

Sexuality Landscape of Modern Kerala: A Discourse on Gender, Masculinity and the Modernity

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Review Article

ABSTRACT

An enquiry that would light on the past of sexuality and the ways in which the contemporary is of sexuality is produced through its historical legacies. Sexual topics of any kind are avoided in polite conversation in India, and any talk concerning is altogether taboo, especially in Kerala (even kiss of love). This article attempts to conceive of a contemporary history of gender, masculinity and sexuality in Kerala and what extent the variants of modernity is influenced. Kerala's restructuring in the 1990s era of liberalization has shifted the governmental and political discourses of sexuality. This paper examines the post-1990s public sphere of Kerala as it changes and yet retains its connection to earlier periods. Through the examination of formative networks of cultural practices of the region, the particular study offers a critical understanding of the politics of sexuality, gender and the modernity.

Keywords: Political discourses, Politics, Kerala

INTRODUCTION

Since very earlier times, human beings had some sense of the past, both his/her/(others) own and that of their community or people, through their decades they develop a sense of a description or narration, the past as well as present, but they are not or deliberately considered the crucial or sensitive issues of human being but also the society like, how, what and why of its extent of sexuality determine the scope of history. According to Michel Foucault in his *The use of pleasure (History of Sexuality)* 'the object was to learn to what extent the effort to think one's own history can free thought from what it silently thinks, so enable it to think differently'.

Sexuality in General and gender in particular is a subject of controversy among scholars as well as Public Sphere. So the scholars of history of sexuality and the students of Kerala history are baffled in their attempt to understand the variants of discourses, due to the confused nature of sources, lack of written records, lack of specific contemporary 'evidences' and more due to the social stigma towards certain aspect.

History of sexuality and gender

Historians studied the subjects of politics, economics, religion, and long they began to consider Gender. Sexuality became a topic of extensive historical inquiry only after the development of women's history; which marks a specialized journal, the *Journal of the History of Sexuality* in 1990. Even though some of the most prominent theorist of historical sexuality, the French philosopher Michel Foucault, focused primarily on the male experience just as traditional history had, both because of the timing of their emergence as historical fields and the nature of their subject, gender and sexuality are often closely related. Indeed, sexuality may have the opposite problem from other areas of historical inquiry, in the scholars may need to be reminded of distinctions between gender and sexuality rather than convinced of the importance of gender as a category of analysis when exploring sexuality.

Gender history is that recognizing that femininity and masculinity are to some extent social construct; it investigates how institutions are gendered and how institutions gender individual.

Study of gender focused on

- Social relation of men and women in their normative patterns.
- Peoples basic assumption about the world and its cultural symbols and meanings attached to its normative patterns¹.
- How gender worked at public sphere.

What is gender and sexuality?

Sex which mean physical, morphological, and anatomical differences (biological differences) and Gender means a culturally constructed, historically changing, and often unstable system of differences. Every political, intellectual, religious, economic, social, and even military change had an impact on the actions and roles of men and women, and, a culture’s gender structures influenced every other structure or development. As argued by Joan Scott, “gender is a constitutive element of social relationships based on perceived differences between the sexes, and gender is a primary way of signifying relationships of power [1].” The word sexuality currently defined as the constitution or life of the individual as related to sex or the possession or exercise of sexual functions and desires, is itself new coming into English and most other Western languages in about 1800. At that point new ideas about the body, changes in marriage patterns, and new concepts of gender differences and new methods of controlling people’s lives converged in western countries to create what scholars usually call “modern sexuality²”.

Differences distinguished between sex and gender sex is natural, gender socially constructed. Gender roles vary culture to culture and are therefore culturally specific. Biological roles interpreted as reflection of role of each gender in its culture and then beyond it into a universal setting. Sex is seen as existing a priori and gender as a set of attributes³. The words sex and gender constitute perhaps the single most important basis for social differentiation in any society⁴. Sex then becomes, as what Michel Foucault wrote in his famous thesis on sexuality, ‘difficult to speak on the subject of sex without striking a different pose. We are conscious of defying established power, our tone of voice shows that we know we are being subversive’ (Foucault- 1976).

Kerala ‘model’ of sexuality

The changes happened in the academic debate over sexuality and gender during the 1980’s marked the development of new discourse, in the field of history of sexuality. The historians argued that sexuality could have a history, which influenced through the nature and nurture of a society. Even in the political, economic, cultural and military changes of a country, the sexuality has played an important role.

Gender and sexuality were crucial concerns of most reform movements initiated in Kerala in the early half of the 20th century, motivated mainly by colonial education and nationalist fervor [2]. The community-based movements of this period were mostly oriented towards disciplining the diverse conjugal practices in the region, and the consolidation of normative citizenships that could be contained within the moral fold of the nation.

Table 1. Social Reform Movement: The Past and Present.

Period	Theme	Organizer
Early 19th century	Women empowerment was the central theme.	by socio-religious reform movements
First half of the 20th century	Economic and political inequality faced by the peasants and labourer’s.	communist party and other revolutionary movements
A break	Result: Women and gender issues were erased through the valorization and proklamatisation of class and related issues.	
Restarted on end of 20th century	Readdressing gender and sexuality	Feminist and LGBTQ movement
Result: internationalization of gender and sexuality –international, national and regional mobilization. And the 20th centuries Sexuality Revolution and 21st centuries Gender Revolution.		

¹ Viji.m, History of Gender Historiography, Tamilnadu History Congress Proceedings, Thirunelveli, 2015, p.442.

² Ibid., p.7.

³ Ratheesh Radhakrishanan, Masculinity and the structuring of the Public Domain in Kerala: A History of the Contemporary, Ph. D. Thesis, CSCS, Bangalore, 2006.(unpublished work, accessed- <http://cscs.res.in/dataarchive/textfiles/masculinity-and-the-structuring-of-the-public-domain-in-kerala-a-history-of-the-contemporary>)

⁴ Saji P Jacob, Family of Kerala- Developing an Intra-Family Perspective, Research Report Submitted to the KRPLLD, Center for Development studies, Trivandrum, 2004.p.27. accessed- <http://www.cds.ac.in/krpcds/report/saji.pdf>,

The paradigm shift

On the other hand, the past, present and contemporary of sexuality is 'shifted' from a normative structure to super normative, such as the incredible mobility of bodies and imaginations, the contemporary life style and fashion sense (even boy's dress sense, hair and beauty), dating with partner, sex from dark room to open area, porn site influence and new kind of sex positions (from muthuchippi to xhamster⁵)

These changes happened within the three or four decades, the public sphere of sexuality is changed because of the changes in the perception of sexualities and genders. A) Changes in global scenario – Sexuality Revolution, LGBTQ movement. B) Changes in National sphere – the legal intervention of IPC 377 by Supreme Court and NAZ foundation repeal campaign and a new life style concentrated on the metropolitan cities. C) Changes in the Kerala regional scenario-women empowerment programme, voice against dowry and 'emergence' of moral policing and its counterpart.

Another hand these changes were happened due to the impact of political development in recent times on sexuality and gender is mainly:

- The so called feminist and its opposite movement.
- The politicalisation of sex workers and its counter arguments.
- The queer movement and anti queer (moral policing).
- Online visibility (social media activism).

The construction of modernity

The constructions of 'gender' and 'sex' in Kerala are caught within a multitude of discursive problems. The most basic issue is the continuing hold of the functionalist paradigms in analysis. An equally relevant and anomalous aspect is the use of the binary conception of tradition vs. modernity to describe the framework of changes evolving in the family structures. The most fundamental argument is that, the disruptions that are taking place within this institution are a bi-product of the contradictions inherent in it. It is also the argued that the so called processes of modernization in Kerala have always been going hand in hand with the concerns of traditional structures only. In other words, there are no such differences between the role of family and the institutions of modernity, in their role of giving shape to the identities of 'gender' and practices of 'sexuality'⁶. Both historically and in the present, the conjugal family and the domestic woman occupy a central position in scholarly, state and popular self-narratives about Kerala. In histories of the formation of Kerala as a state, studies about significant regulatory processes of sexuality often mention the legal abolishment of the matrilineal system. For instance, there is a rich body of scholarship on the abolishment of the matrilineal system in the late 19th C, as a deviant kinship structure that had to be recast to construct the patriarchic family for Kerala to enter into modernity and the nation space⁷.

Mobilization of marginalized community

The post-90s is marked by the emergence of the sex worker, gay and lesbian as political actors in Kerala society through collective mobilizations. To some extent they formed a collective mentality through the formation of an association. This has produced texts and events that enact the process of embodiment and styles of self-fashioning by sexually marginalized communities. In these networks of cultural production, for political purposes, such as in the publication of the autobiographies by Nalini Jameela, the sex worker enters into representation by critiquing the recognizable tropes through which a prostitute is addressed and configured by the state and other cultural practices.

The public sphere of sexuality

What the post-90s makes possible is a vantage point to track the trajectories of sexual figures and events, how they travel and become embedded in public memory. By exposing the regulatory mechanisms of excess and containment in these cultural networks, which put forward a theory on the workings of sexuality and the possibilities of resistance embedded in it. A detailed, participatory interpretation of texts and events, the ways they travel and get interwoven into everyday life-worlds, becomes the means to access the workings of sexuality at a local level. More than laws and state-produced policies about legitimate or illegitimate sexual practices argued that cultural representations, their production and reception, become the mediated screen through which norms about sexuality are maintained and disrupted. Here

⁵ Muthuchippi is a famous Malayalam Weekly on sex stories, and Xhamster is a porn site.

⁶ Op.cit. Saji P Jacob.

⁷ Navaneetha Mokkal Maruthur, Sexual Figures of Kerala: Cultural Practices, Regionality and the Politics of Sexuality, P.h.D. Thesis, The University of Michigan, 2010, pp.3-12. https://deepblue.lib.umich.edu/bitstream/handle/2027.42/78876/navnee_2.pdf

identify the cultural as the critical realm in which the public imaginary is shaped. It is here that struggles for political and social recognition are staged⁸.

Masculinity: the power and structure

The perceptions of gender identity, the conception of sex and sexuality, and the articulation of sexual behavior as totally based on a religious value, can be seen as reinforcing this emerging dynamics of gender inequality. The most revealing dimension here is the role that family plays in all this as an agent of determining influence. In other words family is functioning here as the most crucial site of genderization or the construction of an iniquitous structure of gender relation. This is an aspect all too often undermined in any analysis of the functioning of family⁹. Within the changed context of the structure and function of family, this institution has only become more and more restrictive of the patterns of social and familial interaction. Womanhood came to be identified along the lines of reproductive functions where-as the male gender is conceived in line with the patriarchal authority structures. The world of women became the quite world of confident mothers or the obedient wives. Economic, sexual, educational, and other social decisions lay predominantly with the male head of the household. Along with the so-called virtues of development also came increasing standards of modesty, and restricted social interactions. The irony here is that, even the female gender is preoccupied with the notion that the disparities of opportunities thrust upon them are only normal things¹⁰

As a result, women are not only subjected to a consistent process of domestication, they are also manipulatively used in this process of perpetuation of this gender dynamics. Obviously it is the institution of family and the unquestionable legitimacy that it enjoys, which make this really possible. With regard to sex and sexuality practices also, this has revealed the various anomalous conceptions associated with it that are prevailing in the Kerala society. Sex has almost become a matter of ridicule and silence within the family. Hence the much talked about role of family as an agent of articulating the sexual behavior of the people have only turned out to be one of over repressive and restraining. It is almost a functionally redundant agency in this regard. Anything linked to sex and sexuality has become rooted in a framework of misplaced moralities, secretive and a matter of either privacy or ignorance^[3]. Even the so-called modernist agencies like the school are therefore not functioning to alter this frame of conception. With little or no sex education within the family, and no such deliberate intervention on the part of agencies like the school, either the moralistic discourses of religious preachers or the commercialized propositions of media are largely shaping the notion of sex. The question here is not what the agencies like the church and the media are doing, but the role that family plays to perpetuate an approach of silence and restraint about sex. The fact that, no significant regional variation is visible, is also indicative of this ambivalence that family shows towards the issues of sexual behavior across the state. The social history of Kerala, on the contrary, was quite well known for its multiple social structures, characterized by totally distinct varieties of family forms, gender and sexuality relations.

CONCLUSION

The history of sexuality of modern Kerala was created in cultural artifacts, by the influence of socio-economic activities, political interference, popular consciousness and religious beliefs. For example in the television programmes, specifically entertainments such as comedy shows (Vodafone Comedy Show), they use to present transgender and fatty-black skinned people as comic characters.

Today in Kerala's public sphere, women are considered as an object which can be celebrated for notorious and unfair dealings. From recent incidents happened in the Kerala society can understand it obviously, for example Saritha Nair, Shalu Menon, and Lakshmi Nair were treated as victims of male chauvinism (through social media and social gathering sphere).

Pseudo policing has emerged as one of the recent trends in Kerala. It has been followed by mass psycho actions like moral policing against kiss of love strike and unwanted harassment of people.

Now a day the rise and fall of a society completely depend up on the 'stand' or the 'position' of Middle class, the future of a nation is in the hands of middle class thoughts and actions.

As the above fact in Kerala, public space tries to satisfy middle class consciousness. The middle class represent a typical family structure in which they made their own rules and conditions. In this structure to some extent the sex and sexuality are external objects. To prove that, the middle class demand for fair skinned groom or bride in marriage market,

⁸ Saji P Jacob.

⁹ J Devika, EN-GENDERING INDIVIDUALS, A Study of Gender and Individualisation in Reform- language in Modern Keralam, 1880's-1 950's, P.hD, Thesis, M.G University, Kottayam, 1999.

¹ Nandy Ashis, the Intimate Enemy: Loss and Recovery of Self under Colonialism, Delhi, 1983.

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appearance of filthy scenes in television programmes and separate seat arrangement for male and female in public transport system.

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3. Osella F. Malabar Secrets: South Indian Muslim Men's (Homo)sociality across the Indian Ocean, *Asian Studies Review* 2012;36:531-549.