to follow Guru (2012) to think through how different inhabitations can be constituted through subordination, violence, and try to think of them not as forms of difference alone but intense sites of experience, negotiation, anger, aspiration, disappointment, subordination and as producing differing conceptual registers.

## THE NEIGHBOURHOOD

### Work to Sociality

Palakkad district had been part of colonial British Malabar, widely characterized as having a more rigid caste-based, large landowner, agricultural economy than the princely states of Travancore and Cochin. This economy has distinctive features well documented in Kerala, which I will repeat in truncated form here. This agricultural economy was constituted through caste relationships to land and to agricultural labour. In Malabar, every inch of land was owned right down to the riverbed by large corporate family estates of Namboodiri Brahmins and Nairs; some private individuals most often from dominant castes; and corporate temple residential bodies, *dewaswoms*, predominantly Tamil Brahmins.[7] *Illams* and *tharawads* were inclusive of joint family complexes, livestock, ritual shrines. Upper caste landlords would own agricultural land in multiple places including in areas distant from their houses – represented in areas in Eastern Palakkad by their local tenant landlord and the *kalam*, a structure where the harvest would be collected and inspected. Land ownership ritually and physically shaped local areas around them.[8] This meant that 1) labourers were always seen as resident on someone else's land, and 2) deep caste segregation and thus 3) the *emergence* of neighbourhoods cannot be understood without a spatial history of upper-caste structuring of interiors and exteriors around gender and caste.

All upper castes deemed labour as demeaning. The leasing and subcontracting systems saw that agricultural land was leased to tenants most often from dominant castes such as Chettiars, poorer Nairs, Guptas, and sometimes (lower caste/OBC) Ezhavas, who worked the land with landless labour or leased the land to other tenants, often Ezhava and Mappila Muslims who did the same. The bulk of agricultural labour has always been from Dalit communities, most often the Cherumar (e.g. Kanakan, Pulaya) and Paraya castes (Kumar 1965). Not least, residence was governed by deep spatial restrictions on proximity, resulting in both rigid segregation in living residence and contestations over various public spaces, including roads/paths in agricultural areas (Sanal Mohan, 2015). Different caste residential areas were laid out adjacent to fields around upper caste households' need for services and agricultural labour.

These spatial patterns informed the kind of residences that Dalits lived in, they lived in land granted by landlords, worked for them, and had to negotiate water and other services through them, at the same time, as always being kept in highly segregated settings. O (Paraya) and P (Pulaya) colonies were small and separated from each other. Muslims and Ezhavas lived close by

7 Following William Logan's (1887) observations in the Malabar Manual, scholars argue that British attempts to regularise and tax landownership transformed a system of rights in land and share of produce in Malabar was solidified into fixed forms of outright land ownership.

8 In neighbouring Tamil Nadu villages did have common land for grazing and ponds, unlike Malabar where every land was owned by someone (Mencher 1966).

in a residential area off the main road. Nairs were further up the road. K colony was a much larger Ezhava and Dalit Kanakan mixed colony bordering Palakkad town.

Upper-caste interior landownership had multiple spatial interiors and exteriors. The making of the borders of what could be interior and exterior to the upper-caste household was constituted around caste. Thus, in Sri-Krishnapuram Panchayat, we interviewed one community of cherumar communities called "era cherumar", so named, some explained to us, for the place in the Namboodiri compound they were not supposed to pass. The housing complexes also constituted places of work, but subdivided into different kinds of work, inside houses, with livestock, in fields, supervision of fieldwork which were structured around caste. This was continued down the scale. In K colony, with its Ezhava subleasing tenant landlords, the difference between Ezhava and Dalit labourers were marked by the ability of Ezhavas to go inside the houses of the landlords and engage in domestic and other labour inside the house. Gender strictures around spaces pertained to upper-caste women, Dalit women and men worked together in mixed workplaces.

Becoming a *Neighbourhood*

Kerala's signature land reforms in the 1960s and 1970s capped agricultural land ownership ceiling at 15 acres, redistributed excess land, and transferred land from landowners to their tenants, predominantly from the dominant OBC communities, Ezhavas and Muslims (Krishnaji 2007). Overall, critical evaluation of Kerala's land reforms has acknowledged little benefit for Dalits in comparison to others (Krishnaji 2007; Sivanandan 1976). As Rammohan points out, Dalits who were the backbone of wetland rice agriculture in Kerala along with tribal communities remain overwhelmingly landless (2008, 15) Instead what made a critical difference was the fact that labourers received *kudikidappu*, rights, an opportunity to purchase at nominal rates the land on which they already lived (Krishnaji, 1979).This established the possibility of localities becoming neighbourhoods.

While strikes in the 1970s raised wages, stagnation in the agricultural sector (Jose 1988), saw male flight out of agriculture. One friend and CPM activist, Balan *chettan*, was typical of many male Dalit agricultural labourers in leaving agricultural labor as soon as it was possible despite hard won raised wages. As he explained to me, the new wages were still so low, that the real effects on their lives did not manifest until the late 1980s and 1990s. It is important to note that in Eastern Palakkad my interviews showed that workers were still paid in *edangazhi*, that is in kind, not money, until the mid 1970s. As a whole, agricultural wages (in relation to other sectors) remained low and largely stagnant (Mohanakumar, 2008). School attendance steadily rose in the 1990s – young men and women were disinclined to work in agricultural labour, seen as a demeaning caste-occupation. Thus, agricultural labour became the province of older and middle-aged women. Alongside demographic and gender shifts in agrarian labour, such economies also became less remunerative as increasing mechanisation and streamlining of agricultural practices

reduced the availability of employment for older and middle-aged women. Now women are primarily employed through NREGA (National Rural Employment Guarantee Act) schemes.

The localities were no longer the centre of an active workplace, fields encircling localities were no longer being regularly worked by local Dalit men and women. By the 1980s, labourers were no longer tied to the landlords ritually, symbolically or economically as they had been previously. However, while people now owned their own houses, *realization* of land as homes only came when rising incomes and access to municipal schemes helped labourers transform their homes into more permanent houses and 'improve' them. Balan *chettan* and other Dalit activists in our panchayat had gone around and collected a comprehensive list of Dalit localities in the 1970s and taken it to the panchayat. These lists rendered these places as localities and eligible for panchayat recognition through schemes for water, electricity, roads. K colony had a road running through it, financed and repaired by the panchayat. O colony had a road built in the 1980s by a neo-Hindu Ashram and its hospital settled in the area. P colony had no road, was still encircled by fields unlike the Nair and Ezhava and Muslim areas close by which were all off the main road. There was electricity throughout the colonies – supplied by the panchayat which arrived around 10–15 years prior in the late 90s and early 2000s. K colony close to town had first a communal well built by the panchayat and now had running water. In O and P colony water was accessible at a two-hour interval in outdoor taps which often determined the evening schedule of working, cooking and washing for local Paraya and Pulaya communities. These colonies also comprised small concrete houses. Balan *chettan* house's transformation marked panchayat schemes, first a thatched hut, a *chala*, then tiled and stabilized, and now, like all the houses I encountered in the colony, a concrete house built through a panchayat scheme that offered around 2 lakhs for construction of houses.

Men working outside the locality, young people going to school and work outside of the colony, combined with the possibilities for families to improve their homes, enabled localities to become neighbourhoods in different ways than when most families in the locality worked as labourers for the local landlords. In addition, in the daytime the neighbourhood was mainly filled with middle-aged women hanging around. Working class agricultural female labourers of all castes had little life outside of the locality. The most common trips outside the locality were to the clinic or bank, political rallies, temple festivals, weddings/homecomings and other kin/social functions. Some young women had a daytime life outside of the locality through school/university or work, but their evenings were all within the locality. In addition, social functions were central to the experience of the locality – a series of functions, weddings, marriage-related parties, funerals, homecomings, going to bring women home from their natal families after their confinements and baby ceremonies. Thus, middle-aged and older women lived and socialized largely within the (caste) world of the locality and the collapsed agricultural economy. These women were not recently experiencing work and mobility, but rather fundamentally constituted through histories of manual labour and the agricultural workplace. It is this neighbourhood which then is, as

Devika and Thampi point out, the place in which "the space of labour and the space of women's immediate social interaction is blurred" (2010, 17). I suggest here, that this neighbourhood itself is not a given space but a historical project.

**Neighbourhood as Gender and Caste Conviviality**

In the centre of the panchayat, government buildings, the village offices, a number of eateries, a recently built function and wedding hall and public roads were all nominally 'caste free'. Tea shops near panchayat buildings were considered open to all unlike tea shops in residential areas which were associated with the local caste in that corner of the locality.[9] Similarly, eating together in either a small eatery frequented by working men or in the small canteen inside the panchayat building set up and run by some Dalit friends, crossed caste. These kinds of commensality and inter-caste mingling in official public spaces and institutions is what gives the picture of Kerala as progressive and caste-free space. However, the fact that these official public spaces of the panchayat and the town represented spaces that were supposed to be caste-free did not mean that they did so at all times. It was not that caste was absent – it was just that caste was to be not mentioned. These were not the spaces in which a lively sociality actually occurs. This was within the neighbourhood – the 'private public'.

Throughout fieldwork, Vinu and I would return to Ponni Veliyamma's house and family in K colony in the evenings. They had adopted us within the colony. We would sit around and take part in the evening ritual of tea and chatting that most women were able to engage in before it got dark and the evening meal had to be prepared. Female sociality was intense and warm in all the colonies that we worked in, and it was very much centred around houses – houses which themselves were continually being improved.

Houses are absolutely critical across the class and caste structure in Kerala to forms of respectability and marriageability (Osella and Osella, 2000).When I asked local families what they needed in order to contract a decent marriage and what they looked for when they were looking for marriage, two things were essential: some dowry and a "good" house for both the bride and the groom. As everyone told me, neither of these were historically given in their community, dowry giving had been minimal and houses had never counted when everyone lived in large joint families working for landlords. Dowry giving had risen steadily after the 1980s. The women I interviewed in their 40s often had been given around 1–2 sovereigns (pavan) of gold as dowry. Now the expectation was around 10 sovereigns of gold as dowry. In addition, the expectation of household goods and assets that the woman's family were expected to be sent to the groom's family after the new mother and first child returned to the marital home had risen. Houses had to be nice, and when

9 In K colony, our Dalit friends rarely accompanied us to the tea shop run by an Ezhava family surrounded by Ezhava houses.

visiting the prospective grooms or brides, I was told that a decent house was considered critical in judgment of whether this was a good family to marry into. The groom's house was an indication of where the bride would move to, the bride's house was a measure of occasional inhabitation for confinements, the setting for many wedding events and fundamentally a measure of the "quality" of the family. Only when the house was finished could the wedding take place. Many of these expenses were financed by deep debt – debt to the local cooperative banks, the CPM bank, and to a variety of moneylenders who came to the colony regularly and were known in K colony as the "Saturday man" and the "Sunday man."

Such houses are both symbols of prestige and signs of unevenness: while Dalit communities have acquired rights to their hutments and have improved them continually through building them, investing in them, acquiring assets, comparatively speaking they are at considerable disadvantage in comparison to others. Housing land was never redistributed in reforms, so upper castes retained housing land. Moreover, as Yadu and Vijayasuryan (2016) show, the market in real estate that emerged after the land reforms considerably disadvantaged Dalits further. In absolute terms, they own less than any other community in Kerala (ibid., 403–406). They propound in segregated areas with inferior land which are difficult to capitalize on in a real estate market (ibid., 402). Dalit neighbourhoods continue to be marked and segregated within the rural panchayat I worked in.

Households were related around networks of what Karen Hansen, discussing nineteenth century American antebellum working class communities, calls "visiting practices" with neighbours and extended kin, networks of those who could be drawn on for emotional and financial support, gossip, political conversations as well as for working together in seemingly private households (1997, 275.) These dense interactions which made up the texture of social life for most working-class men and women, she suggests, are often occluded by scholarly (gendered) distinctions between public and private, given that these sorts of interaction neither fit into notions of formal public and organized public life understood as centered on institutions, formal politics, and encounters with strangers, and, notions of private life often used to characterize the household (ibid., 274–279, 291). Visiting crossed and 'mediated' public and private spheres and spaces, and, for Hansen, questioned the viability of understanding public and private as empirical categories rather than ideational ones. Similarly, in rural Palakkad, socializing happened between men and women of different households, though often of the same larger family group and neighbours within the space of the rural locality – a space that could not be characterized as private, but was not the same as the *formal public* spaces of the municipality, *organized* spaces created by political party events and actions, or *male public spaces* outside of the locality.

Sociality rarely crossed class. While Ezhava 'landlords' and Dalit labourers were now 'neighbours' in K colony and so there were some formal visits (we met people's landlords through their former labourers introducing us). However, such encounters were always awkward, our labourer friends

lost their easy demeanor inside these houses and were visibly uneasy.[10]

Visiting happened largely within caste networks of support and help. In all colonies and across the Kanakan, Pulaya and Paraya communities, families were commonly constituted around a group of brothers, their in-marrying wives and their children. Different branches of the family related to each other along an originary (often recent) elder brother, younger brother relation, what people called an *annan-thambi* or *chettan-aniyan* relation. While men officially constituted the family structure, women provided most of the sociality within the family and in relation to other families. Each married man was part of what in the Eastern side of Palakkad people called *desams*. *Desams* or "neighbourhood assemblies"[11] consisted of a cluster of men (and their families) within the caste who would constitute a community of death pollution (would observe death rituals for anyone who died within the *desam*), help out at each other's weddings, and more generally be ready to be called upon if needed by others in the *desam*. Elder men of the *desam* performed rituals at weddings and at funerals and arbitrated in cases of censure for inter-caste marriage. In K colony, which was large and expansive, the *desams* were well-established with each family contributing Rs 50 monthly which would then be combined for helping individual families with death expenses and for general community expenditure. You would start paying an individual amount as a man when you were married and had children. Every local caste, Ezhava, Kanakan, Pulaya, Paraiyar had its own *desam*. The contemporary *desam* mixed caste, ritual, family and locality relations. The ritual aspect was more commonly pronounced in relation to upper castes, but underplayed here among Dalits.[12] The same caste across a panchayat and region would be in different local *desams* which also roughly corresponded to family clusters. If one's family falls out with others in one's *desam*, in K colony, people then would switch to another *desam* even though this might not be from the same ritual group or family cluster. Family and *desam* structures are an example of how intra-caste sociality was the fundamental affective infrastructure of the neighbourhood.

Visiting itself was rarely inter-caste. O and P colonies were intensely caste segregated. Muslim, Nair, and Ezhava communities lived in completely different localities separated by roads and fields from Dalits. All our Dalit friends would lower their voices when we went past the only two Ezhava houses in P colony. There was no exchange between those houses and next-door

10 We provided cross-class, cross-caste interactions for women. However, by being Sri Lankan Tamil (and therefore considered foreign locally) and Vinu who was Nair but unlike local Nairs ate in Dalit houses, we were casually placed by our Dalit friends outside of the clashes between Ezhavas and Dalits/Cherumar in the colonies.

11 See Fuller 1976.

12 There were ritual connections, with desams attributed to common service either to a small local shrine or to service to an ancestral temple outside of the immediate locality for which people performed caste segregated service. K colony had three Kanakan desams, which people said roughly corresponded to three different ancestral temples far outside the locality from which three different family clusters traced origins. However, other stories also told us that once the desam had been centered around one particular shrine within the colony, and had broken into three clusters around a dispute surrounding the shrine which had subsequently fallen into disrepair and stood untended in the colony. Fundamentally, however, just as Bourdieu points out, these appellations are practical and negotiated around ideals rather than actualities (1990, 162-199).

Pulaya and Kanakan houses. In K colony, it was rare to find Ezhava women visiting Dalit women at home. This was even though Dalit and Ezhava women worked in workgroups together – relationships that are officially described as class solidarity rather than caste discrimination, though we frequently found them discussed otherwise by Dalit women. We soon found ourselves that within a few months of fieldwork in K colony, while Vinu and I continued to be welcomed into Dalit homes and the Ezhava landlording family homes, most of the Ezhava labourers now refused to let us visit them. Some of the Ezhava older women cautioned us that others in their families had told them we were no longer to be talked to at home. We were too associated with the Dalit families now. This meant our Dalit friends relaxed around us and began to open up about the immense caste discrimination they had suffered.

This thick dense social space of the neighbourhood is what characterizes actual social and convivial life for most people. These spaces are deeply gendered. There would be few men involved in these forms of socializing. While those men who were not working might occasionally come in O colony to join us, they were engaged in different forms of visiting and socializing. When we interviewed men, this would rarely be a social time for women, they were expected to bring tea and other snacks for us and our male interviewee, and it was understood that this would be a self-enclosed and not social space of interlocution. Easy socializing between men and women who were not family members did not come with a ready-made model to slip into. Men socialized less with other men in houses and more in public thoroughfares, roads within the colony, toddy shops, union buildings, CPM meeting houses and other more 'public' places. We occasionally transgressed by going for a walk in the colony and some of the children would run before us telling the men that we were coming so that the men sitting around and drinking on some of the small paths leading to the fields would know that we were passing and straighten up. It was clear to us that no-one wanted us to eat at the local toddy shop placed in the middle of the fields outside O colony as some of the men did. In the tea shop outside the panchayat offices frequented by the local CPM men, we and the women we were with were always invited to sit inside the small structure while the men drank tea in plastic chairs outside. At night, going through Palakkad town, the teashops, CPM and CITU (manual loading union offices) would frequently be bustling but few women were to be seen on the street. I was known by vendors near my apartment in Palakkad town as a woman who walked in the evenings, but this along with my height and lack of gold jewellery was considered a testament to my Sri Lankan eccentricities. Most other women locally rarely went out at night in public spaces. Instead, where one would find women in the evenings were in other inside spaces – malls, sari shops, restaurant/eateries.

These observations about the deeply gendered nature of public space in Kerala have been made by numerous scholars and are understood by all we encountered as the commonsense of ordinary convivial life. Here, I want to re-emphasize how much these gendered spaces were also caste coded. While both men and women might engage in visiting and in household-to-household

sociality, men propounded in spaces outside the house both in the locality and in the panchayat at large – which as I have suggested above were part of the official 'caste-free' public. The street, and spaces such as union, toddy shop, political offices, and tea shops were all considered inter-caste male spaces of mingling. These spaces that men mingled in were also considered, along with 'official public spaces,' to be public spaces of a different order from the front of the house in the locality where women from different households would gather. While male mingling in the locality continued to be largely, though not entirely, caste-based (having not been inside male spaces of drinking, it was not entirely clear to me what the mixing involved was), official public spaces were also considered spaces for inter-caste mingling. We soon learnt that while men would visit functions of other castes and eat, it was rare for OBC women to eat in Dalit functions and homes. As one man said to me 'women keep the honor of the caste'.[13] Men's commensality was a testament to social transformation in Kerala, women's continuing observance of restricted commensality was understood as the hidden kernel and persistence of caste in everyday life. This is not unique to Kerala, Niranjana (2001) points out how unevenly caste rules are observed, and how different traversals across caste are made possible without destabilizing the hierarchies and the systemic quality of caste structures in everyday life (53). The commonplaceness of this observation, however, draws our attention to the importance of discussing and describing the thick spaces of social interaction within new kinds of private-publics in Kerala and other places.

The rural neighbourhood as project rather than context suggests a fruitful further avenue for research. I propose here too, that this project as it appears from Dalit lives offers an angle that is distinct rather than one of mere difference alone. Thus, we return, to spatialities that are gendered and caste structured, that render the neighbourhood and the house spaces of immense achievement and aspiration, as well as fundamentally structured by histories of caste segregation and subordination.

13 See larger discussion of this in Editorial 'Fighting Caste, Fighting Patriarchy' in Economic and Political Weekly, Vol. 48, No. 29 (July, 2013). [https://www.epw.in/journal/2013/29., accessed September 2018].

# II

## *J Devika*

The insights of Thiranagama's ethnographic inquiry into the shaping of dalit neighbourhoods and neighbourliness in Palakkad provoke several important questions for research about the politics of local development in Kerala. The conviviality that she notices in these neighbourhoods, especially among women, was an important resource that was mobilized in the 1990s during the People's Planning Campaign (PPC) to make smooth the transition towards a new regime of welfare in which self-help and responsibilization would be prominent features. The neighbourhood, as an idea, was certainly very central to the discourse of decentralized people's planning here in the 1990s – especially as the key institution of direct democracy. The idea of the Neighbourhood Group was raised as vitally important after the Grama Sabhas of 1996 failed to be satisfactory; besides lack of enthusiasm among the people, it was also noted that the population of wards in Kerala's panchayats was often too high for direct democracy to be viable. Also, it was now acknowledged that a necessary emotional connection was missing in large wards, and their boundaries were often delineated arbitrarily (Isaac 1999: x). Hence there was a call to form Neighbourhood Groups (NHGs) even though they were not formally acknowledged as institutions of local governance, as micro-centres to carry out a number of key functions such as the preparation of the beneficiary list, monitoring, mobilization of voluntary labour, micro-level data collection, and active participation in the local-level planning process. The activity of NHG formation was very widely taken up by local bodies in the subsequent years. Much development work, especially in road-construction and water supply in areas inhabited by marginalized groups, was completed at this time utilizing the voluntary labour mobilized by/from the NHGs thus formed.

It is evident from Thiranagama's ethnographic work that these NHGs were projected on pre-existing localities that were marked by sharp inequalities and explicit and implicit segregation. This applies to most parts of Kerala to a greater or lesser extent. Perhaps this point is a promising start in the attempt to answer the question about the failure of PPC and its structures to reduce inequalities in Kerala, despite the fact that these structures did prove quite durable and have indeed worked well during the many development emergencies of the present century. There is much in the early discourse of the PPC that reveals the extent to which its architects failed to assess correctly the nature of the 'local' as it existed, and the way in which they relied on romanticized views of the neighbourhood, most probably generated from within the perspectives of the middle-class and privileged-caste perspectives of its leaders in the local bodies. For example, there are many instances in which proponents of PPC seemed to abandon their criticism of Kerala's feudal past and its oppressive social and familial institutions to wax eloquent about how the NHGs would

be a revival of the 'joint family', and how it would be a salve to heal the destruction of community and family values allegedly brought about by globalization (Seema 1999; Parameswaran 2004). If the social capital generated by the dominant left in Kerala during the 1940s oriented people towards the world outside the local by emphasising their connection with the larger struggles against capitalism and solidarities with struggling peoples all over the world, the social capital that appeared efficacious to the PPC seemed the exact opposite: focused on the local, stressing the family and community as both the loci of intervention and voluntary participation, and a remedy to social anomie at best. In other words, it appears that the power-dynamics that Thiranagama's fieldwork unearths was ignored, or treated as negligible in significance, easily erased through participation – which turned out to be a grievous error.

Worse, this error remained unacknowledged, much less corrected, despite being pointed out by several commentators friendly to the PPC (Tornquist and Tharakan 1996; 1996b ; Tharakan 2004). "But it remains a puzzle," remarked one of these critiques, "that, just as the popular developmentalists focused on the 'unity among people' and the 'societal will' and failed in (or abstained from) coming to grips with the complicated multiplicity of interests and conflicts pertaining to post-land reform agriculture … they also refrained from probing into vested interests in connection with politics in general and decentralization in particular" (Tornquist and Tharakan 1996a: 2043). Speaking particularly of the socio-economic survey that was part of the Kalliasseri experiment in local-level planning that preceded the PPC, they note that it did not "reveal the classical parameters of power – including such as the ownership and control of vital resources. One reason given for this is that additional information was 'not necessary for the purpose' … Another and more interesting argument is that even if it were possible to produce more interesting about actual control and power (which people could learn a lot from simply by collecting it) nothing fruitful could result, since issues like this have been 'so hot' ever since the struggles over land." (Tornquist and Tharakan 1996b: 1963-4). In other words, even as the architects of the PPC pushed for an alternate imagination of the neighbourhood as a coming-together of people for common ends and a better collective life of empathy, the actual work on the ground continued to protect and paper over the existing power imbalances and conflicts. The consequences of this is very well revealed in Thiranagama's fieldwork.

This indicates that a detailed investigation into how exactly the NHG, an institution thoroughly instrumentalized for the purposes of local-level development, was projected on and realized from within, a locality shaped and marked by very many pre-existing vectors of power, and with what consequences may be necessary. However, also very necessary in the light of Thiranagama's research is a more focused enquiry on the gendered consequences of this move. This is perhaps of vital significance especially for an understanding of the founding gendered commonsense that went into the shaping of the Kudumbashree (KS) network in Kerala in the late 1990s and early 2000s. For example, accounts of the experience of NHG formation presented by elected members

and local activists in the late 1990s confirms the impression that women were identified key agents of the process of local development, and this rested on a number of pre-existing notions about women's work (such as the common understanding that women have a great deal of free time to devote to income-generating work and voluntary community activism) (see accounts in Seema 1999). Also striking is the general lack of mention of the issues that labouring women were likely to face in participatory governance, the assumption in most of these accounts being that women are largely confined to the domestic.

It is also interesting to note that the speaking voice in the early accounts of NHG formation (Seema 1999) is almost invariably of the male agent of local governance whose sociality was mainly of inter-caste mingling, and whose notion of neighbourhood was of a group of people connected by pre-existing emotional ties, but now also by common interests to be secured in public through joint effort. One gets no clue from these accounts about how the women (so frequently mentioned as the agents of local-level development, whose social capital was considered utterly central to the process of the PPC) understood the neighbourhood. Women, it seems, were expected to set aside the notions of inside/outside that structured their lives which were given by pre-existing social institutions – even if only in a minimal way, just enough to enable responsibilized welfare, self-help, and governmental labour. But this would have meant not just stepping beyond the confines of the domestic, but also of kin and community circles.

How exactly this was negotiated and achieved, to what extent and with what effects in the family and community, and how it shaped the KS on the ground in specific locations are potentially-rich research questions that calls for investigation. This question seems especially relevant in the twentieth-century context of increasingly frequent development emergencies. In the epidemics, floods, landslides that Kerala has faced in these years, and now the pandemic, KS women have proved to be an efficient force of public care-labour that communicates effectively beyond the pre-existing social divides, despite the fact that inequality and social distance have tended to rise in post-1990s Kerala. This means that KS women have, to some extent, to a certain degree, managed to cross, or do cross occasionally, the sharp social divides which constrain them generally. How this has been achieved is perhaps one of the most important issues to be investigated in the effort to understand Kerala's relatively-greater success in dealing with the pandemic – in a context in which most neighbourhoods have been radically altered, physically and socially, with inequality and social distance reaching unprecedented heights and intensity since the twentieth century.

But if the state drew upon pre-existing social and emotional ties to bolster the framework of responsibilized welfare, it is quite likely they were not simply subsumed under and consumed by the state unilaterally. Thiranagama's work draws attention to women's everyday socialising as an active force at the heart of convivial neighbourly life. Research that probes into the specific ways in which dalit women's neighbourly connections and interactions may have acted on and reacted to the process of KS group-formation – how the ethics of neighbourliness in these localities may

have engaged with neoliberal notions of collective interest and the means to secure it through self-help -- might throw light upon the vicissitudes of the 'actually-existing' KS. This is important when we consider the gains of the marginalized from engagement with local governance – and to avoid reaffirming what is increasingly the state's self-representation, that these are outcomes of efficient public management and top-down benevolence. Thiranagama's work also points to the everyday, active work of transforming what were mere localities marked by histories of oppression into neighbourhoods, and the role of local government in it, however inadequate and ambiguous. The work of underprivileged women in and through the KS – the provisioning labour that has been important in securing key entitlements—calls for research attention and especially acknowledgment as a form of labour crucial to the transformation.

Lastly, and more generally, Thiranagama's work reminds us of the value of interdisciplinary research on institutions and categories that are fundamental to local governance in our effort to generate fresh and critical understandings of the KS. As a government institution, KS generates and promotes a self-image and discourse which endows it with a semblance of stability and homogeneity; on the ground however it displays the same heterogeneity and propensity to change as the society it is embedded in. To capture this complexity, researchers need appropriate mixed-method- and historical approaches. It is not that analysing only those aspects of the KS that are quantifiable is a waste of time – to the contrary, much is to be learned through such exercises. However, to limit oneself thus would be to stay within the logic of the state, and lose the sense of KS as a complex institution, and not merely a complicated one.

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