

Engendering of Female Subjectivities with Special Reference to Malabar Migration – A Study

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Abstract: *Migration is an important aspect of human history. It is the movement of people from one place to another place. The causes of migrations are varied. India too has seen migration throughout its history – both internal and external. This paper is based on the internal migration process which occurred in Kerala during the first half of the 20th century. Women were also participants in this process of migration and this paper tries to look at women's participation in the process. The migrants came mainly from Moovattupuzha, Pala, Meenachil, Thodupuzha and reached Nilambur, Chemberi, Mananthavadi, Kozhikode, Iritty and Palakkad in Malabar and acquired lands and settled down under inhospitable conditions. Women had played an important role in the migration process. But the studies on migrations have not yet properly recorded the role of women in this movement. The paper mainly looks how women became engendering subjectivities in the late migration period. Ecclesiastical archival sources also showed how women became engendered. Church and the patriarchal society played an equal role in the process of engendering.*

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Introduction

Church is situated as an institution whose ideology has played a major role in the lives of the migrants. Religion is one of the strong bastions that preserve the ideological leanings of a society. In the case of Malabar migration the overwhelming majority of the migrants were Christians and there were efforts also on behalf of the Church groups to lead the migrants. Church had prominent role in shaping the morality of the community with stringent demarcations and norms about the right and the wrong. The nineteenth century church in Kerala had been influenced greatly not only by Victorian morality but also done a lot in popularizing a labouring subjectivity. The colonial period had seen profound changes within this community. The colonialist who came here tried to mould the community and its practices to confirm to European models of Christianity. The underlying morality that they propounded was influenced by the Victorian era. Thus Victorian morality can be said as one that was instrumental in shaping the community.²

Objectives of the Study

- To analyze the process of engendering through ecclesiastical discourses
- To find out how migrant women became engendered in the late migration period

It is very important to note that how women were being ‘engendered’³ in the late migration period. As discussed earlier, even though women of Travancore were engendered subjectivities, migration had lead to situations in which gender codes could be opened up or be subverted. The journey from Travancore to Malabar itself was not an easy one but one fraught with dangers and tensions. Many a time’s both men and women had to perform roles different from those back on and customs and practices may have become a causality. As seen in the case of labour, women had to play a major role in working on the land. But these openings though in limited ways would have led to possibilities for the women to break established codes. So once the community settled down

one can see efforts by the community to put back or reestablish these gender codes.

For the study of this aspect I am trying to look the Pastoral Letters of Travancore of the latter half of the 19th century,⁴ but it was seen that these letters dealt mostly with liturgical matters. The discourses relating to engendering was mostly seen in the magazines brought out by the Church as *Vedaprachara Madhyasthan* and *Amma*. These magazines mostly belonged the first half of the 20th century and continued to the 1960's. In Malabar these discourses can be seen by the end of the 1950's and this has looked at these discourses still the 1990's.

This process of 'engendering' occurs in this period is because, as part of internal migration the women in the initial stages had taken on roles where they had to work equally with men, her role in the kitchen was only minimal. By the 1970's the process of migration had came to an end. The migrants had established themselves in the new surroundings. Initially cooking and cleanliness was not a priority for the migrants. Mostly they lived by eating tapioca that would be dried and stored after harvest. But once the community had established itself, it became necessary to 'engender' the migrant women again so that she takes up her roles of a traditional wife, mother and as one who took care of the 'inner domain' of the family i.e. the home while men went about their duties in the 'outer' public domain. The demarking of these two domains is being done through the discourses that are carried on at the ecclesiastical level. Thus Church played a major role in 'engendering' women. An analysis of the Pastoral Letters of the Changanassery Diocese⁵ shows that these letters were mostly concerned with liturgical and other aspects. The roles of women, her duties and responsibilities seen further in this chapter is only seen in Malabar. This leads to the conclusion that the church felt the need for this specifically in Malabar and hence came out with these letters. This could be

because the women here have played a major role in migration had to be engendered once again.

From the church records it is clearly that during the early stages of migration women were not represented in the forums of churches. Church said that those families, who did not have eldest male member, could send the eldest female member who had the right to participate in the discussions but they were only as observers and did not have any right to voice their opinion.⁶ An examination of the *Palliyogam* Registers of the 1960's and 1970's revealed a complete absence of women in them. Thus women were excluded from these meetings is what can be inferred. Fr. Binoy from Kulathuvayal St. George church said that women did not participated in the *Palliyogam* in churches during that period.⁷ From the *Palliyogam* Register of Koorachund St. Thomas church the absence of women were visible in the meetings of the churches.⁸ Thus women who were members of the churches had no rights in the church but formed the backbone of the churches in terms of membership and as people who lived according to the doctrine of the church. Thus church molded women by patriarchal norms and ideology. Women did not have any voice or power in the male oriented church and the society. For the Church women thus only constituted the rank and the file of the church and as agents of responsible for bringing up the next generations.

According to the church the duty of mother is to bring up her children as God fearing Christians. The church's view was that it was God who gave and took away children and hence it should not be tampered with. The concept of ideal mother can be further seen from the articles of *Girideepam* magazine and from the Pastoral Letters of the Diocese during this period. Rev. Fr. G.C. Teelar wrote an article in *Girideepam* titled *Adukkala Parishkarikkuka* thus:

Women must awake early in the morning and engage with the making of different kinds of food items for the family members. She makes nutritious food but

when she spends a lot of time in the kitchen the impact is the loss of her health. House wife must know more about the healthy food which she will give to her family members. When she made food she lost a lot of time and she did not get any extra time. Women must concentrate on hygiene and should always keep her beautiful. She must make time to read books and give importance to entertainment. The duty of women is to give pleasure to her family members. For this a woman must be a good cook and also a good artist too. If she entertains her family members they would not go outside to seek other entertainments.⁹

Thus the primary responsibility of the women was household affairs of this the kitchen enjoyed the foremost area which required her attention. But the woman was also expected to be multifaceted of keep herself beautiful. The smooth running of the house depended on her as also the keeping of the family members attached to the house and not turns their gaze elsewhere. J. Devika emphasized the role of 'ideal mother' in her work. She said that:

An ideal mother was not just she who gave birth; raising children into productive subjects became the crucial component of motherly duty. Notions of motherhood already prevalent in local society often recognized a distinction between the bearer (*Pattiamma*) and the rarer (*pottamma*).¹⁰

In the case of the discourses that occurred in these magazines too this picture of the ideal mother was upheld to be emulated.

Raphael Kaniyamattam who wrote an article named *Malabar Katholikkarude Samoohya Sthithi* looked at the role of the church and along

with understanding the social status of the Catholic migrants in Malabar. He stressed the importance of self-discipline and hard work as well as on the gendered division of labour by which the man was in charge of the house and the women was the one who sustained it. He says that:

To wear good dress, to eat delicious food, to live in better houses were not the primary aims of human beings. Human beings must do hard work and for this she/he must live a disciplined life. Discipline is one of the most important factors that lead our family. Women have certain important duties in a family. To work well, to eat well, to go church every Sunday were not the primary duties of woman. Woman must clean their surroundings, keep the house neatly and put things in their own place. To be disciplined while talking. Not to talk loudly. Behave sweetly and lovingly with children and husband and don't quarrel with them.¹¹

Here also women's rights were strictly under the control of man and she was firmly put in charge of the domestic sphere. Christians were to live in a disciplined and industrious way. These two qualities were most important for the migrant community right from the beginning to succeed in their new surroundings. This had to be continued once they were settled so that the community prospers. Once settled the women were now urged to turn their attention to cleanliness and hygiene mirroring in a way the reform discourses which were analyzed by Devika and others that showed the process of engendering.

George Valiyathazhath wrote an article named *Bharyaye Prasamsikkuka* and in this article he is trying to not just to mould women but also the men so that women may become more attentive to domestic needs. The dress codes of

women were stipulated, and man or husbands were to praise her beauty so that she is encouraged to continue her efforts at these. The patriarchal society was trying to thus bring out the 'womanly qualities' of woman. To quote:

Men should praise the dressing styles of women as the dressing of women is considered as a controversial issue in the modern period. There is nothing wrong in praising modest and neatly dressed women. It is the psychology of women that they like to be praised by a man. He showed an example in which a mother gave delicious food to her husband and children when they returned back home after doing heavy work. The mother could be an ideal mother as she looks after them very well. But the family members did not say anything about the food which is made by her. After twenty years one day she gave them grass and they scolding her and asked her what she do? She said-Oh! You should identify grass and food?¹²

Thus women were seen as shallow beings who would be satisfied with a few praises. Thus praising and encouraging them it seems could be used to placate them so that they do their duties and walk within the folds of patriarchy doing what the men wants.

In the Pastoral Letters issued by the church too we can come across the reiteration of these ideologies. Mother's duty is to bring up the children as god fearing Christians. She was seen as being primarily responsible for moulding the character of the children who are the next generation so that they glow up to be 'ideal' men and women.

By the end of the nineteenth century Nazrani women were engaged in spiritual life different from their domestic roles of motherhood and womanhood. After the establishment of certain congregations among the community

the Nazrani women became moulded by the community as they became disciplined with Christian morality and chastity.¹³ The civilizing mission and the reformist movements of India also played a role in shaping, educating and regulating woman and producing them as values of morality and chastity.¹⁴ By the establishment of educational institutions Christian girls were educated in these schools and their mobility being strictly restricted. These schools taught the girl children what is to be a good Christian girl. The sisters were always vigilant about the appearance, behavior, aptitudes, and attitudes of the girls.¹⁵ The patriarchal authority gave separate education for girls to place them in the domestic space by assigning duties of child rearing and home management. After all education for them was to mould the next generation and to make 'good housewives' and 'good mothers'.¹⁶

The Pastoral Letter No. 31, titled *Daivaviliyepatti* dated 7/4/1960 Thalasserry says:

It is during after the settlement of migrants here in Malabar...a number of educational institutions were established here... if only the students were taught in Christian atmosphere by Christian teacher only then will the children grow up well and take to religious calling....in this regard I would like to remind the Catholic teacher their serious duty. By living a model life they become an example to their Christian student. By giving them proper guidance and conducting catechism classes for their students they should guide their students in the right way.¹⁷

The church also expected the laity to bear the expense towards the upkeep of the religious orders as can be seen in the Pastoral Letter No. 50, titled *Cherupushpam Mission League* dated 15/8/1965 and Thalasserry *quoted* thus:

The nuns in Malabar were trying to organize women and girls among the parishes. For the priests and nuns every family must give 50 paise in every month. This is very helpful for the priests as this money is being used for the upliftment of the church.¹⁸

Thus it was the parish members who were responsible for maintaining these 'agents' of engendering. It is very important to note that how women were being 'engendered'¹⁹ in the late migration period. As discussed earlier, even though women of Travancore were engendered subjectivities, migration had led to situations in which gender codes could be opened up or be subverted. The journey from Travancore to Malabar itself was not an easy one but one fraught with dangers and tensions. Many a time's both men and women had to perform roles different from those back on and customs and practices may have become a causality. As seen in the case of labour, women had to play a major role in working on the land. But these openings though in limited ways would have led to possibilities for the women to break established codes. So once the community settled down one can see efforts by the community to put back or reestablish these gender codes.

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Pastoral Letter No. 85 titled *Kudumba Bhadratha* dated 1/12/1983, Thalasserry quoted:

Second Vatican Council gave more importance to the concept of family. The virtue and welfare of the society is related to the family values. To keep your family values and respected each of the members in the family. Poverty, diseases, mental tensions etc. destructed family values. Alcoholism was another cause which destroyed the family life. Many of the families collapsed with the lack of knowledge about the familial values. Do not compare daughters and daughter in laws and sons and son in laws in the basis of their ability, physical attraction, job, and money etc. Do not spend a lot of money in marriages.²¹

Sexuality out marriage was considered as 'sin'. Marriage is a relationship for both man and woman. Sexuality is seen as an aid to increase population. But abortion and artificial birth control methods were considered as 'sin'.²² For church the main purpose of marriage is procreation. For the church abstinence was the best method of controlling population. Women were exhorted to be more conscious about their chastity and live in the fear of the Lord and lead a

good life. For church a good life was one without any sin. Thus sin and morality was intertwined. Church argued that when human beings understood that sin destroyed their life they would refrain from doing it. Birth controlling measures were included in the category of 'sin' and human beings did not know its after effects. The duty of mother was to bring up god fearing children. God gave children and took them. In the migrant areas women had many children as they said that if they had more children some would die due to poverty or other diseases and the chances of survival of at least some were there. They believed that as god gave them children he would protect them.²³

Pastoral letter No. 87 titled *Vivahamenna Koodasa* Dated, 31/7/1984, Thalasserry, quoted:

Marriage is an important element in the formation of family. Jesus Christ raised the value of marriage from contract to sacrament. God created his people as man and woman. He ordered them to increase their numbers on earth through reproduction.(1:27-28).Sex is considered as one of the right that men and women get after marriage. The aim of marriage and family life is reproduction and for this sexuality was permitted and was regulated by divine rules. Second Vatican Council decided to restrict contraceptives adopted by couples. Church decided that there should be a time period between marriage and engagement. So that marriage may be conducted once the two families get to know each other better.²⁴

To understand the response of the church to the policy formulated by the Indian state the Pastoral Letters send by Mar Sebastian Valloppilly the first Bishop of Thalasserry (1954-1989) is used for study. Catholic Church has always been against artificial methods of contraception and contraceptives.

Even more was their opposition to abortion which was considered as a crime equivalent to murder. The Pastoral Letters while exhorted the faithful and warned against artificial contraceptive quoted the ideas of Gandhi. As is seen from the Pastoral Letter No. 45 titled, *Kudumba Samvidhanam Thettaya Margangal* dated 12/7/1965 Thalasserry quoted:

After independence population increased day by day and the government of India has take certain new measures to control the population. They used television, radio and other mass Medias to propagate ideas on the control of the increasing population. Along with this certain new clinics has been opened in different parts of India for birth control. The attitude of church towards the government's policies is strictly written. The main aim of marriage is to give birth to babies. To bring up children is very heavy task and for this god gave certain pleasures to human beings who have tied up with marriage. Marriage is considered as a sacrament and human beings must consider it as 'sacred'. Sex is only for procreation. Man and women can control their sexual pleasures and safe methods should be used for the control of birth. If population increased human beings should migrate to a new place. Gandhiji had also opposed the use of artificial methods of contraception. When a woman used artificial methods like abortion she is equal to a prostitute.... Vinobabhave also opposed such artificial contraceptive methods.²⁵

Through this letter church was stating once again its view that marriage is only for procreation. Church also showed some examples like Gandhiji and

Vinobhaji who opposed such artificial methods to buttress their stand. For the church that was part of the migrant community migration was the remedy of such increase in population.

Conclusion

The womenfolk played an important role in Malabar migration. But the archival sources did not mention anything about the participation of women in the process of migration. The paper articulates as to why the active role shared by the womenfolk is excluded in history. The migrant women who came from Travancore were engendered subjectivities. But when they migrated towards Malabar sometimes their gender roles were broken up and they actively participated in all labour processes. Within one or two years after their settlement, the Church and the patriarchal society were trying to engender these migrant women. The ecclesiastical archival sources mention about these types of engendering activities.

NOTES AND REFERENCES

¹The discourse on the importance of labour can be seen in the *Nair* reform discourse. The hardworking nature of the Syrian Christian community was upheld in this discourse as a model to be followed. Susan Thomas, *Property Relations and Family Forums in Colonial Keralam*, Ph. D. Thesis, Department of History, School of Social Science, pp. 95-96.

²Susan Thomas, 'Church and Community Formation among the Syrian Christians of Kerala', *Proceedings of the Indian History Congress*, 73rd Session, Mumbai, 2012, I.H.C. Delhi, 2013, p. 1016.

³J. Devika, *Engendering Individuals, The Language of Reforming in Early 20th Century Keralam* looks at how the women of Kerala were 'engendered' in the colonial period, Orient Longman Private Limited, Newdelhi, 2007.

- ⁴ Joseph Perumthottam (ed.), *Mar Charles Laveenj, Jeevacharithravum Edayalekhanangalum*, HIRS Publications, Changanassery: 1999, Pastoral Letter No. 3, 1888, pp. 42-43, Pastoral Letter No.4, 1888, pp. 44-45.
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- ⁶ *Palliyogam Register of Fatima Matha Church, Peruvannamoozhi*, 1970-1974.
- ⁷ *Personal interview with Fr. Binoy*, Kulathuvayal St. George Church, 8/4/2015
- ⁸ *Palliyogam Register of Koorachund St. Thomas Church, Personal interview with Sister Joisy*, Vimalalayam, 14/4/2015, *interview with Sr. Roslin and Sr. Tresa*, Sacred Heart Convent, Kulathuvayal, 14/5/2013.
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- ¹³ Beena Paul, *Op. cit.*, pp. 1-2.
- ¹⁴ *ibid.*, p.6.
- ¹⁵ *ibid.*, p. 8
- ¹⁶ *idem.*
- ¹⁷ No. 31, 'Daivaviliyepatti', Dated 7/4/1960, Fr. George Chennappilly (ed.) *Thalassery Athiroopathayude Pradhama Methran Mar Sebastian Valloppillyude Edayalekhanangal 1954-1989, The Pastoral Letters of Mar Sebastian Valloppilly, The First Bishop of Thalassery*, *Op. cit.*, pp. 160-165.
- ¹⁸ No.50, 'Cherupushpam Mission League', Dated 15/8/1965, Fr. George Chennappilly (ed.) *Ibid.*, pp. 254-255.

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²¹ No. 85, 'Kudumba Bhadratha', Dated 1/12/1983, Fr. George Chennappilly (ed.), *Op. cit.*, pp. 442-447.

²² No.49, 'Kudumba Samvidhanam Thettaya Margangal,' Dated 12/7/1965, *Ibid.*, pp. 244-245.

²³ *Personal interview with Kochu Thressia*, Kallanode, 1/1/2011

²⁴ No. 87, 'Vivahamenna Koodasa', Dated 31/7/1984, Fr. George Chennappilly (ed.), pp. 452-461

²⁵ No. 49, Kudumba Samvidhanam- Thettaya Margangal, 12/7/1965, Fr. George Chennappilly (ed.), *Op.cit.*, pp. 244-251.