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## **Long-lived sociality : a cultural analysis of middle-class older persons' social lives in Kerala, India**

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# PLACING AND APPROPRIATING

## INTRODUCTION

In order for social relations to function in Thiruvananthapuram, several things had to be clear. This clarity concerned in particular persons' positions and relatedness vis-à-vis others. The construction of a relationship was only possible when these positions were regularly made explicit and some ground for relatedness had been found. In this chapter I will focus on the meanings of introductions as these formed the ideal moments for an analysis of these processes of placing and appropriating. Whereas mechanisms such as these were in place always and could be referred to in other moments as well, they became most clearly visible during introductions. Introductions set the stage for new social relationships. They formed moments in which previously unknown contacts were placed and appropriated, made to form part of an already existing social framework. Hierarchies, labels and statuses that were at times hidden or downplayed once the relationship was in place could be temporarily more visible and clear to both those involved in the introduction and to onlookers. For my research work too, introductions were crucial. Not only was I dependent on a great many persons and in need of many introductions, I was also in need of productive and 'good' introductions. This chapter explores in some detail the character of a 'good' introduction through extensive analysis of an introduction that took place in the public gaze and went 'wrong'.

The 'textbook row' that sparked aggressive political protests in Kerala in 2008 concerned a textbook lesson that pictured an introduction. Analysis of the lesson and the protests that were fuelled by it—all in light of other day-to-day introductions—provides further insights into the start of new social relationships. Introductions made visible several elementary aspects of sociality that otherwise remained unspoken of. Social background, hierarchies and mutual expectations all came to the fore through questions asked, information given and even through simple data as names and birthplaces. Through discussion of multiple introductions this chapter thus touches upon issues of belonging and relatedness and describes some key features of sociality. Although these features concerned more persons than the older persons only, they certainly need careful analysis to come to an understanding of older persons' sociality.

The chapter ends with a short chronology of some of my first contacts in Thiruvananthapuram which is meant to help situate the field and further contextualise the research population. My particular entrance in the field opened many doors but may have closed others. Through a more methodological reflection on the famous snowball method of soliciting research participants it becomes clear that no such method was in place here. Both the age-difference between the older persons studied and me and the associated cultural expectations made their involvement in this research different from described in most books

on anthropological methods. As introductions were moments in which I explained about my research objectives, these moments were equally linked to complicated methodological dilemma's concerning informed consent and anonymity.

### **THE TEXTBOOK ROW, OR AN INTRODUCTION GONE WRONG**

The months June and July of 2008 saw a political crisis in Kerala that was heated and violent. Thousands of protestors were mobilised throughout the state and many hundreds came to the main M.G. street of Thiruvananthapuram every day. The crisis concerned a textbook. More specifically it concerned a lesson in the 7th standard textbook for government schools which several of the main oppositional parties and religious leaders in the state accused of being used for indoctrinating communist ideals and propagating atheism.

In India, ruling political fractions decide upon the exact curriculum of government schools. The State government gives the orders for the contents of textbooks from which schoolchildren are taught. This direct political influence in textbooks has led to controversies in several States on numerous previous occasions. In the controversy surrounding the textbook in Kerala the leading LDF coalition<sup>1</sup> was being criticised for injecting communist and anti-religious ideology into the textbook. These criticisms were raised by the oppositional coalition of UDF<sup>2</sup>, particularly by the Congress and the IUML. The Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP), which is a large national party but has no seats in the Kerala assembly, several high placed Catholic leaders, Muslim clergy and the NSS (the Nair Service Society, a dominant caste organisation) also voiced concern and initiated protests against the schoolbook.

In the protests and anti-protests protests that became more aggressive by the day 14,000 books were burned, several *hartals* and *bandhs* (all encompassing public strikes) were staged and a headmaster of a primary school in Valillappuzha (Malappuram district) died in the rows. For several weeks the textbook controversy was front page news in all Kerala's newspapers with new political, cultural, religious and academic leaders pleading against or in favour of the book every day. The row became even more complex when different parties and persons agitated against different aspects of the book. Several other lessons in other schoolbooks were also found objectionable and some agitated against the entire book. When the government decided to constitute a committee to review the contents of the textbook and accepted the proposed changes the protesting parties shifted their anger

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<sup>1</sup> The LDF (Left Democratic Front) is Kerala's governing political coalition since 2006 and won 98 seats out of the 140 seat assembly in 2006 is constituted for the majority by the Communist Party India (Marxists) which has 84 seats and the Communist Party India which has 24 seats. Other constituents are the Janata Dal (Secular), the Kerala Congress (Joseph), the Revolutionary Socialist Party, the Congress (Socialist), the Nationalist Congress Party and the Indian National League.

<sup>2</sup> The oppositional UDF has the Indian National Congress also known as the Congress Party as its largest constituent together with the Indian Union Muslim League (IUML) and several smaller parties that are split-offs of the Congress and the Communist Party.

towards the membership of the committee and constituted an alternative committee who came up with an alternative textbook.

In the complex political reality of Kerala it is naïve to believe that a political row over a textbook is just that: a row over a textbook. Party politics and the fact that oppositional parties and ruling parties may be on the lookout to embarrass one another are dynamics that need to be taken into account. Protest were organised against state-interference in faith but could also be seen as an insistence on fanning communal and religious passions (EPW, 2008). However, the fact that a textbook lesson could stir emotions to such a degree and that ‘playing the communal card’ as it was called in Kerala was politically effective shows that there was meaning to the lesson and the textbook whether it was symbolic or not. Even though many other political processes played their part, the focus of the protests thus remained directed towards a specific lesson in the standard seven textbook called "Mathamillaatha Jeevan" which can be translated into “Jeevan, the casteless” (The Hindu) or “Jeevan who has no religion” (EPW, 2008). The lesson included not only an introduction but continued with an excerpt from Jawaharlal Nehru’s will, which revealed distance from religious ritual, and quotes from the teachings of Guru Nanak and the prophet Mohammed. On the 26th of June 2008 The Hindu newspaper published an English translation of the controversial lesson in its editorial.

### **Jeevan, the casteless**

After seating the parents, who had come with their ward, in the chairs before him, the headmaster began filling the application form.

“Son, what’s your name?”

“Jeevan”

“Good, nice name. Father’s name?”

“Anvar Rasheed.”

“Mother’s name?”

“Lakshmi Devi.”

The headmaster raised his head, looked at the parents and asked:

“Which religion should we write?”

“None. Write there is no religion.”

“Caste?”

“The same.”

The headmaster leaned back in his chair and asked a little gravely:

“What if he feels the need for a religion when he grows up?”

“Let him choose his religion when he feels so.”

(The Hindu, 26th of June 2008)

In the days of the growing controversy I was struggling to put some thoughts down on paper. I had become intrigued by the near-daily introductions I observed or formed part of. These involved two or more unfamiliar persons meeting in a public space, at an association or in the company of a third introducing party. I wanted to write about my impressions of these first encounters: the directness, the logic behind the questions, the aspects that were amplified or left out in presentations of self and the meanings of the possible answers. All this seemed somehow indicative and exemplary of how social relations were formed and experienced. Introductions, I had observed, were moments in which the most implicit and hidden social givens became temporarily more explicit. Hierarchies that did not need much attention at other times would be briefly emphasized and mechanisms that linked the new person to other persons, communities or places became more explicit. Introductions had many ritualistic components and had to be interpreted as performances in which social relations and their meanings were demonstrated. Putting such subtle and often implicit thoughts to paper however felt like a risky affair. There is the great danger of transforming implicit tendencies into fixed and definite patterns. Although it was remarkable how little variation existed in these introductions and how they mostly focused on a similar sequence of issues, these impressions were not of rules or Lonely-Planet-like codes of conduct that all agreed upon.

Let me therefore return to the textbook row. The textbook lesson and particularly the fierce political reactions to it were illustrative of several of the critical observations I was trying to put my finger on. The directness with which questions were asked, the hierarchies in social encounters and the ensuing relations, the importance and meanings of names and communities. Also, the importance of placing and appropriating could all be subtracted from this short textbook lesson and its political reactions. Although an official enrolment in school is of course a specific type of introduction, the described situation gives several larger insights to introductions in general. The social indignation about the lesson further underlined the great meaning that was attributed to introductions and made it an interesting case for analysis. The following sections consist of a close reading of the textbook lesson as an example of an introduction. The lesson, as well as my own observations, will be the starting point for an analysis of names, hierarchy and the placing and appropriating of social contacts.

### **HOW NAMES PLACE**

In Kerala and India at large, the enrolment at a primary school is generally the time when a child, his or her name, religion and caste become officially registered (Donner, 2008: 125). The name registered at the school becomes the official name a person is known by. The lesson with Jeevan's enrolment in school therefore pictured a recognisable moment for every child and adult in Kerala. According to a baby name site in Kerala, Jeevan is a name

of Indian origin and means ‘life’ or ‘soul’.<sup>3</sup> The name Jeevan does not give away much. Contrary to most names in Kerala it does not give any conclusive information on its religious background. Jeevan can be Hindu, Muslim or Christian. Not so with the names of Jeevan’s parents. Anybody in Kerala will know that Anvar Rasheed is a Muslim name. Anvar is not a very specific name but Rasheed is of Arabic origin and therefore indicates an Islamic background. The mother’s name, Lakshmi Devi on the other hand is clearly a Hindu name. Lakshmi is the name of a Hindu deity and Devi means ‘goddess’. Exceptions notwithstanding Muslims in Kerala often chose Arabic names, Christians English names or names that derive from Biblical characters and Hindus Hindi or Malayalam names. Christian first names for instance could be Alice, Beth, Isaac or Joseph; Hindu first names Bindu, Vijaye or Radha and Muslim first names Mohammed, Fatima or Jemilla. To indicate the commonality of the usage of religion-specific names it is interesting to refer to an internet site where baby names in Kerala can be searched. There are several such sites where one can find a name that is appropriate for each religious background. Interestingly the search engines gives the possibility to fill in ‘any’ for the beginning letter of the name (or any letter of the alphabet) and to fill in ‘any’ for the sex (or male/ female) but does not give the possibility of ‘any’ in the case of religion. One has to chose between Christian, Muslim or Hindu.<sup>4</sup>



Figure: The concerned textbook lesson about Jeevan

Names therefore often gave essential information to place someone. Knowing a name could be equal to knowing caste, social standing and religious background. From the name Lakshmi Devi it was not immediately clear to which caste Jeevan’s mother belonged but among Hindus in Kerala many family names were in fact caste names. As described in the previous chapter, this was especially the case amongst those from ‘higher’ castes. Examples of caste names were Nair, Pillai and Menon. The majority of the older Hindus were called Nair or Nayar, which indicated that they belonged to the Nair caste.

Although social reformers as Sree Narayana Guru (1856–1928) have stressed the need to do away with caste names and have suggested their followers to take on other names, this practice has not caught on amongst all castes and was certainly not noticeable among the research population.

<sup>3</sup> <http://names.newkerala.com/baby-name/23467/jeevan>

<sup>4</sup> See for instance: <http://www.keraladaily.com/kerala-greetings/baby-names.php>

When Jeevan's background from an 'inter-religious' family is established the headmaster raises his head and asks which religion he needs to enter in the application form for Jeevan. From the headmaster's body language the reader understands that the situation has become uncustomary. Normally he will know which religion to fill in without asking any further questions. He may ask the parents to be sure but will mostly know their religious background from their previous answers. That is, if he hasn't already understood from other indicators such as clothing, (the absence of) jewellery or other attire. In the case of Jeevan the headmaster is not sure which religion Jeevan's parents have chosen for him to follow and he asks the parents about their choice. When the parents answer that he should not fill in any religion or caste the headmaster is really taken by surprise. His question, no longer part of the application form but now out of personal concern, about Jeevan when he grows up is asked 'gravely'. This is very recognizable in the Kerala context. It is the last answer that is most surprising and was considered shocking by most of the protesters: "Let him choose his religion when he feels so."

Letting a child chose his or her own religion was seen by the dissenters as a negation of religious life. Each person is born into a religion and a religious community. The element of choice was seen as threatening to sociality and especially if it concerned a young child such as Jeevan. There were also protesters who probably did not mind persons changing their religion or becoming a-religious but were upset by the suggestion of authority that was given to this young child to make his own decision on such an important matter as his faith. The strength of the family and the authority of the parents are under threat if children are encouraged to think this critically and individually.

Agreement with the lesson should on the other hand be understood in the context of Kerala's long history of Communism and Socialism. The education minister in charge at the time, M. A. Baby, explained that the textbook had to be seen as promoting religious diversity and tolerance. The objective of the textbook was to present concepts in social science in a critical and reflective manner and to introduce students to social issues through various analytical exercises (EPW, 2008).

It is difficult to assess the conflict in terms of power. In Kerala even small political parties can bring about large-scale public strikes and protests called *hartals* or *bandhs*. However, the fact that almost all religious communities (Protestants did not find reasons to object) had some noteworthy members who disagreed with minister Baby's idea and opposed the textbook gives insight into the range of the resistance. In this light the CENSUS data of 2001 on religion are revealing (Registrar General of India, 2001). In the Thiruvananthapuram administrative division, called *taluk*, only 554 persons are mentioned under 'religion not stated' out of a total of 1'039'465 persons in the *taluk*. This must indicate that even though many more persons objected to organised religion or saw themselves as non-believers the religion one was born into still served as a pivotal identity marker.

### APPROPRIATING CONTACTS

When names did not give enough information on religion or caste, questions became more direct. There was no taboo on asking questions on background information and the headmaster's questions were in this sense not unique. In my understanding of the logic behind the introductions, new acquaintances needed to be both placed and appropriated or made into one's own. By placing a new contact, the contact was in a sense added and fixed into an existing social framework. Links were sought with persons and places that were already familiar, hence the many direct questions. The answers to these questions gave points of reference to place a new contact and create a sense of belonging.

A common question the headmaster did not ask concerned the parents' native place. Such knowledge too gave indirect information on someone's social background. Christians from Thiruvella for instance mostly belonged to the Marthomite denomination. Muslims from the Malabar region were known to adhere to different religious practices from Muslims in Thiruvananthapuram. Knowing a native place also offered a means to find common relatives, friends or socio-historical commonalities and there through establish relatedness. Indian philosophical traditions, Ayurveda included, invoke an ecological conception of relations as flows of substance between persons and places. The idea of a locality specific social identity corresponds with substance shared through a common local environment (Lambert, 2000: 84). In Kerala a shared social identity was created through locality specific commonalities: such as hailing from the same area or having attended the same school or university. These commonalities constituted of more than easy material for conversations, as a common locality already implied a common understanding and relationship. Common localities were not only explored out of interest but immediately constituted a certain degree of relatedness. Hence the many clubs and associations for persons from different regions and states who resided in Kerala.

Janet Carsten's introduction of the term 'relatedness' may be useful in this regard since it leaves enough room for culturally distinct interpretations. Carsten used the term "to convey, however unsatisfactorily, a move away from a pre-given analytic opposition between the biological and the social on which much anthropological study of kinship has rested" and hoped that "'Relatedness' makes possible comparisons between Iñupat and English or Nuer ways of being related without relying on an arbitrary distinction between biology and culture, and without presupposing what constitutes kinship" (Carsten, 2000: 4-5). In a description of the Kerala context too, relatedness is a useful tool to underline the flexibility as well as the importance of kinship-type relationships. The concept of 'relatedness' also resembled more closely the way in which Malayalees saw many of their kin and non-kin relationships.

New acquaintances were thus appropriated or made into one's own through the construction of a direct relationship which could be built upon other relationships but had a



right of its own. One way new contacts were appropriated was by addressing them with kinship terms. Kinship terms in Kerala were used to call any new or old contact. The headmaster too called Jeevan 'son' even before he asked his name and would probably continue that practice after the introduction. The usage of kinship terms in general was very frequent and common in nearly all social contexts. 'Auntie' and 'uncle' for example were used to address people who were of ego's parent's age. The terms 'older sister' (chechi) and 'older brother' (chettan) were used among Hindus on a large scale to address people who were older than ego but not from a much older generation. Christians and Muslims oftentimes used slightly different kin-terms when they addressed each other as older brother (chachan and kakka) or older sister (eedathi and thaatha). According to the persons I interviewed, the usage of 'chechi' and 'chettan' in addressing strangers was something quite specific to the Thiruvananthapuram area and indicated a desire to stress the importance of a degree of relatedness.

That this meant an appropriation of the contact as one's own became most clear when the persons become a topic of conversation. Instead of referring to a third person by means of the main (or earlier established) relationship between the second and the third, the relationship between the first and the third person was stressed. When enquiring about the health or well-being of someone's husband for instance, the term uncle was used to stress one's own relationship with that person. The question thus would be "How is uncle?" instead of "How is your husband?". This appropriation of contacts was not specific to Kerala, however the degree to which the addenda "chettan" or "chechi" were used even for relative strangers was quite specific to the Thiruvananthapuram district and area. As being related to many persons or knowing about large numbers of people was considered imperative, it made great sense to appropriate a great many contacts (Mines, 1994:1).

Whether the usage of kin-terms indicated a certain respect or familiarity depended very much on the setting. When students addressed someone from a senior batch year with the term 'bigger sister' it denoted respect and a certain sense of belonging. Also, when parents of friends were addressed as uncle this signified both belonging and respect. In both these settings, the name of the relevant person was often added to the term for example: Dhanya chechi (Dhanya being a name and chechi meaning older sister). However, the terms older brother and older sister were also used in a slightly derogative way for instance when a service was desired from a stranger believed lower in social status. By using these terms people pretended to belong to a stranger in order to get a better deal or more service. Using kin terms to create a sense of belonging was thus a common practice in many different contexts.

During this research I came to refer to many of the older persons I came to know as 'auntie' or 'uncle'. "You can call us auntie and uncle" some would say. Others would phone me and say "This is Vijaye auntie speaking". In their turn, most of the older persons I came

to know would talk to me or talk about me as ‘mole’ or ‘kunyamole’ which meant daughter or granddaughter. When advice was given it was sometimes added that they were “only saying this as to my daughter”.

The references to kinship became an essential part of my most intimate relationships. Writing in terms of ‘respondent’ or ‘informant’ would therefore be a problematic cultural translation. It would stand for a misplaced alienation as well as hint at a certain understood authority on my part which was not how our relationships took form. In fact, I know that most of my uncles and aunties in Thiruvananthapuram would have felt insulted had I called them ‘respondent’ or ‘a lady/ man I spoke with’ to their face. Also, referring to my uncles and aunties as respondents seems like a miss-placed objectification. It would serve no other purpose than to fortify or objectify my status as a researcher and their status as informants neither of which were experienced as such in the field. To the contrary and as I will elaborate on in more detail later, many preferred to believe I visited others for my study and them mostly for social reasons making informed consent a somewhat foggy concept.

Naturally there were also many persons I did not become particularly close to. Some persons I met only once and some persons emitted a certain formality and seemed to prefer a more formal relationship. These persons are referred to as Mr. and Mrs. in the text. Even though these relationships had a more formal sense to them, they sometimes resulted in very intimate information sharing.

#### **A FINE WEB OF HIERARCHY AND AUTHORITY**

The kinship terms or addenda that were used could incorporate distinct or subtle hierarchies. When the headmaster calls Jeevan son, their already apparent difference in age and stature is delicately underlined. Age was a crucial composite of identity in Kerala and when an older person was referred to as ‘uncle’ this indicated respect for his seniority. The other way around, when I was called ‘mole’[girl/ daughter] or ‘kunyamole’[little girl] this indicated that above my role as a researcher, my younger age and sex were defining my social identity. Although these hierarchies may be unimportant or clouded in day-to-day relationships, they could be re-iterated at significant moments. For instance when decisions had to be made and the younger person was subtly reminded of his or her subjugate position.

In the textbook lesson the hierarchies are brought to the fore in yet another way. In the short conversation nobody but the headmaster asks questions. The headmaster has the authority and the role to ask for names and religion and nobody questions him. From the first sentence it becomes clear that the parents and Jeevan have just entered the headmaster’s room and that the headmaster—or someone else—has not been introduced. Although this fragment comes from a textbook only and is thereby both fictional and fragmentary the fact that the person with most authority asks the questions is recognisable from the introductions that I experienced or observed. Most introductions in which an age-difference was apparent

involved an active questioner and a passive new contact. In my case for example instead of explaining my own background, name and motivations, these subjects would all be asked for. As a 'young girl' I too learned to wait and reply.

Introductions could involve two persons who met each other for the first time and asked questions but could also involve a third person who was known to both parties. When a third person introduced two unfamiliar acquaintances status became even more central. The 'introducer' would start with a short explanation of the socially respected aspects of the other persons' background. In the case of men this would often revolve around the point that he was an important person. Sentences like "He is a very big person." or "He is very important" were supplemented with list of credentials of distinguished companies or rewards or compliments that person had received or worked for, continuously stressing the status of the person in question (Mines, 1994: 22).

In the case of women this was a little different. These introductions were often shorter and less 'boasting' than those of men. When good qualities were mentioned it mostly referred to certain homely qualities or to other members of her family. "She is married to" or "she has one daughter and two sons". Only rarely were a woman's professional accomplishments mentioned and then often on a lighter tone or laughed away by the woman in question. (Kakar & Kakar, 2007). The characteristics or accomplishments that were mentioned most—and mattered most—for both young boys and girls were high rankings in school. For men it was additionally important to get into engineering or medical colleges; to study and work abroad and to work in a high position. For women: being married, having children and being a good householder were important identity markers.

To introduce those who were retired, mention was made of the offices they held—or had held—in community institutions as the SCA but also in charity organisations (Mines, 1994: 13). Older persons knew a great many details about a great many persons. At several instances the way in which a reference was made to a distant acquaintance or a relative of an acquaintance resembled a mantra. Even in long chains of persons (that persons' neighbour's son's daughter), all intermediary individual details were mentioned. Pronouncing these complete secular mantra's seemed to put narrators at ease, as if they were happy to succeed in their own memory tests. The few instances I observed in which a detail was not remembered led to great frustration. When so much importance is placed on who you know, those persons' affiliations and contacts should also become your own through repetition and appropriation.

Unfortunately the textbook lesson gave no information on the body composesures or body languages of the four characters. More than articulated, hierarchies in social relationships and introductions may be embodied. The headmaster first 'seats' the parents but we do not exactly know how. Does he give them permission to sit down with a hand gesture or with a wink or does he stand up and physically offers them chairs to sit on? Is

Jeevan also seated or does he remain standing? Do the parents and Jeevan look the headmaster in the eye or do they look down and wait for the headmaster to take the initiative of asking the questions? Also, we do not even learn which one of the parents answers the headmaster's questions and to whom the questions are directed. All these issues that are left unsaid in this fragment do have a great impact on how introductions are in actuality experienced by those who form part of them.

The great benefit of the anthropological research method of participant observation is that the researcher too comes to embody and thereby physically experience all these different aspects of social relations. The body "is the threshold through which the subject's lived experience of the world is incorporated and realized" (McNay, 1999: 98). The researcher's own body therefore becomes a tool to understand sociality. For instance through making mistakes: at one occasion I said a polite "*namaskaran*", including the formal hand gesture, first to a lady I had just interviewed and then to her servant who stood right next to her—both their reactions made immediately clear that I had trespassed a social boundary. Just as children learn to embody distinction, I had to make the same mistakes (Ray & Qayum, 2009: 159). Standing up when older persons enter the room, smiling to strangers as a way to recognise their presence and keeping quiet when those with more authority talked were all further examples of bodily reactions that became my own and that became particularly pronounced during new introductions.

### **MY FIRST INTRODUCTIONS**

The previous sections in this chapter have all centred around the important ingredients of introductions and the many meanings that introductions entailed. I have argued that introductions were moments in which important information became more explicit and new contacts were placed and appropriated. To further introduce the older persons in this study and to contextualise the relations that developed between me and them, let me now turn to my own introductions in 'the field'.

When I first came to Kerala for a research period of four months in 2003 I needed to look for ways to meet older persons. It was suggested to me that the YWCA had many senior members and so I called their office to ask whether they could help me get acquainted with older women. In that first telephone call to the YWCA I was referred to Dr. Elisabeth who, according to the lady on the phone, would be able to help me. Dr. Elisabeth turned out to be a well-placed, unmarried medical doctor with many contacts. She told me about the Senior Citizens' Association she was a member of and called the president's wife, whom she knew from yet another association, to tell her I would like to come to their next SCA meeting. A few days later and armed with Dr. Elisabeth's visiting card I went to the meeting and met Lata auntie. Lata auntie was an instant help the moment I came to the meeting. She introduced me to her female friends saying that I needed their telephone numbers so that I

could fix an appointment for an interview and that I was doing a research on older women in Thiruvananthapuram. Before the end of that first meeting I had about eight addresses written in my notebook and had been introduced both formally by the president during the meeting and more informally by Lata auntie to her friends before and after the official part of the meeting.

From then on, I was introduced over and over again to many different people. Often, because I had asked to be introduced to persons in a particular situation. Just as often, because somebody felt it was imperative that I should meet an acquaintance of theirs. Like that, someone I would have met and interviewed in one context would on another occasion introduce me to a new person. Although some slight variations existed I found as described above that these introductions had many ritualistic components. In the social sciences this way of doing research is mostly referred to as the snowball method. As a snowball gathers more and more snow while rolling down a slope, the researcher is supposed to collect more and more research contacts and data while going through the research period (Barnard, 2006: 193).

While the analogy may be visually interesting, I often found it far from appropriate. The picture of a rolling snowball hints at a situation of neutrality. Apart from gravity, no other forces seem to affect the snowball on its way. Also, all the gathered snow adds up directly to the volume of the snowball whereas in reality more information does not necessarily or directly mean more insight or understanding. In fact, new information sometimes appeared to completely destroy the foundations beneath earlier acquired insights.

Perhaps because of the great Indian obsession with cricket, I often felt that the analogy with a cricket ball would be more appropriate. Just as in cricket, the ball (or research) was batted in many directions and, in most cases, caught by any one of the older players in the field. As the batsman, I had considerable influence on the directions of the ball, but this influence was only effective at certain moments and not always very precise. Introductions depended on the person who introduced me and the impressions they got about me and my research. Sometimes, through verbal and non-verbal reactions, I sensed whether I had made a positive impression on a new acquaintance. They would compliment me on my clothing because I wore a *salwaar kameez* or on my research topic and would smile or tell me to come by their house. ‘Bad’ first impressions also happened such as when the president of an association explained that my research would be of no interest to the members in his association because “they weren’t interested in hearing about their own problems”. Quite obviously my research or person did not interest everybody. Yet in between the obvious acceptations and the scarce clear rejections there was a larger grey area in which things were left unsaid. Many variables that will remain unknown also played a role in whether persons enjoyed talking and enthusiastically introduced me to others or ignored my presence.

The added 'method' in 'snowball method' hints at a great degree of planning and control. This was however not always the case. The inequality that is often assumed to be present in relationships between researcher and researched was in this case differently constructed. It was not based on economic means or professional authority but more indirectly based on my selections and interpretations of the information they gave me. Otherwise, most probably because of the great age-difference and possibly because of a desire I came across in many educated Indians to teach an unknowing and younger 'Westerner' about India, I was more often told than telling. I was more often explained than explaining and given directions instead of giving them to others. In many ways this greatly helped my research as specifically these interactions gave great insight in many aspects of older persons' sociality as this was their way of placing and appropriating our relationship in their daily lives. In this respect, allowing older persons to direct me turned out to be a fruitful method to explore sociality but it was not a method to control or plan my interactions with the research population.

Those who agreed to talk with me saw their cooperation as a favour that they were doing me, as neither they nor I were under the impression that my research would ultimately benefit them (Donner, 2008:19). As an unmarried young 'girl' my work was oftentimes not taken very seriously. Familiarity with generally well-regarded large quantitative surveys among this higher educated segment of the population may also have contributed to the lack of esteem for my type of anthropological research. In many ways this disinterest for my professional work or questions was to the advantage of the quality of our informal conversations. Whereas many of the older persons seemed more interested in our occasional chats and my empathic reactions, some liked my visits and requested my return. Intimate details were easily shared and often followed with "but what about your research, where is your survey?" Their apparent unconcern with my professional status resulted in many ethical questions that I will deal with later, on principal codes as informed consent. Although all knew I was doing research on older persons, most seemed at least partially unaware of their own roles in this study.

Getting started by knowing authoritative persons like dr. Elisabeth or Lata auntie and her husband Anand uncle, the then president of the SCA, was surely helpful in many ways. It opened doors and gave ample insight into the formal running of these associations. At new introductions I was often asked through whom I had first come to know older persons and mentioning a well-known person like Anand uncle was always effective. The link however may have been restrictive in other contexts and gave rise to yet more ethical dilemmas. The persons I met knew I was in touch with the president and possibly tried to be 'politically correct' when talking about the association or about other topics that my first older acquaintances were involved with. Also, in introductions involving authoritative figures, the possibilities for refusal or true anonymity were limited as many participants in this research

turned out to be in close contact with each other. As far as possible then, I hope to have made their contributions anonymous by changing their names in the text and at times changing or omitting telling details, especially when these could be socially problematic. Nevertheless, as I found out when an older friend read my masters' thesis, complete anonymity was unachievable.

Introductions through mutual contacts were really the only way to approach new acquaintances in Kerala and with time I came to understand the ways in which authority and status worked and became more skilful at making use of the contacts I already had. My dependence on senior persons for information and contacts gave me a clearer perspective on what issues were deemed important by older persons themselves. The great involvement of certain 'aunts' and 'uncles' who became interested in helping me was always inescapable and mostly beneficial. It varied from subtle suggestions to friendly interferences. One morning I would be called with the message to cancel all my interviews and appointments for that day because I was invited to an interesting meeting. Other times I was asked what a common acquaintance had said to me about her divorced daughter and yet other times I was told that I shouldn't visit one person that often or I was asked why someone was so special that I would take the trouble to go there more than once. "You should meet this person, he speaks very nicely". Or, "Don't go there it will be of no use" was advice I got from those who kept an eye on my progress. And, as a 35 years younger decent girl, there were limits to how much I could explicitly demand or refuse.

Finally, the batsman is the main player in the cricket game. And so it was I who analysed the material and wrote down the thesis. I influenced introductions through asking specifically about particular people. When after some time there seemed to be a bias towards healthy and active older persons, I asked to be introduced to those who were less mobile. Also, when I decided there were more essential things to do than to arrange another meeting with someone "who spoke very well" I left suggestions as they were, without following them up. In the end working with a cricket ball had its advantages, especially in Kerala. Just as a cricket ball travels much greater distances than the peacefully rolling snowball, I too feel that I saw and heard more than when I had not been given all these pieces of well-meant advice. Some of the most informative meetings I attended were suggested in this way. Also, being flexible and listening to advice helped others to feel involved and probably motivated them to help me on the way. Finally and most importantly the process of research itself gave me the clearest understanding of how older persons in Thiruvananthapuram generally saw younger persons and especially younger women. The behaviour they expected and the different positions and duties they attributed to younger and older persons became clearer through their direct involvement in my research.

## CONCLUSION

When I explained to Anand uncle that I felt these introductions had some meaning and that there was a logic to the number of direct questions asked he agreed with the observations but did not attach much value to the phenomenon. He said that questions were asked out of courtesy and that I should not read too much into them. At a different occasion however, he told jokingly of an occasion in which Malayalees were asking each other so many questions that by the end of their meeting they knew everything there was to know about each other. Of course, introductions can be a way of ‘talking nicely’ and questions can be asked out of courtesy. Still, there are several reasons why I would argue that there was indeed a meaning and a logic behind introductions. First, there were striking similarities in the way acquaintances were made and questions were asked. Second, the stress on mechanisms of placing, belonging and appropriating and the information that made these processes possible were not exclusive to introductions but could be observed in more aspects of social life in Thiruvananthapuram. Third, the answers on the questions asked were remembered and repeated in different situations and there was social disapproval of forgetting ‘important’ details as names, birthplaces and information on close relatives. Finally and fourth, the moral conviction as well as condemnation that were inspired by the textbook lesson were clear indicators of how much importance was attributed to the questions and especially the answers that were asked in this particular introduction. Clearly there were good and bad answers to certain questions. There are specific context and individual-dependent meanings to every name, kin detail, background and religion that is asked for and given.

The committee that was formed to review the controversial lesson proposed some changes that were again very interesting. They recommended that the title of the chapter should be changed into “Freedom of Faith” so that no references were made to organised religion. They also recommended replacing the extract from Nehru’s will with a quote from his speech on secularism and added a saying by Sree Narayana Guru on religion and harmony and a reference to the Indian Constitution’s support of religious freedom. The most interesting proposed change was however the following: Jeevan’s name and the names of his parents were to be removed (Devika, 2008).

If introductions were really only ways to talk nicely or be polite the answers to the introductory questions of the headmaster would not have incited hundreds of angry protestors to take to the streets or burn books. In the upcoming chapters it will become more clear how certain social mechanisms functioned once relationships were established and the phase of introduction was over.