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

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# GENERATIONS OF CHANGE

## INTRODUCTION

This chapter centres around experiences of change. Older persons, per definition have had long lives full of change and in this chapter I explore which of these experiences of change they found particularly meaningful. Three persons are followed more closely: I.P. uncle, Mrs. Leela and Mrs. Yasmin. All were above 65—and were thus considered ‘old’ according to most definitions—but with their ages of 67, 84 and 70 in 2003 and 72, 89 and 75 when I last saw them in 2008 they belonged to different generations and had different experiences of ageing. I.P. uncle and Mrs. Leela belonged to the Nair community and Mrs. Yasmin was Muslim. But even though their individual views on change varied greatly, the differences in their views did not necessarily represent their different religious communities. Although all three spoke of the changes that were taking place in society and in their personal lives, they had different ideas about what was changing and what they thought of these changes.

In their thoughts and experiences of change, I.P. uncle and Mrs. Leela at times closely followed dominant societal discourses about change. These discourses concentrated on the demise of the joint family household and the fear of ongoing westernisation and modernisation. Mrs. Yasmin on the other hand experienced change quite differently and attributed radically opposing values to what she saw as change. However different these attitudes and experiences of change, they all centred around notions of gender, the family and the household.<sup>1</sup> Older persons as well as common discourses seemed to regard these aspects of sociality most susceptible to change.

In topics like gender, love and arranged marriages, dowry, joint and independent living arrangements and old age homes the various perspectives on change are discussed. Since each of these topics was present in dominant societal discourses, these discourses will be unravelled through a focus on individual examples. Counter voices are heard to further analyse the room for individual variations.

## GENDERED RELATIONS

I first met I.P. uncle and his wife Radnam auntie at a Senior Citizens Association meeting in October 2003. That time—and mostly for strategic reasons—I was particularly focussing on

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<sup>1</sup> Within anthropological literature it is proven difficult to find one agreed-to definition of the household. This is because people within different contexts seem to attribute different meanings to the concept. According to the Encyclopedia of Social and Cultural Anthropology: ‘Many keystrokes have been registered, and much ink spilt, in attempts to produce a universal, etc, one-size-fits-all definition of household. None exists.’ (Sanjek, 1996) I have used a flexible definition of household that interviewees themselves could give shape to. During interviews I would first ask directly how many people were living in their household. Next, I would ask more detailed questions about these persons and possible other visiting guests, tenants or servants, in order to get an understanding of what the ‘household’ really meant.

older women. I was doing research for my MA thesis and found that women were only interested in talking when I specifically added that the focus of my research was on them. Men on the other hand, talked and wanted to answer questions also when they knew they were not the focus of my research. I.P. uncle was interested to hear more about my research aims and methods. He did not agree with my focus on women and told me to ask older men too. I agreed with him and said that I liked to start with interviewing him. He replied that he and his wife were busy with preparing for a trip to Australia but that he was happy to talk before their departure. One week later I visited the couple for a first interview in their home. They lived in a luxurious house in a quiet residential neighbourhood. I.P. uncle opened the door and Radnam auntie was on the phone. They were talking to their daughter in Australia and I was given the phone to introduce myself to her. After a few minutes they ended the telephone conversation and came to sit with me in the living room.

The couple of 60 and 67 had been married for 39 years and had very different personalities. I.P. uncle was extrovert and talkative; he was always the one to answer my questions first. Radnam auntie was not as talkative and usually had to think for some time before she replied. They said that this was in general a difference between them. While I.P. uncle socialised with many and liked to frequently meet with new persons, Radnam auntie had a few very good female friends in whom she confided and needed no new contacts. Their different levels of education and confidence in English amplified their difference. While I.P. uncle had studied up to postgraduate level and had worked as a manager in a big organisation, Radnam auntie had studied up to standard plus two (12th grade) and had never worked outside the home. “Whereas I am a people manager, she is a house manager” I.P. uncle explained.

Many of I.P. uncle and Radnam auntie’s proclaimed ideas on their own roles as husband and wife were congruent with their more general ideas on how men and women in Kerala society were to act. To I.P. uncle and Radnam auntie it was obvious that men and women were supposed to be different and that they had differently prescribed positions fitting cultural ideas on appropriate behaviour. In a conversation that started about his wife, I.P. uncle made a more general statement on one of the differences between men and women in marriage.

“In marriage you have to adjust. I have found that women, after six months in marriage, will start to become possessive and demanding. They will be jealous if you give attention to other women. And they want to make decisions about money and about everything. This is different for men. Men will only be afraid sometimes that their wife is liking someone else.”

In 2003 and later in 2005 and in 2008 I met them regularly and on many ‘public’ occasions. We became friendly and I would often visit them or talk with them over the phone. They

were an active couple and went to many societies' and neighbourhood meetings. Sometimes they invited me to these meetings, at other times I came to a meeting with someone else and met them there. Radnam auntie did not attend all these meetings as frequently as her husband did. "That's because she is a housewife" I.P. uncle once explained. But from Radnam auntie's words and body language it was also clear that she better enjoyed chatting with her friends around her house and in other more private settings.

In 2008 when I.P. uncle introduced me to another couple he had judged interesting for me to meet, we talked again about our first meeting. I told the befriended couple about I.P. uncle's insistence that I should also interview men. I.P. uncle said he also remembered this first meeting and further elaborated on this suggestion by saying that anyway "90% of what women know they have learnt from men". Although he further added a little joke on how women were created by God to make life complicated for men, it was apparent that for him there was definitely some truth in his first remark.

As the different positions of I.P. uncle and Radnam auntie indicate, many of their decisions conformed to the as more traditional described standards for husband and wife behaviour. During the interviews I.P. uncle's voice was dominant. From the moment he told me to interview men, he was the one who took the lead and had the initiative in the relation I had with him and his wife. This social dominance was also apparent when I met the couple with others. Whereas I.P. uncle was the enthusiastic dominant organiser, Radnam auntie was—in public—the more quiet, somewhat submissive housewife. She had become a housewife who had never had to provide for her family with a job outside the home. These positions fitted well with both their personal character traits as well as with strong cultural ideas on gender. However, as I got to know them a little better it was clear that Radnam auntie had her own ways to influence their mutual decisions and create her own options. She was, at least in public, less outspoken than I.P. uncle but that did not mean that she did not have opinions or that they were mute. Through her reactions, but also through I.P. uncle's behaviour it was apparent that he had to take note of Radnam auntie's ideas and preferences and could not act without her agreement. Also, even though it took her fewer words than her husband, Radnam auntie found ease in expressing her disagreement in many instances. She, for instance, preferred longer stays in Australia and later questioned her husband's conviction that older persons were supposed to advise younger ones. Their disagreements, and the way in which they were expressed, showed how Radnam auntie had a different, yet effective, way of expressing herself.

Strong gendered stereotypes required women in the positions of wife, mother, sister, daughter-in-law or daughter to be obedient, submissive, and self-sacrificing (Usha, 2004; Mukhopadhyay, 2007). The prevalent cultural ideas on gender gave great responsibility to husbands, fathers and brothers to provide for, decide for, secure and protect the women in the family. Women were on the other hand stimulated to be accepting, nurturing, loving and

accommodating. I.P. uncle and Radnam auntie's visions on the division of tasks in their marriage fitted, at least when I.P. uncle was presenting the matters, clearly in this cultural mould. As a true paterfamilias I.P. uncle held the best interests of his wife and daughter at heart. That was, within the limits deemed appropriate to their different positions. He was interested in their wellbeing and supported them in all ways he knew as possible. Strong gendered stereotypes largely informed his ideas about an ideal division of labour and behaviour. Nevertheless it was clear that Radnam aunty only allowed and agreed with I.P. uncle's more abstract theories on gender if they suited her individual interests as well, if they didn't she had her ways to convey her takes on the matter.

Notwithstanding these dominant stereotypes and discourses on gender, the older women of this study were exceptionally well-educated and at times very skilful in ultimately having things done their way. Many women I talked to had studied for more years than Radnam auntie. Education had not only helped many of these older women in their younger days to gain some degree of independence—as many had been the first in their families to leave their natal home unmarried—it had for many represented their career. Education was the prime professional area in which these older women had been accepted and even encouraged.<sup>2</sup> Flipping through the SCA address book the terms 'housewife' and 'professor' were the most frequent labels used for women members. Although a majority of the older women had stopped working upon marriage, many of those who had continued to work had become teachers and professors. Many of these professionals in particular could be described as strong-willed women who were very capable to tell their minds. Whether they did so depended very much on the setting and its strategic use as these women themselves were very conscious of their possibilities and constraints. Nevertheless, age had in several ways an effect on gender and many older women who lived with their husband or 'alone' had managed to shape their current lives in such a way that they were very much in charge of their own decisions. They were members of associations they appreciated and chose to do the activities that suited them best. Through a large degree of choice in their daily contacts they socialised intensively with like-minded persons and therewith partially created a liberal environment in which these stereotypical notions were laughed about or set aside.

Finally, some men too, did not agree with the general stereotypes or chose to lead their lives differently. A 77 year old Christian man and his 73 year old wife said:

Husband: "But you can learn much about a relationship between husband and wife when you look at their money issues. We know people, even if the wife is working and getting a salary, she'll have to ask her husband for every paisa she wants to

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<sup>2</sup> Nevertheless, it is important to remain critical of the all too easy assumption that education directly enables women and offers them more freedom always (Mukhopadhyay, 2007 & Kodoth in conversation). The fact that the majority of these highly educated women stopped working after marriage underlines this warning.

spend. Our situation is exceptional. When we go out, she is carrying the purse. If I carry it, I will just forget it somewhere.”

Wife: “I have freedom in spending the money, otherwise you have to beg your husband.”

Husband: “With us there is only 4 years of age difference. But you can really tell the difference. Women who have been working in the kitchen only they grow old fast, whereas women who have been in college, they stay fresh. See my wife, she is still fresh.”

Nevertheless, from the usage of words like “exceptional” and “difference” it is clear that this couple too, presented their situation as contrary to what they considered normal. This way of framing more egalitarian ways against the stereotypical notions about gender was common and only reinforced existing conventions. It shows how individual men, women and couples while seeing ways to deflect from the common route still used it as their focal point.

#### **A ‘LOVE MARRIAGE’ WITH AN ARRANGED BRIDE**

I.P. uncle regularly said he and his wife had had a ‘love marriage’: “I selected the girl and then it was arranged. Her father and brother decided it, she didn’t get to decide.” At one point he suggested I should always ask other persons whether they had a love marriage or an arranged marriage since he explained it said a lot about their ideas and worldviews. Love marriages were in general seen as modern and as a problematic change from the earlier accepted norm. By talking about his marriage in the way he did, I.P. uncle showed that he believed himself in this respect to be quite modern.

I.P. uncle and Radnam auntie frequently talked about their daughter in Australia, who was their only child. The daughter and her children meant a lot to them. Radnam auntie and I.P. uncle had lived in Mumbai when their daughter had been born and as I.P. uncle had been inspired by the one-child policy he said he had therefore decided one child was enough. I.P. uncle’s youngest brother was also living in Mumbai at that time and his son had become like a second child to Radnam auntie and I.P. uncle. Their daughter’s marriage had been a ‘love marriage’ to a boy of the same Nair caste. I.P. uncle and Radnam auntie said they did not have a say but had given her advice on what was important before she had met anybody. They were proud to tell me that neither had they been asked to give dowry nor had they given out of their own initiative. When I.P. uncle said that he and his wife did not get involved in their daughter’s choice of husband, he made a statement that many of his generation would find too progressive.

The couple was furthermore busy helping I.P. uncle’s younger brother with the arrangements for the marriage of his son. They had taken up this task as they had helped raise the boy and felt he was their son. The boy was interested in a girl from a different state

and caste background and reportedly wanted his uncle and aunt to go talk with her family. I.P. uncle and Radnam auntie explained the importance of the talks and told me of the things they were particularly adamant about. I.P. uncle said he and his wife were not strictly opposed to the proposition of their 'son' but told me extensively of the dangers of inter-caste marriages.

“You don't know how the family will be. We are very particular about religion and caste. People from a different caste or background, 40% of them divorce within one year. We'll talk about all these things. About adjustment, that is very important. We'll have to see whether she'll adjust. And about habits, like food eating and also about the physical life. If she wants to have that and he doesn't, or the other way around that will be a problem. Or if she wants to eat late and he wants to eat early. And their jobs, how they will make that adjustment. You have to decide and plan, than only it will be successful. But the thing is now, if it goes wrong. We'll be the ones who are going to be blamed. Since we are doing the arranging. So we'll see about all that”

I.P. uncle stressed it was imperative to have the same ideas about food, hygiene and customs and equated these ideas with caste background. Although others did not talk in such explicit terms about inter-caste marriages, references to food habits were often made and implied a similar exclusionist caste consciousness (Donner, 2008: 63-90).

The concepts of 'love marriage' and 'arranged marriage' are used all over India (Donner, 2008; van Wessel, 2001). The strong ideal is the arranged marriage which is a family affair in which the future bride and groom are matched through the initiative of their families. Not only the arrangements and organisation of the wedding are a family affair, the wedding itself is also seen as an event that establishes an unbreakable bond between families. Since family interests define individual interests, the young individuals are taught to accept the choice of their elders. Romantic love is not deemed necessary or even beneficial, as respect and adjustment are considered far more conducive to a good marriage. Older persons who are more experienced and are said to have learned to put collective interests over individual ones are understood to better find proper matches.

Almost all older persons had themselves had arranged marriages. Mrs. Leela who was 84 in 2003 came from a well established Hindu Nair family. She spoke reverently about her own marriage which had been arranged in 1937 at age 17. The fact that it had been an arranged marriage, to her “gave it some sacredness about it”. Before getting married she had received a letter from her mother telling her exactly what to do and how to behave in married life. She said she had followed it to the letter and had had no trouble with it at all. Now that her husband had passed away, she found it hard to be a widow. Even though they

had sometimes quarrelled when he was alive, she said they had had a companionship: a mutual understanding that she remembered with fondness.

In a love marriage, in theory, the initiative does not come from the family but from the couple itself. The love marriage was commonly seen as modern and coming from the West (Lindberg, 2005: 153; Wise & Velayutham, 2008; Donner, 2008; van Wessel, 2001). A 'boy' and 'girl'—as unmarried persons were called far into adult life (Mines, 1994: 177)—meet and it is their mutual decision to get married. Family does not play a large role as such a marriage is an individual affair.

So much for theory. In reality there were a multitude of variations to each of the components that made up a love or an arranged marriage. Since with a love marriage young persons potentially harmed their most important relationships, it was in everybody's interest to form these alliances in socially acceptable marriages or prevent a marriage from taking place. I.P. uncle boasted about his own, his daughter's and his son's supposed 'love marriages to me—a Western unmarried 'girl' from the Netherlands—but to others he most surely emphasised these marriages' arranged or confirmative nature.

Even in the descriptions I.P. uncle gave it was clear that certain aspects of all three of these marriages had been 'arranged'. Even in their daughter's case, who they had 'only' explained what she should look for in a prospective partner, this influence should not be underestimated. When from early childhood on, parents are explicit in their demands and wishes these can in turn easily become the child's own (Kalpagam, 2005: 209). If that does not happen, the child will nevertheless be so aware of the possible disappointment or friction that awaits any other choice, that it can chose to adhere. I.P. uncle's daughter had for instance managed to find a Malayalee Nair in Mumbai: someone from their own community and clearly an ideal candidate.

Love marriages were sometimes made into arranged marriages when a young couple asked their parents to take up the arrangements and asked family members for their accord (van Wessel, 2001: 93). In the case of I.P. uncle and Radnam auntie's 'son', the boy had expressed his desire and let his aunt and uncle decide on the basis of their conversations with the girl's family. This arrangement too, had characteristics of both a love and an arranged marriage.

I.P. uncle and Radnam auntie's own marriage did not exactly fit the standard definition of a love marriage either. Radnam auntie's opinion had not been asked, neither by her brother or father, nor by I.P. uncle himself. There was no courtship or relation as a prelude to the marriage. Still, the marriage was not arranged entirely by the families and I.P. uncle said he had made the final selection. The fact that he did not speak of his own father, mother and four brothers and six sisters was telling. It was this deviation from the arranged marriage norm that probably—and to a Western 'girl'- made him call it a love marriage.



When I.P. uncle told of the organisation of the actual wedding, the fact that it was not an arranged marriage as traditionally understood became even more clear.

“We had a simple marriage [wedding]. I bought a really cheap sari. Since she only wears it this one time. You are not supposed to wear the sari after the wedding. I didn’t ask for dowry. And we had our wedding in the temple. Usually the parents will want to do the invitations, but I told them that I would do the inviting. So I invited about 200 people, not too many. We had some small snack and that was it. Nothing elaborate.”

The fact that they had had a relatively small wedding and that I.P. uncle had bought the sari and had sent the invitations meant that his own elders—parents, aunts, uncles—had been more or less excluded from the preparations. This has made the wedding a more individual affair, one of the most constitutive characteristics of a so-called love marriage.

Although the vocabulary of love and arranged marriages seemed to indicate two distinct possibilities, upon closer look, there was in fact a whole continuum of choices (van Wessel, 2001; Donner, 2008) but in all cases older persons’ opinions, experiences and preferences shaped and limited the options available to their offspring.

#### **ADAPTATIONS AND FLEXIBILITY**

All older persons’ marriages had involved a great deal of arranging by their seniors. Although there were some persons like I.P. uncle who called it differently, from interviews it became clear that most had not individually chosen their partner. The couples who formed exceptions to this rule had had specific reasons that only further underlined the omnipresence of the arranged marriage ideal. The two ‘love marriages’ among the older generation that I heard of had been alternatives in cases in which a properly arranged marriage had been problematic. When looking for a prospective partner, these individuals had known that they were considered bad matches. One lady, for instance, had been abroad for studies and had come back too old and too independent to be a proper match for a good husband, she had therefore pursued the search more individually. In the other case the man had a minor physical handicap which had made his prospective potential matches almost surely handicapped too. He had similarly decided he was going to find a wife by himself, but as his family had understood his situation all had accepted this decision. Interestingly both these couples who had thus themselves married through personal initiative had arranged the marriages of their own children, and considered this the ideal.

During an interview with a 70 year old Muslim lady and her daughter-in-law, the senior lady was the only one wearing a headscarf. At the end of the interview when we were still chatting on about dowry, arranged marriages and love marriages the two giggled and looked as if they were sharing a little secret and silently discussed whether they were going

to let me in. Finally they explained that the marriage between the son and this particular daughter-in-law had been an interfaith love marriage. They explained how this had brought about a difficult time for all of them since it had been hard for the two sets of parents to agree to a marriage between a Christian girl and a Muslim boy. In the end the daughter-in-law had converted to Islam although her in-laws still allowed her to pray in her Christian fashion and attend church. “The family doesn’t mind, she can pray in the way she wants to” the mother-in-law said. “And now she is my favourite daughter-in-law!” she laughed.

Mrs. Mathew’s story was also about a ‘scandalous marriage’ that had finally been agreed to. When Mrs. Mathew’s first husband passed away, she was left with four children, the youngest three the oldest eight years old. After about two years Mrs. Mathew’s father had suggested she should remarry and Mrs. Mathew agreed to a proposal by a widowed man who himself also had three young children. After the marriage, the children were all raised together. Then one of Mrs. Mathew’s daughters and her new husband’s son fell in love.

“We were not in favour of the marriage and advised against it, but they were quite stubborn.” Mrs. Mathew explained. “We had to ask for special permission from the Bishop. He said that since they are not blood relations, it was permissible. Those days I never took problems as problems, I tried to understand from all sides and then solve it.”

Now that most of Mrs. Mathew’s children had moved abroad this couple was the one couple she saw most often on alternating days.

It is easy to idealise the happy endings presented above. However, I was only witness to specific moments in time. Oftentimes, the dramas in older persons’ lives had already been more or less resolved. Especially with ‘scandals’ like these it was also likely that only one particular version of the history was shared and that I was uninformed about the more problematic aspects, or about those precise things that had happened in the past.

Another way in which the traditional ‘rules’ regarding marriage were regularly disobeyed was when marriages ended in divorce. Divorce was often explained as one of these immoral things that had come from the West (Donner, 2008: 24). But even if few people approved of the phenomenon, the number of divorces kept rising. None of the older persons themselves had been divorced, but amongst their children divorce was not uncommon, and often a cause for great sadness. Still, historians have demonstrated how amongst the matrilineal Hindu castes both love marriages—as well as divorces—have a long history in Kerala (Lindberg, 2005: 145). Contrary to both Christian and Brahmanic family and marriage systems, in matrilineal Hindu castes marital instability, a loose bond between the spouses, the possibility of love-marriages and the existence of divorce were all prevalent (Lindberg, 2005: 145).

Several said divorce was a subject they would not easily discuss with friends, clearly emanating the impression that as a ‘Westerner’ I would find divorces normal and unproblematic (ibid.). The parents were mostly negative about children’s divorces but had accepted the situation nonetheless. Flexibility was required for relations to survive, which made that important rules and ideals had to sometimes be ignored for the larger good.

### **DOWRY COSTS**

I.P. uncle did not only repeatedly say how he had not given any dowry, he also told me to ask all my interviewees about dowry, as he believed that information said a lot about a person. In Thiruvananthapuram I encountered staunch opponents as well as givers and receivers of dowry among Muslims, Hindus and Christians. The staunch opponents especially often related how the dowry-problem, as they called it, was increasing. With that they meant that costs as well as pressures were mounting. Whether this emic experience was based on objective observation can be discussed, although the scholars referred to below did see a similar trend. It was probably also influenced by an increased familiarity with the down-side of dowry, through examples in their surroundings of older acquaintances affected by dowry or through problematic examples in their charity works.

In the literature on dowry, an etic distinction is made between *stridhana* and modern dowry (Srinivas, 1996: 158-180; Linberg, 2005: 142). The first is seen as a pre-mortem inheritance that is given to a bride by her family and remains legally her property. The latter on the other hand refers to a transfer of a large sum of cash, gold or other things of value from the bride’s to the groom’s family (Lindberg, 2005 :143). Historically in Kerala, dowry was especially prevalent among the patrilineal communities (Brahmin and Christian) and often in the form of *stridhana*. The Syrian Christians in particular were often indicated as those with highest occurrence of dowry giving in Kerala (Gallo, 2005: 234). From there it began to spread and turn into modern dowry (Lindberg, 2005: 146; Government of India Planning Commission, 2008: 418). In Kerala –and other places as Uttaranchal, Assam and Tripura—“a plurality of traditions in the family form and the terms as well as forms of exchange of sons and daughters—a result of differing and uneven patterns of social evolution over previous centuries—[...] was now being replaced by a more ‘mainstream’ model.”(Agnihotri, 2003: 312). The spread and rise of dowry in Southern and Central Kerala has now been noted among all social groups (Kodoth, 2008:263; Lindberg, 2005: 156; Osella & Osella, 2000: 101; Kakar & Kakar, 2007: 57). While research into dowry giving and its multiple effects is complicated because of its official illegality (since 1961), it should be one of the primordial themes to further investigate in contemporary Kerala or India at large.

Older persons spoke of dowry mostly in the form of ‘modern dowry’ although some Christian women explained how they had been given dowry as an early inheritance at

marriage time. It was however, the large sum of money, gold and appliances given (and regularly demanded) at the marriage time of young women, that was resulting in so many problems and pressures. One aspect of dowry pressure that was easily noticeable was the increased dependence of women on their male relatives and in-law families before and during marriage. With dowry, many a bride lost either her inheritance or her own earnings (Lindberg, 2005: 156). Dowry could however also greatly trouble the bride's relatives. Relatives had to acquire large sums of money to marry their daughters, sisters or granddaughters which made many enter into ultimately unproductive financial arrangements.

To the poorest in the slums, dowry posed a tremendous problem. On several of my visits with different NGO's both poorer persons themselves as well as the older and much more affluent volunteers explained how dowry had often led to a chain reaction of accumulated problems. However, dowry also impacted those from the highly educated middle and upper classes. The amounts expected—in cash or in goods and jewellery—increased with social standing which resulted in big problems also among the wealthier middle class families. Especially families with several daughters were dealt—or dealt themselves—a heavy blow.

The results of the financial pressure that this caused were at times felt far into older age. I came to know of two cases in which seniors were directly affected by the dowry demanded of their (grand) daughters. In one case a lady in her late fifties who had been in a reasonably paid lower middle class job took on early retirement to get a bulk sum. In the long run, this lady would have made far more money had she kept her job until she really needed to retire. However, she explained that she was in a hurry to get her daughters married and that she needed the money quickly. To add to the amount her husband sold his shop. Although husband and wife were younger than 60 and did not consider themselves old, they made two decisions that would continue to financially effect their lives. Sometime after they had both given up their employment the husband got into serious health trouble. He was too weak to look for a new job and needed medical treatment which they could no more afford. Their experiences sadly illustrated how dowry related decisions greatly affected many persons' financial situation.

Another instance that I came to hear about concerned an older lady of 78. Her situation was one of the most interesting illustrations of nearly invisible 'downwards' flows of financial support. During the interview with this 78 year old lady called Mrs. Pankajam I had asked her whether she was the proprietor of the house she and her daughter's family were living in, which she had then affirmed. After the formal interview was over, Mrs. Pankajam's 51 year old daughter continued to chat. During this informal chat, the daughter showed me pictures of the wedding of her eldest daughter, Mrs. Pankajam's oldest granddaughter. On the wedding pictures the young bride was covered with large beautiful golden necklaces which was nearly always a clear indication of dowry. A compliment on the

jewellery induced the daughter to give an explanation of the exact workings of dowry giving. She started to complain about the soaring gold prices that made their second daughter's upcoming marriage a financial worry. Although the future parents-in-law had not asked for any specific dowry objects, she said it was generally expected within their milieu to give a certain amount of gold to the in-law family. The daughter explained how it had been quite difficult for them to find good partners for their two daughters. Several potential families had enquired about the daughters but had been put off by the fact that the greatest possession of the family, the large family house, was still in grandmother Pankajam's property. Ultimately, some drastic action was required. The daughter explained:

“The families told us that it was too far away for them. They wanted the house to be my property so that they would be surer to get it. So, that's why she has given the house to us now. We've inherited the house from her, in order to get better proposals”.

Whether the matter had indeed been so explicitly raised by the prospective in-law families or whether Mrs. Pankajam's daughter had also promoted this handover of property because of the obvious benefits it had for her remains an unanswered question. In any case Mrs. Pankajam's experiences demonstrated the heavy burden dowry at times legitimately posed on the older generations. Dowry giving often entailed great financial sacrifices but such suffering was considered normal and not in itself questionable to those who partook. The intertwined nature of dowry streams made the effects of dowry multifaceted and their consequences far reaching. Dowry effected far more persons for a far longer time than only the bride. It seems therefore of the utmost importance that more research makes these intricate links more visible. Perhaps the negative consequences that dowry payments may have for those with the least control over resources may then become recognised.

#### **A JOINT HISTORY IN A DISCOURSE OF DISINTEGRATION**

When Mrs. Leela's father had still been alive all would stand when he entered a room. It was considered improper behaviour to sit down before her father sat down. Her grandfather and father had been strict men and all were a bit scared of them. Mrs. Leela's father had built the house in which she now lived in 1931. There had been a time when the whole family lived in the property, together with their ten servants. Different servants performed different household tasks and lived in one part of the building. Even though Mrs. Leela now occupied only a part of the complex and rented out various parts to private renters and to a big company, the house still held many memories to a family past. Pictures of Mrs. Leela's relatives adorned the walls and because of its sheer size it was not hard to imagine it once having been occupied by a large family.

Since Mrs. Leela's family was a fortunate one and because of the matrilineal inheritance system the Nairs adhered to they possessed a large plot of land where many relatives now lived. Several family houses had been built next to each other that were in 2003-2008 still the property of Mrs. Leela's close relatives. On one side of Mrs. Leela's house lived her two year younger sister-in-law, widow of one of her deceased brothers. On the other side lived her sister of seven years younger, the only living sibling she had left. One house further down the road lived a niece.

Although Mrs. Leela was now back in the house of her childhood, she too had moved around. After finishing school in Thiruvananthapuram she went to Madras to a Christian Women's college. Later she did her BA in Philosophy back in Thiruvananthapuram. In the first thirty years of married life Mrs. Leela and her husband stayed in eighteen different places all over India. Only in 1972 did the retired couple come back to Kerala.

Of her four children, only her daughter lived in Thiruvananthapuram. The 64 year old daughter lived in a neighbourhood relatively close by but suffered from severe diabetics and therefore did not come often, so Mrs. Leela explained. Mrs. Leela's three sons all lived in India. One was in Bangalore, one in New Delhi and one lived closer by in Ernakulam.<sup>3</sup> In total Mrs. Leela had 9 grandchildren and in 2003 already two great-grandchildren. The 9 grandchildren had moved further away than their parents and several had settled abroad.

Mrs. Leela's health condition was in 2003 already quite serious and over the years only aggravated further. In 2005 she had become nearly immobile. Although she repeatedly said she didn't mind staying at home, the pains in her body did form a problem. Her inflexibility made the simplest task challenging and painful.

Mrs. Leela said that her sons kept telling her that selling the house would be a better idea. The house was very large and needed a lot of maintenance and special care. Still, Mrs. Leela was very attached to it and said its age gave it a special charm. Real estate companies had already expressed their interest but Mrs. Leela said it would be up to her sons to decide what they would want to do with the property after her death. However, as long as she would stay alive she was not planning to sell.

Because of Mrs. Leela's family's privileged and matrilineal background she lived close to several relatives. All her children were still in India and contacted her frequently. Her daughter lived in the same town and saw her every now and then. Mrs. Leela was particularly positive about her sons' good will for their mother. They called her often and tried to look after her. Since Mrs. Leela needed a stroller to walk in the house for instance, one son made a little pocket for the telephone so that she could carry it with her. The sons further gave Mrs. Leela appliances such as a microwave and a washing machine but also lots

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<sup>3</sup> Bangalore is at a distance of 753 km, Delhi at 2814 km from Thiruvananthapuram. Ernakulam is the other big city in Kerala and is at about a 4 hours by car.

of advice on diverse matters. Although Mrs. Leela was not agreeing with them on selling the old house, she did seem to appreciate their involvement. Mrs. Leela stressed that the sons also asked her to come and live with them but that she was not willing to.

Even though Mrs. Leela had more close contact with her children and other relatives than many other persons I met in Thiruvananthapuram, she was negative about the ways in which she believed social relationships had changed over time. During the interviews I had with her in 2003, 2005 and 2008 she repeatedly talked about the issues that bothered her and conveyed a sense of loss and sadness. According to Mrs. Leela the changes she had witnessed during her lifetime were far greater than those other generations experienced.

“Our generation was brought up in an entire different way. Respect, courtesy and politeness were the most important values that we were taught. There is very much a generation gap. I don’t think anybody who is 50 years of age at this moment, will experience that much of a gap as my generation does. Modern girls are all educated, working and rather selfish. In the joint family everybody would be sharing. Sometimes even two couples would be sharing one bedroom, now you wouldn’t even be able to make a child share his or her room with another child. There used to be this unselfishness and a division of labour. In the joint families we were brought up to be very selfless. But modern people want everything for themselves, they have become very selfish. We used to all share rooms, but now everybody wants their own room and their own bathroom.”

The decline of the joint family household that Mrs. Leela referred to was a commonly discussed topic (Shah, 1998: 64; Patel, 2005: 26). I.P. uncle too spoke of the ‘micro-family’ that had come into existence.

I.P. uncle : Technically qualified children have to go out of the state, and usually the country, just because there are no jobs here. The government can’t provide the necessary jobs and so there’s a high unemployment rate. Parents need to stay here and so the micro family is brought into existence. We used to have joint families, but we don’t anymore. [...] 90% of the seniors are against that development. Many will talk negatively about it. For instance, a lot of the children go abroad. Many parents will then complain: our children are putting us in old age homes. But the children have no other options, being abroad.

M: Is this all a good change or a bad change?

I.P.: I would say it is the reality. You have to accept it and face all this.

M: And what would be the ideal in older age?

I.P. Ideal old age is when your relatives are surrounding you. When you’re healthy and have sufficient means and lead a normal way of life in good company.

Radnam auntie: For me that is the same.

The joint family household institution, a form of joint living with several siblings and their partners and children, was commonly seen as the embodiment of valuable cultural values. The nuclear family, to the contrary, was associated with negative values such as individualism and materialism.

The joint household had a different makeup in the matrilineal context of Nairs in Kerala than in the rest of mostly patrilineal India. Historically the Nairs who formed a large population group in Kerala were matrilineal and so were several other smaller Hindu and Muslim communities (Mukhopadhyay & Sudarshan, 2003). In matrilineality, property is inherited through the female line. This gave husbands a more marginal role in decision making processes than brothers and maternal uncles. Although this system was thus substantially different from patrilineal forms of joint household life, the current discourse on the demise of the institution of the joint family household resembled closely to more general discourses all over India.

Both in academic literature on India as well as in popular Indian discourses on radio, television and in newspapers and among the older persons in Thiruvananthapuram the decline of the joint household was represented as a social change with a great impact on many aspects of society (Shah, 1998: 64; Patel, 2005: 26). Since the 1950's social scientists have described the joint household as an ideal with a strong presence in India (van Wessel, 2004: 93). This was part of a larger discussion within the social sciences on the impact of industrialisation and urbanisation on family life. Modernisation theory had it that all this would lead to a reduction in the size of household arrangements. For a long time social science research on the Indian family focussed on those questions that problematic modernisation theories had posed (Appadurai, 1996: 2-3). The research concentrated on family composition and the position of the joint household (Cohen, 1998: 103; Sokolovsky, 1997). Although modernisation theory is not as popular as it used to be within the social sciences some of its components have very much become part of a common understanding and discourses on change in India. Perceived changes in family relations and household arrangements in modern society were of great interest and concern to many and were generally understood to form the root of present societal transformations and problems (van Wessel, 2001: 97; Cohen, 1998:118).

The decline of the Indian joint household and the consequent emergence of old age as a time of difficulty thus formed part of a general narrative of decline (Cohen, 1998: 88). The narrative went as follows: There used to be a time when Indian families formed multigenerational joint households. In such households the elders of the family were listened to and were respected. The needs of older persons were taken care of and the intergenerational contacts countered problematic character traits such as egocentrism, jealousy or individualism. Then under Western influences and related processes such as



modernisation, urbanisation, individualism and materialism, families started to break up (Desai, 2005: 106). The social respect for older persons dwindled as did the social values that were constitutive of joint family life.

During a conversation in 2003 with Mr. Narayanan, the secretary-general of the All India Organisation of Pensioners (AIOP) in Kerala, he brought up the concept himself, saying about his peers that their “Status has definitely gone down. Even their own children are concerned with their own lives only. This is the American-style of life, you know. Our joint family system was very useful for the elderly. It gave them due respect. That system has now completely gone. The joint families have completely disappeared”.

It is interesting to see that particular academic discourses on the topic and the general discourses in society had so much overlap (cf. Ferguson, 2006: 32). In an All India Radio discussion prof. dr. Indukumari, a Professor in Sociology at the Kerala University, explained how she believed that the decline of the joint household and the subsequent separate living of the different generations brought about many problems in society:

“The ills of the present day society such as divorces, the violent trends in the youth and the rising suicide mania, are all largely due to the absence of the benign influence of the elders in families and the lack of opportunity for handing down the wisdom of the elder generation to the youngsters” (All India Radio, 21/11/2003).<sup>4</sup>

#### **SOME HOUSEHOLDS ARE MORE JOINT THAN OTHERS**

There are several problems with this widely accepted but also criticised discourse. One of the major problems is the fact that there are many thoughts, but little data, on the before-picture (Cohen, 1998: 93). Many of the academics and lay persons who have referred to such a better past, have taken classical texts as their references. In these texts, the ideals of joint living and intergenerational reciprocity are often mentioned. The question remains however whether these ideals were described or prescribed. Although these texts have their own value and interest, they should not be studied as historical documents. André Béteille has criticised those who tended to confuse these sources by saying that ‘the sociological, as opposed to the Indological, approach must take its orientation from the lived experiences of the present rather than the presumed ideals of the past’ (1993: 451).

Joint family households were for instance regularly assumed to be harmonious and properly working units that respected the needs of the weaker individuals and the older relatives. Historically however, this is difficult to endorse. Also, when comparisons are made the positive aspects of the before-picture are easily compared to certain negative aspects of the after-picture. It is noticeable for instance that when I.P. uncle spoke of the ideal family situation in older age he stressed the importance of having relatives close by but

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<sup>4</sup>Original radio discussion was in Malayalam. The text was transcribed for me in English by one of its participants, Mr. Rhadakrishna Menon, who was himself a participant to the discussion.

that when he explained the proceedings with regards to his brother's son he explained that living as a married couple with your parents is a recipe for problems. This discrepancy between ideal notions and real choices was very often present in talks about joint household living.

Additionally, there are no serious data that indicate that the joint household is indeed disintegrating. Upon a closer look for instance, it becomes clear that at no point in history all Indians used to live in a joint family household setting. As there have always been multiple variations in household arrangements. The developmental cycle of the household—as members age they take on different positions—generate plurality (Shah, 1998: 70; D'Cruz & Bharat, 2001: 167). Nevertheless, joint family household living was and is still the major household arrangement in India (Shah, 1998: 64). Much in this discussion however, depends on the used definitions of 'joint' and 'nuclear'. Most, if not all, of the *tharawads*—ancestral houses in which a joint matrilineal family dwells—in Kerala had been split and few of these large joint families continued to live together. On the other hand three generation households were very common. Data on living arrangements for the elderly in Kerala show us that an overwhelming majority of the elderly lived with their offspring. (Irudaya Rajan & Zachariah, 1997: 21). On average in India, the 60 + resided in households with at least seven members, often consisting of three generations. Only six percent of the Indian elderly were living with their spouses alone, another six percent lived in a household “where their immediate kinship is not present” (Irudaya Rajan & Kumar, 2003: 79). Nevertheless, older persons were of course not equally 'scattered' over the households. Whereas 60 % of the Indian households had no elderly persons amongst them, 31% had one and 11% had two elderly members (Irudaya Rajan, 2001: 614).

Households are no bounded, physical entities, but form a set of relationships and transactions (Gardner, 1995: 121). The joint family household consisted also of aspects such as an emotional or financial togetherness that was continually negotiated and 'worked at'. There are thus many in-between forms of family and household arrangements that correct the picture of a dichotomy between joint and nuclear family household living. I.P. uncle's and Radnam aunties finances and properties for instance were in several ways overlapping with their daughters'. Even though they did not live in a joint household, the couple did at one point (2003) live in their daughters' house and then used money of the sold house to buy an apartment for their daughter. This sharing of properties and financial decision making was very common and indicated a certain joint mindset even if the household was not joint (Mines, 1994: 193). I.P. uncle and Radnam auntie's participation in the marriage preparations of their brother's son, whom they had partly raised and in many ways saw as their own son, also attested to a joint mindset.

Interestingly, the general appreciation of joint household families was often incongruent with personal wishes or choices. In 2008 for instance, I.P. uncle and Radnam auntie were

asked for advice concerning their 'son'. The young couple was by that time already married but had been having some troubles with the parents (I.P.'s brother and his wife). I.P. uncle had again been reportedly asked to moderate and had advised his brother and the young couple to split the household and live independently of each other. I.P. uncle said that living together with parents was a recipe for difficulties and that he and Radnam auntie had only lived with her parents for a few days and with his parents for a few weeks over the years. This discrepancy between individual experiences and dominant societal discourses was common and warrants further analysis.

A final point that nuances the debate on the 'disintegration of the joint family' concerns its assumed link with the processes of modernisation, westernisation and industrialisation. These processes that have come to represent so many combinations of smaller developments have different meanings in different localities. The influence of industrialisation on the joint household is not the same in India as in other—for instance European or Japanese—settings (Desai, 2005: 106). Similarly, the joint family household as it exists as a strong cultural phenomenon in India is very different from historical household arrangements as were found in Europe. It makes therefore little sense to predict changes in India on the basis of changes in family arrangements in Europe (Desai, 2005: 106).

Not all agreed on the benefits of family life and the supposedly ideal character of the joint family household setting. Several senior researchers in Kerala whom I came to know made critical comments about the differences between the discourses on joint household life and the, at times much harsher, reality. Dr. P.K.B. Nayar, founder of the Centre for Gerontological Studies in Thiruvananthapuram told me about the sad issue of elderly abuse. According to this expert, elderly abuse was increasingly frequent and mainly occurring within the household setting (Jamuna, 2003: 125-142). Children who were co-living with their senior parents could become afraid that being nice and affectionate would only make their parents more demanding and expectant in the future which led some adult children to be unkind or even violent towards their senior parents. On the other hand, children who did treat their parents with love and respect ran the risk of becoming disliked and mistreated by their other family members, said professor Uma Devi, a retired professor in economics at Kerala University. They were accused of being in the hunt for financial gain; often a cause of great tension amongst siblings.

Mrs. Leela's opinion on the selflessness of the diverse family members and the just division of labour were informed by a positive image of the workings of the joint family household. In its most ideal form different family members were indeed sharing rooms, labour, lives and incomes together. On the other hand, the most ardent advocates of nuclear family life at the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century and the start of the 20<sup>th</sup> pointed at the unbalanced power position of the *karanavan*. This most senior matrilineal male within the matrilineal joint family was responsible for all major decisions and had de facto more influence over his

sisters' children than their own fathers had. The educated young men from the upper classes who took a stand against the power of these male elders believed nuclear family life was in principal more egalitarian and just. These protests were accompanied by several law reforms that further sped up the disintegration of matrilineality and joint family households. In 1925 individuals belonging to joint families were given the right to demand their own share of property. In 1976 a new law enforced that property could no longer be owned jointly but had to be assigned to individuals (Lindberg, 2005: 19-20). It is therefore in any case historically inadequate to pinpoint merely at exterior factors as explanations of the shrinkages in household size, as some of these changes were actively sought after and promoted.

As the days of political protest against the joint household institution were over, most older persons dreamed of days gone by. Some persons tried to make this dream into a reality. In 2005 several of Mrs. Leela's younger relatives were building and planning a family 'estate'. Mrs. Leela's oldest son had already constructed a house in a large newly acquired plot. Mrs. Leela's brother's daughter who was at that time in Seattle was planning to come in five years. Mrs. Leela's sister's daughter had already settled in the place and that same sister's son was living in the Seychelles but was also building a house there. According to Mrs. Leela her oldest son had actually wanted to put up a proper *tharawad* but since all the property had been sold already there had not been enough space left to really construct that type of ancestral community house. The plan now was for most of the family members to move to the place in about five years time when they would all be ready to leave their jobs abroad and in other parts of India and retire in Kerala.

Although Mrs. Leela was happy that her children and grandchildren were planning this form of joint living, she was sad that they were taking at least five more years. With her bad health condition she would have liked them to move there immediately.

Dreams of joint household living were not always based on personal histories. Many of the older persons in Thiruvananthapuram who spoke with admiration of the joint family institution had themselves only marginally experienced such a setting. Persons like Mrs. Leela dreamt of a joint family household in which they would live with their offspring but many had never lived with their own parents when they were older. Again, Mrs. Leela was no exception, when she told me that her mother too had been alone in the big house for some time 'when we were all out'. Even if the older generation had indeed lived with their adult children they had had many more children on average. This meant that only a small proportion of the children in earlier generations had actually lived with their parents in the latter's older age.

Still, it was not so much the actual living conditions that were referred to but more a general mindset which was symbolised most clearly by the joint family. When Mrs. Leela talked about her mother she explained that even though she had lived without offspring she had never been alone. The rest of the family would all come and help her. Mrs. Leela

contrasted this with the present situation when she added: “Unlike in this modern age when people don’t bother at all”.

### **LIVING ‘ALONE’**

Deviating from Indian averages, a majority of the research population was living with their spouse or ‘alone’ but without children present. On average in India, those above 60 resided in households with at least seven members, often consisting of three generations. Only six percent of were living with their spouses alone, another six percent lived in a household “where their immediate kinship was not present” (Irudaya Rajan & Kumar, 2003: 79). The large proportion of older highly educated persons in Thiruvananthapuram living alone made them therefore quite unique as compared to the average of older persons in India.

Those who did live with their children taught me about the important distinction between living with your children and having your children live with you (Bomhoff, 2006). Whereas some older persons needed help and depended heavily on their children’s daily presence, many others in fact provided for their children’s food and shelter needs. As a large majority of those who were older than 60 were mobile and healthy enough for independent living, most were in a position to make their own decisions as to where and with whom they preferred to live. Those who lived without children were therefore not automatically—as societal discourse would prescribe—to be pitied. To the contrary, although mutual visits could be long and frequent, a majority of those living alone preferred not to live—elsewhere—with their children.

Whether those who said they lived alone, really did so was questionable. Mrs. Yasmin, a then 70 year old widowed Muslim, gave an illustrative answer to one of the first questions:

M: How is your household composition? Who is living in this house?

Yasmin: Only me... Well, two days a week my son comes and lives here in this house. Then there is also the servant who sleeps in this house... There is also an old man who lives here. He is very old, 80 years old. He used to be the prime secretary for my husband. His family lives quite far away, so he goes to see them only once a week and then lives here the rest of the week. Then there is also a young boy. He is in his twenties and works as a mechanic for the company. He sleeps here to look after the old man and me. In case something happens, it is better to have a young person staying with you.

All older persons employed at least one part-time servant, who came in the morning to help with cooking and cleaning. Many preferred having a full-time servant, especially because of a fear for thieves at night, but also for general help during the whole day. Finally, when it became impossible or just unpleasant to drive, hiring a chauffeur was also considered an

option, improving of course their flexibility and making it possible for them to stay mobile and active much longer.

Of course, older persons could still feel they were 'alone' because of the particular nature of employer-servant relationship. Mrs. Leela explained in some more detail what her relationship with her servants looked like. She said she sat down every night and watched some TV serials with her male chauffeur and her servant: "I have two stools for the servants, but my chauffeur wants to sit on the floor. They watch with me, that is also why I watch [...]. In those serials also bad things happen to the people. There is a lot of suspense. But it is the only relaxation for my servants". Still, even though they all sat together and watched TV every night "You can't go down to the level of the servants. There is no companionship there. I do inquire about their health and life and give help financially if they need it, but the companionship is not there anymore [referring to the death of her husband], that I do miss".

Both in television watching and in the 'politics of sitting' the explicit and implicit power struggles between employer and servant came to the fore (Ray & Qayum, 2009: 148). In sitting on the floor or on a stool, servants' bodies quite literally attest to the inherent inequality in their relations with their employers although Ray and Qayum in their study of 'Domestic Servitude' equally showed that through simple acts as watching television servants could also mark some space or time as their own (2009). Although the topic would benefit from much further study it was clear that the relationships between older persons and their servants were infested with continually changing and adapting power disparities.

The fact that these services were available and affordable nevertheless diminished the reliance on other family members and gave many seniors a pleasant sense of independence. Mrs. Yasmin made the connection very clear herself when she said: "But I'd rather stay here than go to Kochi [where most of her family members, including her son, were staying]. Since I can get domestic help, you can stay on your own and are not very dependent"

Still, while servant help made people feel less dependent on their relatives, it created a new and different sort of dependency. It was when making appointments that I experienced the dependency relations that existed at first-hand. During numeral occasions appointments had to be rescheduled or postponed because of 'servant problems'. The difficulty of finding a good servant, especially for full-time positions, was an often-heard complaint. All older persons told me how they either had been lucky to find a good servant (since that was usually very difficult), or how they had problems finding a servant themselves. One couple told me how things had changed for them: "When we were building our own house, it was a different time. Servants were readily available at that time and they were not that expensive. Now it is difficult to find good servants and so it is difficult for me to manage the housekeeping". Servant-recruiting companies were a recent phenomenon in the city. Because of the high demand, women from an unfavourable economic background

could make more money when taking on several jobs at the same time, so I learned from my chats with their employers (Ray & Qayum, 2009: 115-116).

However much servants were criticised or even feared, living without a servant alone was considered far more dangerous. Stories of robberies of older persons living alone were frequently shared and older persons warned each other of the possible dangers they faced. The fear of being alone led many over the years to sell their houses and move to the rapidly arising multi-storeyed apartment buildings. I.P. uncle and Radnam auntie too moved in 2005. These flats were occupied with watchmen around the clock whose presence greatly increased older persons' feelings of security. Having neighbours closer by was considered an additional advantage, especially by those who were often away on travels and trips.

### **OLD AGE HOMES: A PEEK INSIDE**

Both policy makers and the general public in Kerala (and India at large) insist that old age homes are in essence an undesired phenomenon. The important role of family members in caring for their ageing relatives is insisted upon and old age homes are therefore seen as a threat. In this respect old age homes are often talked about as something from the 'West', together with failing family relations and dwindling social solidarity. Institutions for the care of older persons in India are however no new phenomenon. A handful of examples are known from the 18<sup>th</sup> century onwards (Krishnan Nair, 1995)<sup>5</sup> but since then their numbers have grown exponentially (Liebig, 2003; Lamb, 2009). Over the past decennia old age homes have become one of the chief symbols to illustrate what was considered problematic about 'modernisation' and 'westernisation' (Cohen, 1998; Lamb, 2009:60). They were often evoked when persons (of all ages) tried to bring into words what they found problematic about the changes they experienced. Old age homes were seen as a negative, 'necessary evil' for that which they represented: the abandonment of needy old persons; more than for what they were.

In movies, journals and popular discourses the old age home was a recurrent theme. The film *Ammakilikoodu* (2004), which means as much as 'a nest for mother', for instance narrated the sorry stories of several older Christian ladies who had all been abandoned by their relatives in an old age home. The different stories told of abusive relatives and children who had sold their mothers' property. In a 2007 film called *Thaniye* relatives of the main older character tried to get him into an old age home so that they could sell off his property. The attempts (migrated) children undertook to sell of the property of their elderly parents was a popular theme in many films.

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<sup>5</sup> Lamb mentions homes founded by the Little Sisters of the Poor, a Roman Catholic Religious order for women and several homes for the Anglo-Indian community (2009: 57). Liebig mentions the Venkatagiri chaultries for destitute, and often older, persons (2003: 160).

The many problems persons related to old age homes, made me curious. Over the years I visited six smaller and bigger institutions to get some idea of the homes that were available: a convent-run old age home for women; a larger (originally Hindu) old age home founded by the military; a privately run Alzheimer's home; a day-care centre with an activity programme for older persons; a large nursing home with younger and older inmates and a small old age home cum orphanage organised by the Women Muslim Association.<sup>6</sup>

Only rarely did persons speak or write on the actual condition of one or more homes that they had personally visited. Officially, on the website of the Kerala state government, only four old age homes were listed for Thiruvananthapuram. On seniorindiancom a fifth home was listed that did not figure on the government site. Finally, according to Irudaya Rajan's 'Home away from Home' working paper, the number of counted old age homes in the Thiruvananthapuram district was eleven (2000). This was therefore by far the most elaborate list I came across. Of the homes I visited in 2003, 2005 and 2008 only one was on these lists. Although the fear of these institutions was more ideological than factual it was no less present.

The link I.P. uncle made between the current migration trends of younger persons, the demise of the joint household and old age homes was one that was very commonly made in Kerala. Modern media also played a role in the forming of these discourses on tradition and modernity; India and the West (Appadurai, 1996; Cohen, 2004; Lamb, 2009:56). I.P. uncle was thus right in signaling a very current discourse. Two readers' letter in the English medium newspaper the Hindu on this topic further elaborated this point as it was commonly understood by many, especially older, persons.

“Sending aged people to old-age homes is not right for a civilised society like ours. Dependence on such institutions arises only when sons and daughters are away or are neglecting the parents. [...] I think it is the duty of all sons and daughters to look after their parents in old age. If the present generation deviates from this path, the next generation is sure to repeat this mistake.” S.K.Vijayan, Alappuzha (A reader's view in the newspaper The Hindu, 17/04/2004)

“In several cases, it is nothing short of filial ingratitude that sends the aged and ailing to old-age homes. But, in some other cases, it is sheer compulsion of the situation that necessitates the lodging of them in an old-age shelter. As the nuclear family takes root, we have to accommodate the 'necessary evil' that the old-age homes have come to be [...].”

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<sup>6</sup> My visits were short and were not followed through as intensively as I would have, had old age homes been an intended focus of my study.



N.K. Vijayan, Kizhakkambalam. (A reader's view in the newspaper The Hindu, 17/04/2004)

The visits and talks with organisers and residents highlighted a great ambivalence towards old age homes (Lamb, 2009: 56). Whereas the general audience was mostly negative about old age homes, those who were more directly involved as residents or as organisers had very diverse attitudes and thoughts.

On the one hand for instance Mrs. Yasmin and other ladies from the Women Muslim Association were working hard to set up a Muslim old age home because they had observed a need for shelter of destitute older women during their other charity projects. On the other hand I heard how their attempts were critically received and later stopped by fellow Muslims who strongly opposed such an institution. Since the criticasters were of the conviction that older persons ought to live with their children, they believed that the constitution of an old age home was detriment to filial piety. In the end, the building that had meant to function as old age home cum orphanage, only functioned as such for a few months before it turned into an orphanage only.



Figure: One of the larger old age homes with 36 residents at the time of my visit

Residents of old age homes too had very different experiences, backgrounds and opinions. In a convent-run old age home where I spoke to a dozen ladies, one lady whispered how the other residents were regularly fighting. Although she was happy with her room that she shared with another lady and spoke warmly of the care she received from the nuns her words and body language indicated that she did not feel

comfortable with the other residents. In yet another old age home specifically set-up for veterans from the military, I had an interesting conversation with an 85 year old resident called Mr. G.S. who had chosen to live there contrary to his children's wishes.

G.S.: I am married, but my wife is very ill and handicapped. Now she is mostly bedridden. There is something wrong with her back and she can't walk. She is staying with my daughter, so I don't want to be another burden and bother them with my presence. That is why I prefer to stay here. I don't want to bother anybody. We are born to live happily and die happily."

M: Do your children come and visit sometimes?

G.S.: Yes, he came yesterday, he is living close by some seven kilometres from here. But I discourage them to come. You have to work and live, not expect anything from others. If there is a necessity, I will ring them, but otherwise they don't need to come.

M: Do you sometimes telephone your wife?

G.S.: No, she is lying down now and she doesn't have a mobile phone. I go and visit about once a month then I can talk to her.

M: Doesn't she miss your company there?

G.S.: I see her once a month, no...

[Shows me pictures of his 84<sup>th</sup> birthday ceremony. Some 200 people attended the ceremony, including his grand-children. A member of parliament came to give him special greetings (an acquaintance of his son).]

M: Do your friends sometimes come here?

G.S.: No. I have not given too much publicity to the fact that I am staying here. They think that I am staying with my daughter or with my son.

M: Are your children happy with your staying here?

G.S.: No. My son keeps asking me to come. Even yesterday he said that he felt it was time for me to come and stay with him. I told him I don't want to. See I was staying there for some time. Then at 9 o'clock in the morning he, his wife and the children all leave the house and I am alone there until five o'clock. So I don't want to stay there. It is better to be here. I don't want to be a botheration to anyone.

M: But I am sure that sometimes people have been a botheration to you?

G.S.: Yes, but that I don't mind. That we take as it comes, but I don't want to be.

Although each of his answers was multi-interpretable and my visits were too short to really delve deeper into the nuances and the possibly unspoken of fears, preferences or wishes, this and other conversations did nuance the negative picture generally painted by the larger public. Whereas old age homes were commonly seen as a sad alternative or even a threat to the family, apparently they could also form a refuge from the family.

Nevertheless, the strong negative discourse on old age homes had an undeniable effect even on those residents who were in actuality satisfied with their living conditions. The strong public condemnation made Mr. G.S. keep his domicile a secret and saddened the women in the convent-run home, who spoke of their apparent failure in not being allowed to live with their children.

#### **FOLLOWING THE LIFESTYLE OF A FOREIGN COUNTRY**

The negative characteristics that were seen as exemplary of the Western countries through the media and persons' own experiences abroad were by many felt as a threat to life in

Kerala. There was an interesting and strong orthodoxy that stated that while the West was perhaps superior materially and economically, India was morally superior (Kumar, 2008: 13). Proof therefore was taken from news on rising atheism, divorces, euthanasia, individualism and materialism in the West. Others have equally noted these particular discourses and have linked it to India's colonised past.

As Peter van der Veer writes about India (and China) in general:

“Basic [...] is the opposition between eastern spirituality and western materialism. This opposition is part of an exceptionalism on both sides of the equation. It explains the exceptional material success of western modernity and the material defeat of the colonized societies in the East, as well as the philosophical shallowness of that success in the face of the exceptional richness of eastern traditions. Ideological movements like anti-imperialism, nationalism, Pan-Asianism, spiritualism, and also scholarly developments like Orientalist philology and comparative religions, all partook in this basic opposition” (van der Veer, 2007: 317).

Mrs. Leela was especially critical of the changes she experienced. She described them as both modern and western and said that they harmed certain cultural values she held dear. The oneness and selflessness of earlier times was in her eyes replaced by selfishness and individualism.

Others too spoke of a generation gap and complained that the ‘youngsters of today’ had become too demanding and were less accommodating. As a lady of 69 explained “Children are not submissive and won't take advice as much [...] Family ties were greater. We are beginning to follow the life-style of a foreign country”.

I.P. uncle also liked to give his grandchildren, daughter and son-in-law advice when he deemed it necessary. In fact, he said that being able to give advice is one of the advantages of becoming older. Radnam auntie didn't agree. She stressed that younger persons might not be interested in hearing these advices. I.P. uncle said it was his role as a grandparent and senior citizen to give the younger generations counsel on matters in which he was experienced. He wished that others would take points and lessons from the experiences he had had in areas like “work, discipline, administration skills and leadership- and punctuality qualities” and called that “giving guidance to the next generation”. He especially liked to advise his daughter on the upbringing of the grandchildren. To I.P. uncle there was however a difference between giving advice and imposing. He signalled that problems would arise when older persons were too demanding and thought it was one's personal responsibility to secure good relations with their offspring. “If you expect too much from your children you are bound to get disappointed. It is therefore wiser to let them be and not exercise too much control”.

I.P. uncle also believed that the older generation had to try to learn from the young. The young were far more experienced in certain new technologies for instance and the older generations needed to benefit from this knowledge. I.P. uncle believed that this was the only way to prevent a generation gap. He was not negative about a generation gap or about the younger generation per se. Still, he observed the opinions of persons around him and shared their worries about a decline of the joint household and the increase in old age homes.

I.P. uncle was interested in ways and changes that many older persons in Thiruvananthapuram generally described as modern or western but also attached great importance to values and views that were considered more traditional. Even though their only child had moved to a different continent and they missed her company, the couple actively tried to optimise their situation. By joining associations and doing voluntary work I.P. uncle made himself popular amongst neighbours and fellow association members. Their attitude was not one of complaining but of accepting and incorporating changes to a great degree.

Mrs. Yasmin was originally from another state, Tamil Nadu. She had come to the state more than four decennia ago after marrying a Malayalee. She said of herself that she 'barely' spoke Malayalam, but according to those around her that was not the case. She was extremely active socially and through her I was introduced to several more associations and older persons. Mrs. Yasmin was Muslim and had married into an industrial family that could easily be defined as upper class in Kerala. Her own family was also well to do and Mrs. Yasmin added that they were "open minded and not conservative".

Mrs. Yasmin had done her bachelor's degree in Physics and Maths. She was a housewife when the children were small but had started working for a company when the children were a little older. After her husband's death she had started working for the family business, which took her about one hour of work a day. Her son told her what to do, and she would do it: "At this age it is better not to interfere and just leave it to them. They can manage very well and they have the new ideas. The old age should retire. But since my son is mostly out of station it comes to me to sign most of the papers and decisions. That is, after consultation with my son."

Mrs. Yasmin had a busy and active life. Apart from the work for the family company she held board functions in several social and charity organisations that she was a member of. According to Mrs. Yasmin it was better to be active than to retire. "Otherwise you'll get bored and depressed. It is better to have no time to think and be busy with other things".

In addition to the son with whom she worked Mrs. Yasmin had two daughters. One daughter was a scientist, lived in the US and was divorced. The other daughter was an unmarried pilot and lived in Mumbai. Mrs. Yasmin urged both daughters to marry (again) but so far they had not. Mrs. Yasmin said it was especially important for the daughter in the US to get married, since "over there unmarried persons have no one to rely on".

“I told her: either you get married and start a family there or you come back. Without a family there is no point in staying there alone. She is lonely there and what will happen if she falls ill? All the other relatives in the US live on the other side of the country. My other daughter is also staying alone (in Mumbai) but that is different. There are plenty of people there who will want to help. If she falls ill, her neighbour will come and inquire. In the US that is different. She [the daughter in the US] just works whole days and doesn't have much of a social life or free time. Only the weekends are free. I told her to get married and she said she knows someone but can't take leave. So, if she can't even take leave to register the marriage...”

Although her two daughters lived far away. Mrs. Yasmin found ways to remain in close contact. In fact, she incorporated the calls she made over the internet into her daily schedule.

“From 9.-9.30 in the morning I go behind the computer to chat with my daughter in the US on msn. We talk every day. In the evenings at 9 I chat with my other daughter almost every day and with family members all over the world. You can see the other person and talk directly. Only when there is more than two persons you need to type your chat. Calling is very expensive to the US, so this is very good. It is like telephoning and you have a camera.”

A 50 year old nephew, her late husband's brother's son, with an interest in computers had taught Mrs. Yasmin the ins and outs. Initially she had no interest, but her daughters' moving about had forced her to take it up.

Mrs. Yasmin liked things to move forward. She attributed her progressive viewpoints to her 'mixed' family background. Since her husband's brother's wife had also come from another state they had gotten used to speaking English amongst each other and had a more cosmopolitan outlook on life. According to Mrs. Yasmin it was this cosmopolitan character of her family, more than her origins in another state, that made her relatively liberal. Compared to some of her Muslim friends too, Mrs. Yasmin was less 'conservative'. This was clearly illustrated in their clothing. According to Mrs. Yasmin more and more of her friends had started to wear headscarves, a change that she did not appreciate. And whereas many of her generation objected to their daughters wearing jeans, Mrs. Yasmin said that her daughters 'live in their jeans' and laughed about it.

In 2008 Mrs. Yasmin said:

“Some 5, 10 years ago you wouldn't be able to make out on the streets who were Christians, Muslims or Hindu's. You wouldn't be able to tell because they all wore the same clothes and no other symbols. Now, only after some time it has all started. Now I am the only one who doesn't wear a headscarf. All the other ladies didn't use to wear too, but they have all started to wear now. And the Christians have started to wear big crosses and the Hindus are now putting big marks on their foreheads. It

didn't use to be like that. Religion should be a private matter. Now, my hair is not that good as I am getting a bit bold. So, as a joke I was telling my friends that I too, for practical reasons would start to wear a headscarf, so nobody would see my hair. But then I would tell people that it was for that reason only. Also, wearing an overdress [Abbayah] is much easier than wearing a sari. For that reason, it would be easier to wear a dress. Many older women have started to wear it like that, because it is easier."

Dowry, headscarves and a stricter separation of the sexes in public spaces thus all worried Mrs. Yasmin. She, unlike many of her age, was not so much worried about the changes that were considered modern. Changes like love marriages, divorces or individualism did not trouble her. Mrs. Yasmin did not talk of a generation gap or of the younger persons' diminishing cultural values. To her, the more restrictive changes were far more dangerous. The changes that Mrs. Yasmin was critical of were not necessarily advocated by younger persons. They were not even seen as change by many, but were claimed to be traditional in Kerala. Mrs. Yasmin however described these changes as new and alien. She was especially afraid that these changes would further curtail the choices of younger and older women. Although Mrs. Yasmin was not the type to lament or complain one of her comments illustrated exactly her opinions: "We need the people to move forward, but right now people are moving backward."

While Mrs. Yasmin did not see Western influences as problematic as she appreciated the plurality of options that a higher mobility and more individuality brought along, her opinions formed part of a heterodoxy. Others, like I.P. uncle were more ambiguous. They were critical of certain changes but appreciative of others and took a pragmatic stance with which they selected certain aspects of change that they incorporate in their own lives. Yet others, like Mrs. Leela, said that too much had changed over the last decennia. They were afraid that certain values that they held dear and saw as constitutive of their Malayalam or Indian identity would get lost. They were sad that their grandchildren might want to marry for 'love' and might never learn what it is like to live in a joint household and be with one's grandparents.

Again, I.P. uncle, Mrs. Leela and Mrs. Yasmin represented three very different viewpoints on this matter. I.P. uncle clearly believed that individuals had little impact on the larger processes at work. He did not hold anyone of the younger generations responsible but blamed unemployment, migration and influences from abroad. Although he alleged that some persons suffered more from the changes than others, there was no one in particular to pinpoint as a the instigator of changes. Mrs. Leela on the other hand observed how the younger generations thought, acted and talked differently from the older ones. Although she did not speak of a responsibility, she did say that many of the changes were a direct outcome

of the different worldviews of younger persons. Finally, Mrs. Yasmin saw no real differences in generational attitudes. To her, interests, political views and values were more important than social background or age. She felt threatened by ‘conservative’ forces that appeared to grow in strength, also among her closest friends.

## CONCLUSION

In this thesis accounts of history are limited to personal accounts of past times and go back as far as individual memories went. In this chapter I focussed primarily on personal experiences of change although other materials were used as well to nuance and contextualise these findings. In discussing recent history with individuals in Thiruvananthapuram discrepancies were noticeable between personal experiences and dominant historical discourses, as personal experiences tended to deviate from described general trends.

Social relations for instance were informed by strong and changing gendered stereotypes on the ideal behaviour of men and women. These stereotypes formed a conservative force with great influence in public and private relations and they were frequently referred to when practically suitable. Nevertheless, when they were not agreeable with personal goals or when stereotypes became impractical, there were various ways in which older men and women manoeuvred around them. Education in particular offered possibilities for women and men to escape or manipulate expectations and find room for more personal interpretations of their gendered roles.

Another way in which personal accounts deviated from common interpretational discourses was in talk of ‘love marriages’ and ‘arranged marriages’. Although the common usage of these two distinct ideal types of marriage seemed to imply the existence of two radically opposing types of marriage proceedings, analysis of personal accounts of arrangements painted a picture that was far more diffuse. All marriage arrangements formed an interplay between individual and more collective objectives to a degree where they became hard to separate. To older persons the marriage preparations for their offspring were of such importance that many exerted great pressure but at the same time—when arrangements were taking a wrong turn—exhibited great flexibility.

A similar discrepancy between a strong categorical discourse and a far more flexible practice concerned joint and nuclear family household living. Again, a stark and condemning discourse lamented the loss of the joint family household institution and attributed all sorts of negative social values to the supposedly upcoming nuclear family households. In practice however, smaller households turned out to be many persons’ preferred choice. Smaller household arrangements were no new phenomenon and had once been strongly advocated. Finally, they were not nearly as nuclear as made seem. To the contrary, when jointness was not manifest in day-to-day living arrangements it was often

still very much present in financial, organisational and familial matters as decisions on important matters were seldom taken without a consideration of joint family members.

A final change that received great attention in individual and common discourses on older persons was that of older persons living alone or in old age homes. Although both these topics would benefit from more elaborate future research I have focussed on some nuances and on often overlooked aspects to these two ways of living. First through attention to the ambiguous relations that many older persons had with their servants, who on the one hand provided them with continuous presence but on the other hand reminded them of another and at times scary and foreign world close by. Second through an emphasis on the variety of motivations and experiences of those who actually lived in 'old age homes'. The resident accounts showed how an institution that has come to represent so much evil in the prevalent discourse on societal change in fact held many different and opposing meanings to those concerned. While some saw the institute as a reminder or an enforcer of deteriorating family relations, others found in it a refuge from the family (Lamb, 2009). Again, we see how a dominant discourse also influenced the lives and experiences of those who personally held dissimilar views.

The experienced changes described in this chapter thus centred around notions of gender, the family and the household. Apparently it was in these arenas that change was considered most meaningful and urgent. However, whether changes were seen as positive or negative, older persons had to live with them in order to move on. While older persons reacted differently to the many changes around them, as a remedy all spoke of the great importance of discipline. The foundations of this discourse on discipline, its practical consequences, theoretical ramifications and its possibilities for deviation form the subject matter of the next chapter.