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Regimes of Childhood
in Kerala:
A Preliminary Account

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A PRELIMINARY ACCOUNT**

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ABSTRACT

This paper is a preliminary and tentative account of the changing regimes of childhood in Malayali society in a period that spans nearly two centuries, culminating in the present. I argue that instead of stories of linear change, we need more complex analyses of the specific ‘regimes of childhood’ in order to get a better grasp over the contemporary politics of childhood and its intertwining with the politics of gender. In this paper, I identify four such regimes – ‘responsible parenting’, ‘Romantic childhood’, ‘aspirational regime’, and ‘child-governance’ – which have been advanced with different degrees of success and acceptance, and an emergent fifth regime, of securitised childhood. I elaborate on these drawing from a variety of writings from the late 19th century to present-day Malayali society and the wealth of social science research on contemporary Kerala which focuses on children and youth.

Keywords: Child Care, Gender Studies, Kerala, Parenting,
Malayali Society, Youth

JEL Codes: J13, J16

Introduction

This paper attempts a preliminary historical sketch of the regimes of childhood in Malayali society – by ‘regimes of childhood’ I mean specific, historically-shaped ensembles of rules, norms, ideas, practices, procedures, and institutions that implicitly or explicitly produce and govern childhood. Childhood and the child were, no doubt, central to the a project of modern Malayali society in the 19th century which set up these as goals to be actualized, first, by younger members of the bourgeois class but later made them available to other classes too, as Jacques Donzelot remarked in another context (1980). I focus on a period of intense socio-economic change, from the early-mid twentieth century to the present – during the period of interest, Kerala transitioned from being poor, largely agricultural, and relatively marginal to post-independence India to a rich, globalized, migration-dependent region.

Feminist research in Kerala has focused on the continuities of patriarchy between these times, especially in women’s lives – for example, on the persistence of reproductive responsibilities that hamper women’s entry into labour markets (George 2013) but there has also been effort to make sense of the shift and change in the patriarchal framework and its consequent effects (Devika 2019). However, much less attention has been paid to childhood in Malayali patriarchy -- to the ideas and understandings

of the child and childhood as well as to practices of childcare and childrearing and the instruction of children, the agencies held responsible for these, the overseeing authorities, and the lived lives of children, which constitute together specific 'regimes of childhood'. This is curious, because a host of changes, including the post-demographic transition environment, the rise of economic and social inequalities, the shift away to private from public schooling, the entry of the global discourse of child rights, and so, on have had visible impact on children's everyday lives in Kerala. The limited but insightful social science literature on children in Kerala in earlier decades often focused on child labour (for example, Nieuwenhuys 1994); there is a slim body of work that focuses on adolescent issues (for example Mathew 2005), but most of this does not assume critical distance from the global construction of childhood circulating through NGOs and government agencies, with some exceptions (for example Sancho 2012).

I have argued elsewhere for more careful and focused research into the socio-economic shifts that constitute the 'post-demographic transition' scenario in Kerala (Devika 2008). In such a context, the young human is all the more closer to a kind of 'raw material' that mothers are expected to work on in 'child-crafting' through which they are to be shaped into docile skilled labour for the global job markets. I have also pointed out the intensification of age as an axis of patriarchal power, and how the struggles of youth have opened a new front in the anti-patriarchal

struggles that questions binary gender itself (Devika forthcoming; Devika 2019). Extending this further to children, I suggest that the shape of emergent patriarchy in Kerala was, and is, such that the centrality of the politics of childhood to the emergence of new gendered subjectivities hard to miss. What counted as ‘childhood’ and what were acknowledged as the problems and challenges that it entailed changed significantly between the early- and late-twentieth century, but the discourse of Malayali childhood has always been deeply gendered. If childhood here meant just a few years past infancy in the early twentieth-century, it includes teenage years in the present – and the ‘problems’ associated with childhood in the twentieth century such as child marriage and child labour were shaped in the course of this shift. By ‘politics of childhood’ I refer to the processes by which the power relations shaping (deeply gendered) ‘childhood’ and connecting it with the ‘women question’ across time transformed, shifted, extended, mutated, or dissipated. However, this is not to say that the framework of ‘women versus children’ in questions of power and interest is best to make sense of emergent patriarchy. Rather, we may need a greater grasp of “the socio-political, structurally elaborated positions that constitute and constrain relations between women and children.” (Burman 2018: 12). Recent work on the intensification of child care which sets up women’s interests against those of their children has pointed to how late capitalism and austerity has familiarised all the more the provision of needs of communities, even as compulsory schooling and early years education

mandated on a global scale puts women and children “at odds in relation to social reproduction, which they may have previously carried out together”. (Rosen and Twamley 2018: 12-3).

This essay is an attempt at what may be a tentative, preliminary sketch of the different regimes of childhood in twentieth and twenty-first century Malayali society, and the “broad social processes that in their interaction come to constitute – rather than deliberately aim to constitute – social practices that define childhood” (Alanen 1988: 64) that may be necessary for this larger investigation. I consider such historical inquiry to be important to avoid the deliberate or inadvertent lapse into nostalgia in analyses of contemporary politics of childhood. Such lapses make it impossible to maintain critical self-distance from the regimes of childhood – for, usually, this nostalgia is for a certain, dated, Eurocentric vision of childhood, attributed to former times, evident for example, in David Elkind’s popular book on the ‘hurried child’ (1981) and Indian versions of that argument (for example, Kumar 2006). Thirdly, the symbolic politics of childhood has been long recognized as inextricably intertwined with the politics of gender. Indeed, it makes children “convenient symbols for our better selves, and we use them to make points, make laws, win elections.” (Fass and Mason 2000:1). Shulamith Firestone’s insight into the inevitability of the inclusion of the struggle for children’s liberation in the feminist revolution – of how the oppression of children and the constant

infantilisation of women by patriarchal authorities (Zehavi 2018) point in that direction – was an early cue about how tracking the vicissitudes of the symbolic politics of childhood may allow us to understand better the changing shapes of gender itself. In examining the shifts and transformations of the social construct of childhood, I also make an attempt to follow these transformations in Malayali society. However it may be stressed that this essay has strictly limited aims: it does not provide a comprehensive empirical account of childhood in Kerala, the issues that each of the different regimes of childhood produced, their dimensions, the governmental responses to each, and their impacts.

The paper consists of two sections, followed by a conclusion. The next section of this paper dwells upon the regimes of childhood that were formed and gained circulation in Malayali society in and through social and community reformism and nationalism in the late nineteenth and twentieth century. I pay special attention to two of these which I call ‘responsible parenting’ and ‘Romantic childhood’ drawing upon a variety of writings from the period. The imaginations of childhood in nineteenth and twentieth century Malayali society no doubt were shaped within differing conceptions of the modern self and its possibilities, often diametrically opposed to each other. This was evident from the two distinct regimes of childhood proposed in those times. For example if ‘responsible parenting’ tended to advance a biological-foundationalist view of gender in self-

formation was central to the former, the latter relied on romantic notions of childhood, each representing the girl child in very different terms.

The section that follows helps to highlight the extent of change in the late 20th-early 21st century Malayali society, which is dwelt upon in the second section. A number of significant socio-political shifts and economic changes characterise this period in Kerala, including the changes in childcare and family priorities with heavy socio-economic dependence on migration, the deepening of inequalities, the appearance of the global discourse of child rights in Kerala, the championing of the neoliberal self, the moral anxiety over girls' sexuality, and the projection of girls as primarily victims, especially of sexual abuse. There seems to be now a deep divide in our understandings of childhood, on class-caste lines, with two overlapping but distinct regimes of childhood. One of these is centred upon the aspirations for upward mobility nurtured by the Malayali middle class of the present, and the other, around the neoliberalized state's drive to govern and protect children and childhood.

The materials available from which to construct an account of the discursive construction of childhood as a target of governmental intervention in the late 19th and early 20th century are largely primary textual sources which include quasi-anthropological accounts by missionaries to early Malayalam novels, whereas anthropological research

focused on children, childhood and families is available on more recent Malayali society is available for the late twentieth century and the present. The paper does not aim at generating an empirical account of children in Malayali society, the state's interventions aimed at children, measuring their dimensions, impacts and so on; therefore empirical work on socio-economic change is used in a limited way, mainly to offer a sense of the changing material contexts between early and late twentieth centuries.

Early speech and writing by 19th century missionaries and others on the civilizing mission in Malayali society were marked by the special importance granted in it to the reform of family life and conjugality, and especially childcare and the correct ways of providing it. Correct parenting, in other words, was hailed as both a sign of civilisation and the path to it. And the primary requirement of correct parenting, it seemed, was the complete commitment of the biological parents to children, and the general recognition of the unalienable and total rights they had on the progeny. The biological parents, then, were held responsible for the proper development of children. These ideas, flowed of course, from Europe, filtered through colonialism and British liberalism. Historians of childhood in Europe note that the idea of the child as a delicate vessel made or marred by parents, in whose upbringing the state would have to take a keen interest and active role through reforming the family, was quite

familiar among the privileged classes at least (Heywood 2001; Stearns 2006).

These ideas became relevant in the Malayalam-speaking native states of Travancore and Cochin in the nineteenth century in the context of the changing nature of state power there. As has been remarked by a number of historians by now, sovereign state power in Travancore faced stiff challenges from colonial domination, the effects of modern education and emergent colonial governmentality, and popular uprisings against the traditional order of caste protected by the Hindu kingdom (Jeffrey 1992; Kawashima 1998). The need for the modernising state to produce loyal, industrious citizens who would maintain a harmonious relation to it came to the fore in the mid-nineteenth century and the identification of the 'child' as the target of careful government intervention naturally followed. The task of socializing was now clearly recognized (as is clear from much missionary writing and early writing on schooling by government officials and others in Travancore and Cochin) to jointly shouldered by the family and the school authorities. Therefore advising parents on the upbringing of their children received much attention in these times, as much as the steady expansion of public schooling in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century decades (Kawashima 1998). From the Census of Travancore 1891, it appears that children aged 0-14 formed thirty-six per cent of the total population (GoT 1891: 13-17); it was no surprise then

that expanding liberal government in the modernising State of Travancore identified the child as an important target of governmental power.

It was not easy to transplant these ideas to 19th century Malayali society (as has been noted for other non-Western societies, Brockliss 2016). Indeed, they were often quite inimical to the order of caste that conservative authorities in Travancore to protect and viewed with suspicion, even. There were even attempts to borrow the form of the modern instruction manuals to parents on correct parenting for the very different end of instructing the young in ritualized social conduct or *aachaaram*, central to the traditional *janmabhedam* (difference-by-birth) order of caste. An example of this the nineteenth century manual *Balabhooshanam*, prepared by Vaikathu Pachu Moothathu (1814-83) in which a virtuous mother explained the rationale for the ritualized social conduct of caste to a ‘wayward’ young girl given to modern ways. But there was also opposition to the missionaries’ claims that linked local childcare practices and attitudes to childhood to inferior civilisation from those who did accept the general cultural superiority of the British. This was evident in writings that highlighted the ‘freedom’ of women in matrilineal families in Travancore and the absence of female infanticide and child marriage in the Malayalam-speaking areas as evidence of the higher civilizational achievements of these areas – for instance, the *Census of Travancore 1875* (*Report on the Census of Travancore 1876*: 245). Indeed,

when the age of marriage of the population came to be recorded in the Travancore Census after 1891, the very significant difference in child marriage between Travancore and British India was always pointed out (see for example, *Census of India* 1921: 60; *Census of India* 1931: 161-2). However, marriage of children below the age of fourteen was definitely not uncommon in Travancore, especially among Brahmin communities and – contrary to ‘civilizational’ expectations – among the highly-educated and ‘modern’ Syrian Christians. It was large enough a problem to be and this was addressed through legislation in the 1930s and after (Lindberg 2014). It was the framework of responsible parenting that informed much of the debate around the need to abolish child marriage in Travancore in the 1930s and 40s (Lindberg 2014).

Moreover, much of the new advice on parenting would have seemed impractical – given that the new parenting – or responsible parenting as a natural and gendered obligation of parents -- required a great deal of energy from the parents, especially the mother (Devika 2007). In these regions, families in the late-nineteenth and early twentieth century decades were large; birth rates were high (Jeffrey 2003). Within the frame of the new parenting, the child was Nature-ordained, an investment that parents were obliged to make, the shapeless mass to which they were to bring shape through correct parenting. The by-now familiar ‘triangular configuration’ between childhood as non-social, family as its

appropriate context, and socialization as the process¹ was becoming familiar (Alanen 1988). The child was to be valued not just for being the heir or labour, but also as the best means of ensuring the longevity of the marital union². Further, the child was to be the point of connection between the emergent paternalistic modern state – of Travancore – and the family, since ‘responsible parenting’ was meant to shape industrious and docile citizens. As the Dewan of Travancore, T Madava Row (Madhava Rao) remarked in his tract ‘Hints on the Training of Native Children’ (1889), not just the family, but also the nation needed healthy and disciplined children. The family was to be the training ground on which the child encountered non-coercive political power that fostered life through the enlightened father. “The child must be informed time to time that a just government takes care of all the people in the same way as a father cares for his children,” he wrote (p.60). Parenting was to involve a bare

¹ Alanen (1988) mentions this ‘triangular configuration’ as the framework relied upon for too long for sociological studies of childhood. Clearly, this means that sociology was, too long, bereft of self-distance from the politics of childhood.

² For an excellent example of such early reflections on childhood, see the long discussion by the CMS missionary Rev. George Mathen (1865). This essay however does not mention him directly as the author, but this is confirmed by Samuel Chandanappally’s work on the writings of George Mathen, 1993. See, p. 574.

minimum of coercion, especially physical punishment – and thus women, believed to be endowed with a ‘natural disposition’ towards emotion and altruism, were often identified as the chief agents of the ‘gentle disciplining’ recommended in families.

Schooling was viewed as deeply connected to parenting, as almost an extension of it and as a process by which the child grew into adulthood. Corporal punishment, widely remembered in autobiographies as common in homes and traditional schools, in the late 19th and early 20th century, was to be minimised. The circular issued by Alfred Sealy, who was the Director of Education in Kochi in 1890, minimises it, without banning it totally. Such punishment is to be inflicted on a erring child only by the highest authority: “No corporal punishment is to be inflicted on a pupil in any class of a Sircar school except by the Headmaster of the school, or at his express order and in his presence. Teachers stand in the place of parents to their pupils and kind and encouraging words are generally better than blows to make boys work.” (Sealy 1890).

These ideas were advanced through a great many vehicles including speeches and writings of missionaries, modern educators, colonial officials, newly-educated local elites, social and community reformers, school curricula, popular press, novels, government publications and so on, and they gained velocity and reach through the

expanding network of modern institutions focused on society and culture in 19th and 20th century Malayali society³. However, ‘Malayali society’ of the time being heterogenous and characterised by sharp socio-economic divides, they did not penetrate society evenly, nor were they introduced evenly across the three Malayalam-speaking regions of Travancore, Kochi, and British Malabar. In Travancore, for instance, these ideas made their appearance early on in the writings of the missionaries of the London Missionary Society and the Church Missionary Society who worked with mostly the children of the oppressed castes; however, they made their way up the social ladder through emergent modern schooling which received considerable state support in the later decades of the 19th century onwards (Kawashima 1998). Nevertheless, even as the child became ever-increasingly the target of governmental power in the native states of Travancore and Kochi, a great many children continued to stay outside it. As Anna Lindberg noted in her study of the history of cashew workers in Travancore, according to the Census of India (Travancore) of 1931, nearly one-third of the organized factory labour in Travancore were

³ I have dealt with these at length in Devika 2007 and Devika 2008a. I do not mean to always imply homogeneity and evenness in my use of the term ‘Malayali society’. The term is used to indicate the period preceding the formation of the Kerala State, to the culturally-contiguous Malayalam-speaking areas. It goes without saying that society in these areas was marked by deep divides of caste, class, and gender.

children. Hiring children as workers was legal in Travancore until 1946 (Lindberg 2001: 82). Not surprisingly then, children were often mobilized in political struggles of the times – for example, in the Communist movement’s children’s front, the Balasangham formed in 1938, at Kannur, Malabar.

Besides, the child was also viewed as a kernel from which gendered selves could be nurtured. That is, though with roots in bodily sex, gender was ultimately a social achievement, to be perfected through socialisation. The perfect upbringing of a child, therefore, also included shaping a properly-gendered subjectivity by nurturing the capacities, dispositions, talents etc. ostensibly given by bodily sex. A ‘failed’ adult – someone who could not occupy their prescribed social space, i.e. the domestic or the public -- was someone who failed to develop their essential potential for gender, masculine or feminine. Male and female bodies, however, were taken to mature at different ages. Therefore, civil servants responding to requests received for exemption from the law against child marriage in Travancore in the 1940s tended to view girls of fourteen as more or less ready to enter married life, while boys below eighteen were considered too young (Lindberg 2014: 85). Female childhood thus was judged to be shorter within the framework of responsible parenting that these civil servants largely deployed, and also, as we shall see, in that of Romantic childhood.

It is important to stress how central ‘responsible parenting’ was to the subsequent public discussions on child-rearing in twentieth-century Kerala. It formed the ground on which much discussion about limiting the numbers of children in families, part of the larger discussion on population control and national development in post-independence India, turned, serving both those who approved of fewer children, and their opponents. For instance, Rev. Mathen’s 19th century criticism of matrilineal life was not an argument for lesser progeny, rather the opposite. In advocating conjugal families and marital fidelity, he implicitly pointed to these as the fundamental condition for steady parental investment in children: “Children born to couples living in mutual fidelity are found to be strong and healthy, but the offspring of those who lead a loose and stray life are mostly weak and sick (Mathen 1865: 351). More than a hundred years later, in 1970, a pro-abortion lawyer, K I Nainan, justified abortion with the argument that parents would not invest in a child from an unwanted pregnancy, and the result may be an anti-social child. “...An unwelcome child,” he wrote, “will be a burden to his family. He will grow up to be a headache to all others. He will be an orphan who has no thought for his family or society ...”⁴ The child-as-essential-potential that may go astray

⁴ K I Nainan, in the discussion ‘Garbhacchidram Saadhukarikkaamo?’ [Can Abortion be Justified?], *Malayala Manorama*, July 5 1970, Sunday Supplement, p.I.

or waste away without proper guidance appears too, as the ground for the arguments of those who argued in favour of raising the female age of marriage as a birth control measure, and their opponents. An illustrative instance is a debate on this in the *Malayala Manorama* in 1970, in which an article by an opponent of the move who believed that it would lead to girls straying and men becoming disinterested invited a spate of responses, some approving of it and others rejecting it. The arguments of both opponents and supporters of raising the female age of marriage hinge upon the girl's fulfilment of the responsibilities of a housewife, understood as a gendered ability. Those who argue against raising the age of marriage claim that the minds of young girls are more impressionable and therefore easier to mould to fit the role of the housewife; their opponents argue that early marriage would impose the unbearable burden of early childbirth on the girl and this would hamper the preparation of her mind for the responsibilities of homemaking. Some participants in the debate who sought a middle-path pointed to the availability of contraception and that its use could counter the ill-effects of early child-birth on young brides, so that their training for the life of a housewife could continue unhindered.⁵

⁵ See, Elikkuttu, 'Penkuttikalude Vivaahapraayam Koottaruthu', [The Age of Girls' Marriage Should Not be Raised] *Malayala Manorama* August 21, 1970, p.6 ; Susan Abraham, Thiruvalla, 'Penkuttikalude Vivaahapraayam Koottanam' [The Age of Girls' Marriage Should be Raised]. However, it should be noted that women in Malayali society tended to marry later than their Indian counterparts even in the early 20th century (Gulati 1976 ;

That ‘responsible parenting’ meant responsibility not just to the child but also to the nation and the state was by now the commonsense that underlay discussions such as these.

The moulding of the child was undoubtedly a gendered and gendering activity; the centrality of a ‘properly gendered’ family to ‘responsible parenting’ was by now unquestionable. The new mother-craft was all about gaining the skills to keep the child’s body healthy and to shape its internality and it was clearly defined as the exact opposite of existent socializing practices followed by mothers which were roundly condemned. Komattil Padoo Menon dismissed these as “...relating nonsensical tales to young children, frightening them with descriptions of terrifying creatures, inculcating false beliefs and thus polluting their minds and manners” in 1892 (Menon 1892/1985); this rebuke still continued in 1932, this time espoused by birth-control advocates, who claimed that “It may be possible to admit that the earlier animal-like motherly affection expressed in kisses and cuddles with little concern for hygiene, nutrition etc. has decreased with birth control. Today’s mother who has limited the

Lindberg 2014) ; there is also evidence to show that even in communities where early marriages, of both males and females, were common, such as the Syrian Christian, the 19th century trend for females was an increase in the age of marriage (from around 13 before the 1830s to around 15 later in the century. See Krishnan 1977.

numbers of her children is striving very hard to provide them with favourable circumstances as far as she can.” (*The Mahila* 1932; 373). The aim of it was to foster dispositions, inculcate skills, deemed appropriate to the sexes without the two familiar practices in child-rearing: violent physical disciplining and *vatsalyam*, or indulgent mutual affection (more about the latter later). In the late 19th century novels in Malayalam that sought to advance this vision, such claims are frequent. For example, in *Meenakshi* (1890), at the beginning of the novel, the eponymous heroine is a girl of twelve who is working towards attaining feminine perfection with the diligent efforts of her guardians. They are said to have raised her affectionately from infancy closely supervising her interactions with others and not permitting the “unnecessary recreations and socialization that some other girls are sometimes allowed.” (Nair 1890/1990:77). She was also educated by senior and serious men, and sent to school to learn English and needlework. Meenakshi’s mother tells her sisters: “When it comes to girls, they must be taught proper reserve and modesty. Don’t let them go hang and play on the necks of strangers. For that, the parents need to be sensible. Secondly, the men of the house should keep their eyes and ears open. Don’t get them into marriage alliances with some thug or other. And if they notice any waywardness, that must be suppressed immediately.” (p. 67) Meenakshi attains the man of her choice four years

later⁶. Not surprisingly, a huge volume of discourse in the late 19th and early 20th century was devoted to discussing how education in general, and female education in particular, could be revised to help the development of particularly-sexed infants into properly-gendered individuals, whose perfection would be discernible in their ability to conform to ideal masculine or feminine subjectivities (for a more detailed account, see Devika 2007).

But even as this was to become the overwhelming commonsense about the child and childhood in twentieth century Malayali society, echoes of the Romantic conception of childhood were also heard, especially by the 1930s and after, times in which internal critiques of rationalizing and individualizing social reform developed, for example in the work of the first-generation feminist Lalitambika Antharjanam (Devika 2007). The child as pre-dating all the divisions of the world, as the fullness that adulthood loses but which it must strive to recover, does appear, for example in the writings of early literary authors Balamani Amma and Lalitambika Antharjanam. Balamani Amma's work displays the tensions between 'responsible parenting' that the nation and community expects of her, and the Romantic childhood she seems to be drawn towards. Thus

⁶ The heroines of other late 19th century novels are also around the same age, and are in their mid-teens by the time they fall in love and marry. See for example, Menon 1892/1985.

even as she shares the vision of the child as an inimitable, exceptional entity, she is also filled with anxiety as a mother, about being in charge of what is also the nucleus of a future human. Writing in 1951 about the mechanical regimen children were being subjected to, she observed:

The old-timers insist: only children raised by the stick will thrive ... The new reformers who treat those old-timers with contempt, on the other hand, are insistent in the name of discipline that each movement of the child should be assigned a particular time and yield a particular advantage ... Many of those who are overly concerned about the health and education of children do not realize the truth that only health that is built upon happiness is lasting, and that in a slavish mind, education does not shed light but merely produces smoke. (Amma 1951: 26-7)

Unlike in 'responsible parenting', in Romantic childhood, biological foundationalism is not always the rule when gender is represented. Notably, the feminine gender is projected as an irresistible tendency that manifests – blooms --by itself early in the female child, while the boy has to 'grow up. As a proposed regime of childhood, Romantic childhood became popular in the 1950s through the work of great Malayalam poets like Akkitham and Vailoppilly, but it was the work of a relatively minor poet, K S K Thalikkulam, a story-poem titled 'Ammuvinte Aattinkutti' (Ammu's Kid Goat), which became its

most endearing voice⁷. In it, eight-year-old Ammu's selfless love for her 'child', a kid goat who she has named Kuttan, finally wins over the heart of the landlord who had bought him to be slaughtered for a wedding-feast when she hands him her only valuable, a gold neck-chain, to buy Kuttan back. Ammu's love for Kuttan is praised for being impeccably maternal. He, her 'child', demands her attention with his lovable pranks, while she turns to him mixing her effort to discipline him with an ample measure of love and constant affection. The sound of the goat's bleating sounds like the word 'Amma' to the poet's ears. The goat's nibbling at their crops is equated with a child's playful mischief; Ammu, like an indulgent mother, takes the punishment for it – her father beats her for it. Despite all the destruction he wreaks, Kuttan's 'mother' does not allow him to be tied up; she says that she would strive to fulfil all his wishes, and asks, "Your mother is gone, yes/But

⁷ Published in a collection by K S K Thalikkulam in 1960 of the same name, the poem 'Ammuvinte Aatinkutty' came to be much-read among Malayalis. It was made into a film in 1978 by the well-known film director Ramu Kariat . It was extended by the well-known contemporary writer E Santhoshkumar, in his story 'Cheruppakkaaranenna nilayil ezhuthukaarante chhaayaachithram' [A Portrait of the Writer as a Young Man] which problematizes Ammu's abundant altruistic femininity. See Kumar 2000. Kariat's film won the award for Best Children's Film in 1979. A recent goat-rearing programme for school students in 2013 also drew upon its name.

am I not the mother who nurtures you?” (Thalikkulam 1963 :. 43) But Ammu’s love is so powerful that it not only reverses the landlord’s purchase of Kuttan (he is returned free of cost to Ammu), but also effects an ethical transformation in the landlord who proclaims that no meat will be served at all at the wedding feast (p. 48)

That is, the qualities deemed feminine in social reformist discourse – altruism, the disposition towards loving care and sacrifice for loved ones, patience, the ability to transform others through tears, entreaties, emotion, gentleness - seem to be already present in Ammu; she is already perfectly womanly at the age of eight. This is a child who needs no raising. The other female child-protagonists in this collection of poems too display flawlessly feminine qualities and these include a disposition to be of help to all in the family – for example, Malathy, (in ‘Malathy’) who is described watering the plants in the morning; and when she sits down to study in the morning, is called to help her mother in the kitchen, to run errands, by her father, to prepare the betel for her grandmother, and to help her little brother in his lessons. To her teacher, she represents “the humility that must join knowledge”, and the poem ends with the remark that “Let our little girls be thus/ helpmates, always, to all around.” (Thalikkulam 1963: 36). Another such little woman, Padmini, feeds a dying beggar, overcome with compassion (‘Padminikkutty’) (Thalikkulam 1963 : 31-2). Both these girls are described as the recipients of the

unconditional and indulgent love felt towards children –*vatsalyam* – of their mothers (which differs from the emotional framework of ‘responsible parenting’, which requires more distance, especially physical, as Balamani Amma implies, above⁸) which seems to make their inherently womanly nature bloom and thrive. All these little girls are depicted as going to school, but school seems to play little role in perfecting their abundant femininity.

These little women offer a sharp contrast with other children who are subjects of Thalikkulam’s other child-centred poems in the same volume – for example, ‘Vaasuvinte Jolittirakku’ (Vasu’s Busy Schedule).

⁸ In their perceptive essay on the notion of *vatsalyam* in Indian traditions, Sen and Pandit (2013) Point out that *vatsalyam* in the Bhakti tradition is “the all-consuming desire to bless, to confer grace, to nurture and nourish.” (p.169). *Vatsalyam* here is intensely physical too. Sen and Pandit note that it was believed to translate into the following behaviours: “...inhaling the child’s forehead; massaging and caressing the child’s limbs like back, forehead, hands and feet; blessing and giving instructions; nourishing and nurturing through acts like serving food etc; and commanding and giving advice to the child as a form of mentoring” (p.170). Moreover, they show that the expression of *vatsalyam* does not represent a one-way flow from adults to children; they identify four distinct voices, which include the expression of the child’s feelings towards the adults and the expression of the adults’ feelings for the child expressed in the child’s voice (p.172). The romantic version of childhood in many Indian languages, including Malayalam, is imbued with the *vatsalya* rasa, and Thalikkulam’s poetry of/for children exemplifies this.

Vaasu is a little boy engrossed in play – dragging the palm-frond-bull around, parading his toy elephant, ‘selling’ all the mud-pies, playing father-mother with his little female playmate Janukkutty. The poet’s exaggerated ire berates mother, who tells Vaasu to do his lessons, when he has so many important tasks to finish. The poet then points out that Vaasu alone lives in his little world of pure joy, one where there exists no divide between the real and the unreal, one that older people can only watch and enjoy only from the outside (Thalikkulam 1963: 33-34). Unlike Vaasu, the three girls engage in what may well be labour, which however seems to be rooted in the delightful and unself-conscious blooming of femininity in and through a female child. The little boy, then, is pre- or non-social, and has to grow into a man, but the little girl is already a woman (even Ammu’s sister, the four-year-old Jaanu, is already caring for her sister’s ‘son’, the kid goat).

But another reading of these poems that describe child-women would probably make us see Ammu as the older sibling in a tenant farm-household with traditional child-raising practices (there is reference to the harsh punishment meted out to her by her father angered by the damage the goat does to his crops) who shares labour responsibilities with adults, helping with the care of farm animals, who juggles school and work, and negotiates independently and successfully with other adults for her own ends; Malathy as the child who already contributes to domestic labour at

the age of eight, is entrusted with responsibilities for the care of the elderly and younger siblings, and respected for it; and Padmini as the child who is already confident enough to offer care to an indigent elderly stranger on her own.

In short, the romantic conception of childhood does not disempower female children; indeed, they seem to have gained considerable agency, value, and even respect through their ability to exercise ‘gentle power’, which, unlike in ‘responsible parenting’, is not instrumentalized to the ends of the nation-state in its project of shaping industrious citizens. The state is conspicuously absent in ‘Ammuvinte Aatinkutti’ – clearly, Romantic childhood does not fit easily in governmental frameworks.

II

‘Ammuvinte Attinkutti’ was written in the immediate post-independence decade in which, as Sriprakash et al (2019) point out, the newly constituted nation sought to free itself both from the legacy of the coloniser’s infantilizing, as well as the denigration of Indian children by colonial culture and rule. However, in Kerala, the later part of the 20th century coincided with a period in which an intense discourse on population control spanning decades finally culminated in the shaming of large families, with the State’s *Economic Review* of successive years in the 1960s repeatedly mentioning that more than forty per cent of the population were children, all of who are dependent, and therefore ‘heavy burdens on earners’ (GoK 1964: 5). The need to reduce the number of children per family was projected incessantly in writing about Kerala’s economic prospects as the most important measure towards improving saving and investment, and reducing the state’s burdens of providing essential services such as medical and educational facilities (Devika 2008; GoK 1961: 24; GoK 1962:5). However, by 1969, the Kerala State’s *Economic Review* noted a sharp fall in birth rates, inferring from it that the state’s efforts at family planning were finally yielding dividends (GoK 1970: 8). Writing in 1967, the birth control advocate A P Udayabhanu remarked triumphantly that women who carry a fourth child were beginning to be shamed and that such families would soon be condemned

for being shameless and irresponsible (Udayabhanu 1967). In other words, children were becoming fewer in numbers. However, in the 1960s, and right up to the close of the twentieth century, they received considerable attention from the State within the framework of ‘responsible parenting’ in which parenting and schooling sought to jointly shape children into ideal citizens, endowed with the disposition to contribute productively to the nation and the necessary cultural literacy. Government spending on schooling went up steadily in the 1960s and special events, such as the state school ‘youth festival’, later renamed the Kerala School Kalotsavam, begun in 1956, grew into massive yearly events in which nearly 12,000 school students participate each year (Rajashree 2017) .

By the twenty-first century the proportion of children in Kerala’s population fell from 42.6 in 1961 to 23. 4 in 2011 (Rajan and Misra 2017: 4). The infant mortality rate fell from 58 in 1971 to 12 in 2013.⁹ According to the Kerala Migration Survey of 2017, 85.6 per cent of families in Kerala have no children aged below four. The gradual shift of children from the workforce to schools in this period increased the costs incurred for each child while increasing the value of each, confirming a more or less universal post-demographic transition pattern (Mahadevan

⁹ See, Registrar General of India. No Date. Compendium of India’s Fertility and Mortality Indicators, 1971 – 2013, Available online: http://www.censusindia.gov.in/vital_statistics/Compendium/Srs_data.html

and Sumangala 1987). Recent research points to very significant changes: for example, the undisputed dominance of the nuclear family form compared to the 1960s, women's entry into higher education in unprecedented numbers, increasing childcare burdens on women, and rising aspirations to upward mobility through employment and education of children in families cutting across class, caste, and community lines (Osella and Osella 2000; den Uyl 1995; Thampi 2007; Arun 2018; Chua 2014; Devika 2019). With many decades of migration by (mostly) Malayali men for work to the Gulf countries starting from the early 1970s, Kerala had become a heavily migration-dependent society and economy by the 21st century (Rajan and Misra 2017:12). This has led to heavy inflow of resources to families, which invested them in 'safe' options, like house-construction, prestige consumption (like marriages), and in educating their children to ensure their entry into the global job markets. Average per capita consumption expenditure in Kerala which was below the national average in the late 1970s rose forty-one per cent above the national average by the close of the century (Kannan and Hari 2002: 201).

Most importantly, the late 20th century saw the arrival of the highly individualizing and Eurocentric discourse of child rights into India and Kerala ¹⁰ (Balagopalan 2002; Raman 2000), as well as the

¹⁰ The UN Convention on the Rights of the Child arrived here in the 1990s, after the Indian government's Plan of Action for Children (1992)

transformation of the local state from a welfare-oriented developmentalist state to a more-neoliberalized and governance-oriented state, with impacts on the conception and practice of public welfare. Welfare came to be responsabilized through the ideology of self-help, with individualised welfare handouts becoming prominent in the state's welfare measures, and

and the Kerala State took up Plans of Action focused on the child in 1995 and later 2004, adopting explicitly a rights-based approach to children's issues in 2011, setting up the institutional network and authorities for its implementation, such as the Child Welfare Committees in all districts. The Kerala State Commission for the Protection of Child Rights started functioning in 2013. The new millennium saw the passing of the Juvenile Justice Act (2001), Protection of Children from Sexual Offences Act (2012), the Right of Children to Free and Compulsory Education Act (2009), and so on, which now form the framework of child governance in India today. In Kerala too, a range of institutions, from NGOs such as the Don Bosco Veedu Society which advances a highly protectionist and familial reading of child rights, the Kerala Mahila Samakhya, meant to take up women's education, but now intervening actively in cases of child sexual abuse, and the local self -governments, to which the government functionaries of child governance were devolved, were all involved in the network of child governance. See, <https://dbveedu.org/wp-content/uploads/2017/09/Annual-Report-2014-2015.pdf> , accessed 15 March 2020 ; <http://14.139.60.153/bitstream/123456789/8657/1/2nd%20Joint%20Review%20Mission%20of%20Mahila%20Samakhya%20%289th%20to%2017th%20November%2C%202009%29.pdf> , accessed 15 Mar 2020; for an account of the LSGs' measures for protection of child rights implemented with the help of the self-help groups of the Kudumbasree, see Ortiz et al 2013.

the community itself coming to be understood in liberal terms, as the collection of individual families (Devika 2016). With rising incomes and falling family size, in the 1990s, the removal of children from paid work and their universal enrolment in school were fast becoming reality. In the 1980s, researchers found children working, and being counted as workers, in traditional industries such as coir (Gulati 1980 ; Nieuwenhuys 1994), and they also found that gender hierarchies structured the work performed by boys and girls, orienting the boys into income-generating work outside the home, and girls, towards domestic production and reproduction (Nieuwenhuys 1994) ¹¹. Nieuwenhuys found that the condemnation of child labour as harmful to the child ended up justifying the rampant exploitation of children in family-based work (1994: 204-5); she also questioned the opposition between schooling and child labour from her fieldwork that covered periods from the 1970s to the 1990s. However, by the 1990s, in popular Malayalam press, even indigent families and communities in which teenagers worked for family survival received universal condemnation, For example, that teenage girls of Kerala's impoverished fisher communities were now working in prawn curing

¹¹ Child labour was widespread in Kerala for the most of the twentieth century and accounted in large measure for the profitability of such new industries as cashew and coir in the early twentieth century. See Klyuver 1923 (and other reports of that time), quoted in Nieuwenhuys 1994: 179-80, 181-83; Lindberg 2001.

factories in faraway Gujarat and other places was a story that generated much indignation in the late 1980s and early 1990s. Though research among these teenagers revealed that the decision to migrate was theirs, that they had to convince their parents, and that they enjoyed working and living with their peers away from home, the public discussion on their migration often projected it as a form of child trafficking (Nieuwenhuys 1995)¹². These attitudes, along with the upswing of social conservatism towards the end of the 1990s and the new millennium spurred by a spate of sex rackets involving the trafficking of young girls and the sensationalised media reporting, led to the spread of a strongly protectionist interpretation of child rights and the rise of the still-dominant discourse of the socially-disadvantaged-girl-as-victim (Sreekumar 2001; Devika 2009). In this discourse, the young victim inevitably figured either

¹²As Iversen (2006) points out, it is not as if all child labour is beneficial to the child and completely voluntary. However, the general condemnation of all child labour as equally and invariably harmful is unhelpful. Iversen gives the example of the unevenness that arises across gender: while girls engaged as domestic workers may not have the mobility to escape from abusive employers, young boys employed in small restaurants may have much greater choice and mobility (p.8). He notes that “In policy terms, the ‘carrot’ of providing better education may be much more effective in reducing children’s work and improving school attendance than the ‘stick’ provided by draconian labour laws.” (p.12) Like severe labour laws, alarmist and moral-panic-inducing public discussion too may ultimately devalue children’s work and drive it from visibility.

as the pleasure-seeking strumpet indulging herself and/or falling into a trap, or the innocent victim duped by wicked men; the boundaries of childhood are pushed downwards when the child is faulted for being 'pleasure-seeking'. But both kinds of 'depravity' seemed to invite the state's corrective measures.

A significant change in the late twentieth century is the 'extension' of childhood till eighteen years, as different from responsible parenting, in which girls past fourteen were often seen as grown-up and ready for marriage, while boys were granted a longer childhood lasting till the end of teenage often. Though advanced forcefully by the new global regimes of child rights, the extension of childhood till the age of eighteen of all children seems to have not been applied much to Malayali girls, as was evident in the discourse of sex-rackets and trafficking of the late 1990s and early 2000s (Sreekumar 2001). This is a continuing trend. Even as teenage girls in Kerala continue to be recognized as endowed with more resources than anywhere else in India (James 2018), they are also placed under a stricter surveillance system that extends from the family to school and involves both police and non-police authorities.

These changes seem to have brought into being two regimes of childhood which shade into each other, but still have distinct features. The first of these is what could be called the 'aspirational regime' of the

Malayali middle-class, in which the child is a resource that parents ‘own’ , or may use to their own ends, (in practice, if not in letter) which they seek to mould into forms that bring prestige and upward mobility to their families (Sancho 2012: 110). If in ‘responsible parenting’ of the early 20th century the child was the moulded for the future community or nation by the parents/nuclear family guided by the state, belonging to both, and demanding particular kinds of attention from both, in the ‘aspirational regime’, the shaping of children’s inner worlds, mental and physical skills, and dispositions is now predominantly a family enterprise, aimed at primarily family upward mobility, with the state assuming the role of a mere facilitator. Meanwhile, the highly individualizing discourse of global child rights which has, by now, become all-pervasive in the state policy aimed at children and informs deeply the institutional network of child care that came to be formed here from the 1990s. The contradictions in the global child rights discourse – the fact that “... although children are afforded basic rights by virtue of their humanity, children’s rights legislation has been from the outset geared towards protecting the special status of childhood” (Shanahan 2007: 417) seems utterly visible. The target of the child governance network has been largely the children of the poor. This forms the core of a fourth regime of childhood which may be called the regime of child governance. This overlaps significantly with the third, for example, in that both are centred upon an understanding of the child as mouldable material for family upward mobility and upon aspirations. But if

the third is shaped by parental authority, it is the paternal authority of the neoliberalized and securitizing state that shapes the fourth. And as Leya Mathew (2016) points out, the aspirations of the middle-classes and the poor are not on the same ethical plane. Mathew notes in her work on the oppressed-caste mothers in the Pathanamthitta district in Kerala that these women's aspiring for their children is an ethical practice aimed at escaping historically-continuing caste humiliation, which is quite different from the higher/middle-caste and class ambition to further consolidate their advantages (Mathew 2016). These aspirations, she points out, evoke irritation anger, even disgust, among others, unlike the aspirations of the middle classes.

David Sancho's ethnography (2012) focuses closely the aspirational regime of childhood pursued by middle-class families in Kerala. His work is on a group of "... families who have more recently gained access to the material lifestyles understood as middle class. Having attained this economic base via migration and/or technical education ...they are now set to reconvert their economic capital into higher forms of education ... which they will aspire to reconvert once more into greater prestige and economic gain." (Sancho 2012: 109-10). In this group, family upward mobility was a project planned essentially by parents and executed by both parents and the child. It is framed by the discourse of the 'self-sacrificing parent' and the 'dutiful progeny'. This discourse continues to present this joint project as the self-chosen venture of the child; Sancho

notes that “These modern idioms of individual ambition and freedom to choose effectively conceal parental authority ...authoritarian and intensive craft-like parenting is both imposed and disguised through idioms and stereotypes about the modern Indian family and youth, which portray modern parents as detached and highlight youth’s supposed individual freedom and thirst for success.” (Sancho 2012: 130-32)¹³.

Sancho also notes that the aspirational regime is gendered even if the discourse of youth ambition seems to be gender-neutral. Individual aspirations are placed on both girls and boys, but this rarely affects the well-entrenched gendered expectations that they carry from infancy: boys are to be oriented to the world ‘outside’, specifically, the market, while girls are expected to recognize the ‘inner’ world, i.e. the home and the community (of caste and religion) as their ‘natural’ space, and so are to be oriented towards marriage. Sancho notes that the deployment of aspirational regimes by parents on boys is a “simple formula”: “... being all about trying to enhance their employability, wealth and prestige prospects.” (Sancho 2012 : 120). But for girls, it is more complex,

¹³ Similar aspirational regimes are seen among middle classes across the country. See Kumar 2011; Donner 2006; Tuli and Chaudhary 2010; Seymour 1999. This is also a theme that arises in studies of hanging family relations in India in the wake of accelerating urbanisation and globalisation. See Bhatia 2006; Uberoi 2007; Sharma 2003; Gupta and Panda 2002.

“... conditioned by ideas of morality and of the girls’ future role as mothers.” While the family is the prime site of education and resource mobilisation for higher education for girls also, it “acquires a double importance as educational choices and career preferences are shaped in accordance with their future expectations in the family that they may marry into.” (Sancho 2012: 121). However, compared to ‘responsible parenting’, in the aspirational regime, the female child is ‘thinly’ gendered – gender is understood as just a social requirement or construction, not something that is completely overwhelming. The girl child has to grow up to respect it, but it may be set aside (temporarily, for the most) if necessary to make way for aspirations of upward mobility.

Children who are subject to the regime of child governance, however, largely belong to the lower middle-class and the poor, who use the state school system (Ortiz et al 2013; Chacko 2019; Mathew 2016) and study in the Malayalam medium. If the parents project themselves as ‘mere facilitators’ while actually setting the terms of the conversation in the aspirational regime of childhood, in the child governance regime, the state claims to be a facilitator but also provides the horizon of aspirations within which the child may be permitted to choose. As Ortiz et al point out, while the local government network creates spaces for children and provides them with resources, planning that will draw children from all classes and spaces which will make children active participants and not

passive beneficiaries are still distant (Ortiz et al 2013: 42). Also, as Mary Ann Chacko shows in her ethnographic inquiry into the Kerala Police's much-lauded student cadet programme, the programme claims to be completely gender-neutral and meant to empower girls (who are more often than not from lower middle-class or very disadvantaged social and familial backgrounds), but the female empowerment it achieves is "ambivalent and conditional ...", highly individualised and demanding of a certain 'disciplined femininity'. Also, it "ironically sanctified masculine privilege and externally-endowed protection." (Chacko 2019 : 14). Similar inconsistency seems to exist between the Kerala Police's community policing aimed at children, which promises participation, empowerment, and protection for vulnerable children¹⁴, and the appalling violence that marks some police interventions aimed at precisely lower-middle class or poor teenagers, especially boys. The ones directed against ostensibly 'wayward' youngsters have been often moralistic and violent, often involving caning and crude corporeal humiliation (like the chopping of the styled hair of truant male students in a 2015 police operation code-named

¹⁴ See for instance the project document of the Kerala Police's Community Policing initiative for children, <https://www.bprd.nic.in/WriteReadData/userfiles/file/201907030901335393404ACommunityPolicingInitiativeforChildren-MM-02.pdf> , accessed 16 March 2020.

‘Operation Vidyalaya’)¹⁵. Besides, children of the lower-middle class and the poor who can only afford government schools and Malayalam medium education bear a disproportionate share of the burdens of perpetuating Malayali linguistic identity, and becoming good citizens and ‘humans’ through state-funded Malayalam medium schools (Mathew 2016: 88).

Nevertheless, the child who is amenable to moulding through the hard work of parents seems to be an idea shared between the two regimes. This is a significant overlap which seems to be intensifying as more children begin to engage in risky behaviour, especially the consumption of drugs, often to alleviate the stress generated by aspirational regime (Kaumudi

¹⁵ See,

<http://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/city/thiruvananthapuram/Low-rise-jeans-high-crime-in-Kerala-district/articleshow/7130625.cms> . Also, ‘Police Chop Hair of Kids Bunking Classes in Kerala’ 17 Jan. 2015, News Minute, http://webcache.googleusercontent.com/search?q=cache:UD3z_CxVRJgJ:www.thenewsminute.com/keralas/645&hl=en&gl=in&strip=1&vwsrc=0 , accessed 9 Sept. 2015; <http://www.abplive.in/incoming/2015/06/16/article620376.ece/At-least-60-students-bunk-classes-to-watch-Malayalam-blockbuster-Premam-in-Kerala-caught> , accessed 9 Sept. 2015. See also, <https://www.thenewsminute.com/article/kerala-dalit-teen-alleged-torture-police-custody-crime-branch-submit-report-soon-69626> , accessed 16 March 2020.

Online 2022). Naturally, ‘failed children’ are a constant concern in public discourse, and both middle-class families and child governance try to tackle it constantly – most recently in the strong anti-drug peddling measures that the government of Kerala has tried to take (NDTV 2023) . As far as the child-subject of the middle-class aspirational regime is concerned, there is very tight adult control on what may count as agency: enthusiasm for a high-flying career is conceded as agential, while choosing a partner or wanting to have sex would be a sure sign of ‘failure’. Adults maintain this dividing line with a host of practices, for example, by controlling exclusively the boundary between adulthood and childhood, and letting children talk while setting the terms of the conversation, both revealing the extent of children’s powerlessness vis-à-vis adults (Dunne and Kelley 2002). And when the middle-class child ‘fails’ (i.e. to live up to parental expectations), the blame is often put on parental ‘overprotection’ and overindulgence – a surfeit of consumption - which makes children weak and incapable of overcoming challenges and disappointments. Consumption, especially, is blamed when young female students ‘stray’, which is sometimes a code word to describe teenaged girls’ effort to secure some consumptive agency (Lukose 2005). This argument comes up commonly in discussions of rising child suicides in Kerala especially among the middle classes (for example, Chua 2014). But as Chua notes, the response has been not to abandon consumerist aspirations, but to ‘immunize’ children to such self-destructive tendencies, fortify their

agential capacities through therapy and other methods, and further bolster their confidence (Chua 2014:177) .

The ‘failed’ underprivileged child is the target of child governance through by NGOs, local governments, and other agencies, and is expected to develop ‘proper’ agential capacity through these. The ‘failures’ of the oppressed-caste-working class teenager are immediately attributed to ‘distorted agency’, directly attributed often to under-parenting, a failure of the family, even to the aspirations they may have for the child (Mathew 2016). But common to both sides of the divide, the blame is attributed to individual parents or families and structural inadequacies and pressures are mostly ignored in the public discourse of childhood now. For example, there is evidence that schooling for the poorest is still ridden with caste-stigma, such that these institutions are referred to derogatorily, with oppressive caste names attached – *para/pela pallikkoodam* and that the education provided here does not enable students to escape social oppression and economic denigration (for instance, Mathew 2016). And even when there is considerable concern about the ‘hurried childhood’ (Elkind 1981) of present-day middle-class children in the Malayalam public sphere, the structural conditions that turn them into raw-material for child-crafting are hardly criticised.

Poignantly enough, among both the better-off and the worse-off, domestic violence, even physical violence, against them, as recent studies show seems quite common (Sancho 2012; Mathew 2016; Kumar et al 2019). A study based on nearly 7000 samples in a city in Kerala revealed that child abuse was rampant – the one-year prevalence of abuse of any form was nearly 90 per cent. Despite all the effort to protect children from sexual abuse, it seems highly prevalent; nearly twenty per cent of the sample reported life-time sexual abuse (which was the least compared to other forms of abuse) and boys reported more abuse than girls (Kumar et al 2019). However, this violence rarely produces outrage; public discourse is inflamed only by the most shocking cases of sexual and other physical violence that results in severe damage to the child’s body or its death¹⁶. Incidents of the severe physical abuse/murder of young children by their

¹⁶ Data from the Kerala Police Department shows a steep rise in crimes against children, with POCSO cases (classified as ‘Other Crimes Against Children’) growing exponentially, from 206 in 2009 to 2824 in 2018. Child rape increased from 235 to 1137, while kidnapping and abduction grew from 83 to 205 in the same period. See ‘Crimes Against Children’, <https://keralapolice.gov.in/public-information/crime-statistics/crime-against-children> , accessed 15 March 2020. POCSO cases elicit a quicker response from the police, not surprisingly, given the strong provisions against child sexual abuse and the public outrage that such crime generates.

aregivers, especially mothers, form some of the most frequently-appearing lurid and moralising news reporting in present-day Kerala¹⁷.

The above arguments are well-illustrated in two recent events that provoked considerable public discussion. The arbitrary shifting of the boundary of childhood in cases of sexual crime against two socially-oppressed and economically underprivileged female children, aged 13 and 8, has been quite naked in the recent case of atrocious violence against two dalit girls in the Palakkad district of Kerala in 2017 which culminated in their alleged murder. The acquittal secured by the three accused persons in 2019 caused a public uproar against alleged political interference and police bias in favour of the accused. The police seemed to have failed at every step in delivering justice to the children and their parents who are construction workers. The state's machinery for the delivery of children's rights seemed to have failed too – the chairman of the district Child Welfare Committee had appeared as a lawyer earlier for one of the

¹⁷ See for example, <https://www.news18.com/news/india/to-save-extramarital-affair-kerala-mother-smashes-baby-against-rocks-repeats-act-to-ensure-death-2507043.html>, accessed 15 March 2020 ; <https://www.thenewsminute.com/article/kerala-mother-lover-arrested-slowly-torturing-her-2-year-old-son-death-93637> , accessed 15 March 2020 ; <https://www.thehindu.com/news/national/kerala/mother-arrested-on-charge-of-killing-toddler/article26974561.ece> , accessed 15 March 2020; <https://english.manoramaonline.com/news/kerala/2019/03/29/thodupuzha-child-torture-arrest.html> , accessed 15 March 2020.

accused¹⁸. The Justice for Walayar Kids committee has accused the investigating officer, M J Sojan, of making public comments that the children had “enjoyed sexual harassment” and has demanded his arrest.¹⁹ This atrocious comment reveals that the sexualisation of female child victims of crime from underprivileged social backgrounds in public discourse, which has now a history of nearly two decades (starting with the infamous sex-trafficking cases of the turn of the millennium), is still an ongoing story. Meanwhile, the media coverage that sought to play up the children’s innocence and vulnerability only confirmed the observations made in research on the disempowerment of the female child that the protectionist reading of the child rights discourse effects, and its implicit reliance on a certain ideal of “... of childhood that has evolved in the North ...[based on] the experience of living in a privileged, protected area within the confines of a nuclear family and staked out by an array of pedagogical aids and expertise guaranteed by the state,” (Nieuwenhuys

¹⁸ See <https://indianexpress.com/article/india/kerala/walayar-minor-sisters-rape-case-everything-you-need-to-know-6096348/>, accessed 15 March 2020.

¹⁹ See <https://kochipost.com/2019/10/29/how-the-system-conspired-to-deny-justice-in-the-walayar-case/>, accessed 15 March 2020; <https://www.thenewsminute.com/article/punish-dysp-sojan-justice-walayar-kids-forum-demands-3rd-day-satyagraha-116748>, accessed 15 March 2020.

1998: 272) that subtly shifts the blame on to the shoulders of the parents, on their alleged neglect. The widespread public discussion has not had an impact on the government; meanwhile, it seems to foster the “politics of pity”, seemingly confirming Claudia Aradau’s observation about the evocation of human rights in the securitisation of human trafficking: “... if human rights have become the rights of those who are too weak or too oppressed to actualize and enact them, they are not “their” rights. They are deprived of political agency; the only rights are our rights to practice pity and humanitarian interventions ...” (2004: 259)

The other incident that was passionately debated in Kerala and India was the suicide of a hardworking and dedicated, high-performing first-year undergraduate student at IIT Chennai, 18-year-old Fathima Latheef, who claimed in her suicide note that she was driven to it by the discrimination she suffered on grounds of her religious affiliation from teachers and others²⁰. The reasons for her death have been widely debated; of interest here, however, is the manner in which she provided an occasion for the articulation of the ideal child of the middle class aspirational regime of childhood (though she was technically past the age of childhood). One reason why the outrage over her death was especially pronounced was

²⁰ See, <https://openthemagazine.com/features/fathima-latheef-death-on-the-campus/> , accessed 15 March 2020.

because she did not fit into the familiar versions of the ‘failed child’, but was the eminently successful one -- diligently pursuing her studies, possessing extremely well-developed academic abilities, securing high rates of success in exams and extra-curricular activities, with clear goals and sustained effort, free from the attractions of consumerism and other distractions typical of teenagers, fully devoted to her family²¹. Her parents made it amply clear that they were fully supportive of their child’s ambitions. Fathima’s father was vocal about what he perceived was the callous indifference of the educational institution towards her daughter; it was widely called an ‘institutional murder’. There was widespread protest. One wonders what the public response would have been if Fathima had not been such a perfect fit for the ideal child of Kerala’s middle class aspirational regimes? Would there have been the same outpouring of sympathy? Also, by exiting her childhood ‘successfully’, i.e. by entering a prime institution of knowledge and setting her sights on a prestigious career unmindful of the concerns about marriage and family that her Malayali peers normally encounter, Fathima seems to have benefitted from the understanding of gender as ‘thin’ – socially constructed and partially

²¹ See <https://www.azhimukham.com/kerala/family-members-teachers-neighbours-remember-fathima-latheef-chennai-iit-student-committed-suicide-64874> , accessed 15 Mar 2020. This article is an excellent instance of the reiteration of the ideal child of Malayali middle-class aspirational regime that projects it retrospectively on Fathima.

reserved – and escaped sexualisation in her death (her desire, they said, was channelled entirely into intellectual preoccupations). But it is evident that her life and death were indeed assessed in gendered terms, albeit implicitly. She also fitted well into the “happiness assemblages formed around and through girl power”, and therefore her suicide immediately mobilized many around the discourse of the empowered girl²², especially, the empowered Muslim girl (Lesko et al 2015: 38, Khoja-Moolji 2018; Caputo 2018); her cry against Muslim-phobia on campus made her suicide an important message to all concerned about the unrelenting attack on Indian Muslims by the Hindutva regime. What if she was neither of these, what if she had not spoken at all about the reasons for her suicide? In 2004, public outrage was roused by the very public suicide of Rajani S Anand, a 19-year-old dalit student of engineering (a ‘merit student’) who killed herself when there was no more hope of financial support for her studies. This death too could qualify to be considered an ‘institutional murder’. This victim too could claim to have exited childhood ‘successfully’, aspiring to a career in engineering and trying hard to mobilize the

²² Lesko et al. explain ‘girl power’ thus: “Girl power is a progress narrative that entices, energizes, and focuses attention. It is a relational narrative in which Western (white and middle-class) ideas of agency, individualization, and ambition are “wished” on other girls. Empowered girls circulate as a form of happiness, as at-risk girls (constrained by patriarchal constraints, sexual predators, or lack of “grit”).” (p. 38)

resources to stay in education. But the discourse of the empowered achiever-child was hardly invoked in Rajani's case though one could argue that she was as ambitious and able to overcome societal constraints of gender in her life-choices. There were strong public protests in this case too. But Rajani could not escape intense sexualisation: questions were raised about her character and the government was accused of ordering a virginity test on her body (Devika 2009: 32).

Finally, a fifth regime of childhood, one that views the child, especially the Muslim child, as a 'security risk' seems emergent from recent police action against youth suspected of 'Maoism'. In a recent case which has generated enormous public outrage, the Kerala Police arrested two youths on the charge of Maoism, imposing the draconian UAPA provisions²³. The claim made by the police that the boys were under surveillance over the past five years, when they were high school students²⁴, appeared preposterous to many, but may well be intelligible within this new regime of childhood. Kerala Police has been conducting de-radicalisation trainings among Muslim youth and teenagers with

²³ See, <https://www.edexlive.com/news/2019/nov/08/how-the-kerala-polices-use-of-uapa-against-two-students-has-got-kerala-raging-8980.html> , accessed 17 March 2020.

²⁴ See, <https://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/city/thiruvananthapuram/dont-extol-maoists-cm-to-oppn/articleshow/73944408.cms> , accessed 17 March 2020.

community support, quite on the lines of, for example, other such programmes aimed at the Islamic minority in UK (Coppock et al. 2018). As has been pointed out for UK, here too, such interventions which undermine the political agency of teenagers and youth on the pretext of protecting ‘their best interests’ may do more harm than good. However, this ‘securitised child regime’ if it becomes full-blown, might be a regression to colonial times in which the colonial government was found the Indian child to be potentially seditious, and source of constant anxiety (Topdar 2015).

Conclusion

In the above discussion, I have recounted four different ‘regimes of childhood’ (and one probably in the making) that have been proposed, with different degrees of success in actualisation, from the mid-19th century to contemporary Malayali society. They do not follow one another in a linear fashion. Rather, each assemblage is closely associated with a certain form of the state and changes with shifts in state-society relations. Each of these relied upon a certain conception of the child and childhood with different consequences for children; each of these is gendered, again, with different inflections and consequences. Of these, two belong largely to the twentieth century, and the third and the fourth to contemporary Kerala, deployed on children of different social classes. They coincide with very different moments of social transformation, and refer to different conceptions of the state. The first of these, proposed in/for modernising Travancore of the late 19th century but readily adapted to post-independence India, was ‘responsible parenting’ which conceived of the child as a nucleus of potential in which parents were to invest in through maintaining a steady marriage and a stable, properly gendered family and household ; it focused on shaping the child’s essential internality without much physical punishment and turning it into an industrious (and properly gendered) subject of value to the nation and relied upon a biological foundationalist understanding of gender. The second regime proposed,

that of Romantic childhood became prominent in the immediate-post-independence decades of the 20th century, often as an implicit critique of the rationalising ‘responsible parenting’ regime that was dominant in major social and community reformisms of the time. It signalled however, not so much to a really existing political formation, but an imagined ideal society of the future: it is no coincidence that though ‘Ammuvinte Aattinkutty’ is set in an unequal scenario characterised by tenant-landlord relations, the poems in it also gestured towards a society animated by the anti-caste and compassionate values of Sreenarayana Guru. It relies strongly on the revaluation of the feminine, retaining the modern identification of women with the ‘gentle power’ of love, care, patience, and other such qualities (Devika 2007), but elevating it, raising the feminine as the fount of self-less giving and the Sreenarayaneeya value of *anukampa*, or deep compassion, that emboldens its possessor to challenge authority and both demand and elicit an ethical response from them (as Ammu does, from the landlord). It also revalues the traditional form of adult-child love, *vatsalyam*, as the mode of parental interaction with children and emphasizes non-violence.

The third, the aspirational regime of childhood, is dominant in contemporary Kerala especially among the Malayali middle-classes. There is a visible inconsistency in it between the manner in which children are treated and the ways in which the child is projected. While the child is treated as raw material for ‘child-crafting’ for parents – with no essential properties, unlike in ‘responsible parenting’ – to serve the upward

mobility of families in a socially conservative, if migration-dependent, society, it is also projected as already-agential, ambitious, and oriented towards an upwardly-mobile life, which a self-sacrificing parent must encourage. Though it is a gendered regime, gender is a ‘thin’ presence in it, so for women, it can be set apart temporarily for advancement in career. The fourth regime, that of child governance, which overlaps with the third, targets lower middle class and poor children. It deploys the global discourse of child rights; its political horizon is the neoliberal state, playing the role of the facilitator, providing support to children to maximise their agential capacities through trainings and space-making (like the adolescent groups and *balasabhas* mentioned in Ortiz et al 2013 and the Kerala State Child Rights Policy, 2016). This is however often inadequate to level the inequalities, given that children of disadvantaged families bear the disproportionate burden of state-funded pedagogy oriented towards citizenship and not the market, which does not often build skills (Mathew 2016). However, unlike ‘responsible parenting’ in which there was considerable caution about maintaining existing family life -- initiatives that let other national or international authorities assume (presumably colonial) paternalistic authority over local institutions were not always encouraged (Sriprakash et al 2019: 354) – in the neoliberal regime shaped by the global discourse of child rights, parents who are perceived to be burdening the state with poor childcare and thereby the destruction of precious future human resources can be removed, but the structural conditions as well as

the immediate needs of these families are rarely addressed. This has been especially the case of the victims of sexual violence, very frequently children of highly-disadvantaged or otherwise troubled families. As Keddel (2017) points out for child protection in New Zealand, “Within a social investment paradigm, parents are positioned as the instrumental subjects through which children will be raised in ways that avoid future costs to the state ... [The parents’] own vulnerabilities are viewed as non-legitimate. Children are viewed as vulnerable victims and ‘damaged becomings’, as the emphasis is on their future productivity... Once children are removed from their families, however, the reforms respond to them in a different way. The narrowed discourse of child vulnerability may operate in favour of children in the care system: it asserts their lack of culpability and therefore entitlement to resources...” (p. 102) In Kerala, the lack of adequate resources for child governance prevents this system from being developed to the full – but to the disadvantage of both the parents and children, with the vulnerability of neither lessened. Worse, the relentless sexualisation and abjection of female children of disadvantaged families seems to be unabated, as is evident from the ongoing struggle for justice for the Walayar children. A fifth, emergent regime, that of the ‘securitised child’, takes aim at the teenagers and youth of Muslim minority, identifying them as innocent and vulnerable, in need of ‘saving’, thereby denying them political agency. There is, in it, a throwback to colonial anxieties. The deepening neoliberal orientation in Kerala’s child welfare

policy perhaps calls for separate investigation: on the one hand, there is evidence that child-protection services offered by the state through NGOs are crumbling and even criminalized (Smitha 2021), and on the other, the State increasingly seeks to create a ‘child-friendly’ atmosphere mainly by addressing such issues as the rising drug consumption by teenagers are essentially the problems of individual children. Secondly, the solution seems to lie in more and more protectionism, as evident in the ongoing campaign against drug use by school students.

Going back to a question evoked in the introduction, whether one can make better political use of ‘women and children’ (Enloe 1993) instead of turning towards a ‘women vs. children’ framework, it appears to me that the above account demonstrates how tightly and closely the politics of gender and the politics of childhood are bound within specific politico-historical contexts. For example, in contemporary Kerala, the protectionist interpretation of child rights coincided with the protectionist understanding of women’s strategic interests (Devika 2009). But it is imperative to note that in all four regimes of childhood outlined above, the mother is positioned as the major and natural caregiver vis-a-vis the child, but the nature of the mother’s power, her relation to political authority, the nature of care and the act of giving, all differ, such that a linear conception of maternal dominance over the child is not entirely tenable. If the mother was the centre of hope and the target of much development

pedagogy of ‘responsible parenting’ in the mid-20th century, in the contemporary deployment of child rights in Kerala, the state machinery may even penalize runaway mothers, arresting them and charging them with child neglect²⁵. Also, it is evident that the story is not a journey from gendered conceptions and experiences of childhood to gender-neutral ones. The empowered achiever child of the neoliberalised Malayali middle-class is not freed from gender but the female child may set it aside temporarily and partially; as for male child, his script is clearly of the self-driven, enterprising, ambitious man making his place in the world. But the less-privileged female child has to deal with the risk of sexualisation, and the male child, with the burden of proving the benign nature of his masculinity, and both have to cope with the inconsistencies between discourse and practice of child governance in Kerala. Clearly women’s subordination under modern patriarchal regimes in Kerala is not the same as children’s, they are not even always parallel to each other, but it is possible to identify the points of convergence and departure. This essay has

²⁵ See <https://www.thenewsminute.com/article/why-kerala-woman-was-arrested-abandoning-her-baby-despite-cradle-baby-scheme-111729> , accessed 16 March 2020; <https://keralakaumudi.com/en/news/news.php?id=102040&u=mother-ditches-her-child-to-marry-tik-tok-lover-ends-up-in-jail-102040> , accessed 16 March 2020 ; <https://kafila.online/2017/11/13/thoughts-on-the-continuing-assault-on-womens-rights-and-progressivist-gaslighting-in-kerala/> , accessed 16 March 2020.

probably thrown up more questions than answers; hopefully they will generate further research.

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