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

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“DISCIPLINE MATTERS IN HOW OLD YOU GROW”

INTRODUCTION

When asked about good or bad ways to grow old, or when discussing influential virtues, older persons referred to the notion of discipline. References to discipline were many and made both through actions and words. After all the changes that were discussed in the previous chapter, the stress placed on routines and continuity may come as a surprise. Nevertheless, the external changes and pressures that were experienced as forced upon them from the outside had a clear relation to the self-imposed routines and calm. Through discipline older persons attempted to live a balanced life and deal with changes.

Discipline was one of the guiding principles for leading a good life to Muslim, Hindu as well as Christian older persons. While it was linked to different religious values or practices and therefore came in many different shapes or forms, the ambition to lead a disciplined life was a strong commonality that crossed religious boundaries. The focus therefore will be not so much on religious interpretations—as this would have exceeded the possibilities within this research project—but rather on the common understanding of discipline as experienced by those from all three religious backgrounds.

Discipline was strived for in itself as an attainable character trait, but it was also more specifically related to specific areas of daily social life and sociality. Among older persons it was mostly applied to time-management, to the body and to their religious and social life, albeit sometimes in slightly contradictory ways. Although all three major religions had different theoretical frameworks around the concept of discipline, they all promoted it in religious as well as in profane activities. Discipline of the mind was further advocated in times of great distress as it was considered important to always stay in control. Through a control of mind, body and social comportment, middle class older persons positioned themselves against the masses of ‘others’ who because of their disregard for discipline engaged in what they considered unhygienic, chaotic and uncontrollable behaviour. Hartals, all-encompassing public strikes formed the epitome of such acts of indiscipline that older persons felt were out of their control.

After the exploration of the many expressions and explanations of discipline comes an exploratory analysis. The relation between discipline and power is an obvious one to investigate, as has of course been famously done by Michel Foucault (1989). The stress on discipline had its origin in certain abstract religious and cultural ideas as well as in certain more concrete historical projects of making of the state and the middle-class. Discipline not only implied a control of one’s self through one’s body or mind; discipline was also a way to control members or citizens. In the context of Thiruvananthapuram, institutions like the church, mosque or temple, family, schools and associations actively disciplined their

members. Older persons had internalised this discipline and used it to their advantage to make sense of the chaos around them and work with the ongoing changes in their lives.

The discourse on discipline excluded those of different socio-cultural backgrounds and many of the younger generations. Also from within the older middle class population itself there were unfortunates who were marginalised. Those who were mentally ill in particular were physically and socially at odds with this cultural idiom of discipline as their mere presence questioned all sorts of idealistic assumptions about older persons and joint family household living.

Talking about virtues and living them were of course two different matters. Whilst there was a clear and commonly shared stress on the good way to live in older age, not all translated these virtues fully into their daily living. Simone de Beauvoir called the assumption that older persons are standing examples of all virtues, one of the subtler forms of oppression that they have to bear (Beauvoir, [1970] 1987: 9) and she was right in pointing towards this form of possible subjugation. Older persons in general may not necessarily be more disposed to leading their life according to certain (cultural) values than persons of other age groups. In Kerala however this was a strong social expectation nonetheless. Still, notwithstanding these strong shared ideas on the importance of discipline in older age, some chose to act undisciplined once in a while through meeting socially, gossiping, drinking alcohol, playing cards or having a party. Such undisciplined behaviour was however either minimised and laughed away or somehow explained within the discourse on discipline. A strong gerontocratic cultural discourse that favoured older persons' social weight gave them some leeway to act as they chose but also gave them great responsibilities. In conversations, domesticity, rituals and decision making older persons' professed dominancy was omnipresent. One of the legitimating bases for this discourse was the explicit assumption that older persons were wiser, less impressionable and more disciplined.

STRUCTURING TIME

The first indications of an appreciation of discipline came quickly. "Could you describe an average or a normal day?" was one of the basic questions I asked all persons I interviewed. The interviewees were asked to give an impression or an abstraction of a collective of memories and experiences. It was a tricky question to ask as normal days and average days do not exist. I had posed the same question at an earlier occasion when I researched women who were housewives in the Netherlands. They had often reacted puzzled: since every day was different and they would not usually count the hours they spent on each activity they had no idea. Or they would hesitatingly start to calculate what they thought were reasonable approximations.

Older persons in Thiruvananthapuram to the contrary needed little encouragement to answer this question. Without delay they told me all about their daily routines. These

included such activities as waking up and taking a bath, eating various meals, possibly taking a nap, having a tea and going to bed and were described with great punctuality. Wake-up times for instance were easily given. At times persons spoke of a margin of 60 minutes, but never more. The times varied from 3.30 to 8.00 with a median wake-up time at 5.30 and were mostly told with a distinct sense of pride. Sleeping late was considered both a sign of weakness and as unhealthy.

MR. H.N.(72): We always wake up at 4.30. Even though there is nothing to do. We go to bed early and wake up early. Even if we go downstairs and just sit here. It is a golden rule, it has to do with our health.

MR. H.N. and his wife Mrs. Geeta woke up early even if there 'is nothing to do'. This was an interesting choice of words, since in an earlier interview they told me about the many things they did when they woke up. MR. H.N. took a walk and Mrs. Geeta did her exercises at home, she then did some meditation and prayers and then with the help of a servant she started the kitchen work. Thus, when MR. H.N. said he would wake up early even though 'there is nothing to do', it should probably be taken to mean that MR. H.N. had no obligatory tasks or work to do. It did not mean that he found the activities he performed as his routine unimportant. They were very important, as both he and his wife explained through the story of a friend of theirs who used to be their neighbour but had moved to live with her son in another state.

M: How is your health compared to two years ago?

G: My health is ok. I'm keeping the same routine and carrying on without a problem. Why are you asking? Do I look older? My friends have been telling me recently that I look more weak than before, but I feel all right and I'm not tired after my routine.

H.N: If she would be taken away to live with children in a far off place, like this friend [a friend from Andhra Pradesh who has gone to live with her son], then it would be a problem. When the routine is broken.

G: That friend from Andhra whom I told you about she had a routine when she was living here. There, with her son, she has no work to do and her health is deteriorating she told us. She doesn't get sleep in the night because she is not sufficiently tired. Now, she is going for one hour walks to make herself tired.

MR. H.N.: Keeping this routine is very important in old age. We don't want to change. Change might be ok for a few days, then even we might enjoy it, but after that it will start to look on your body.

In later talks I had with this couple they often referred to their friend who had gone to Andhra Pradesh. They were sad for her because she had left her friends and life in Thiruvananthapuram behind to go and live with her son. This had happened after her

husband had died. Apparently her son had exercised considerable control over his mother to get her to come and live with him and his family. MR. H.N. and Mrs. Geeta used the following words to describe the situation: “Then suddenly her husband died and her son came to take her with him”. According to them their friend missed them and was lonely without her friends and proper routine in the new place.

The importance of regular morning activities was also stressed by the then 84 year old Mrs. Leela. She explained she used to wake up later but now started her days at 3.30 in the morning. She did this because her failing health made her slower and she still wanted to be finished with her morning activities in time.

S: I wake up at 3.30. Because my movements are so slow and restricted I need a lot of time to do my things. The doctor has told me that if I will fall, I will not get up anymore. So I’m very careful with my movements.

At five o clock I will be finished with my bath and clothing and then I will go to the pooja [prayer] room until 6.30.

Waking up early was seen as positive and was sometimes juxtaposed to what younger persons do. When Mr. (74) & Mrs.(65) Abraham Mathew had their children over to stay—and they added that this was usually once a year—they would tell them to wake up for breakfast.

Mrs: Every day is the same. I wake up between 6 and 6.30.

Mr: And I wake up between 7 and 8. At 8.30 we have breakfast. Our timings are very strict. Even when our children are here, they are all expected to come for breakfast at 8.30. Sometimes they go back to sleep after having had their breakfast.

Lata auntie told me how when a younger grandchild had stayed over for several weeks, oversleeping had been a constant topic of discussion between her husband and their grandson. Grandson would stay in bed until eight, nine ‘o clock, therewith greatly annoying his grandfather who believed waking up early was essential.

Next to waking up at a specific time, most were quite particular about having their food, tea and nap at a certain time too. Having a fixed routine was considered to be a good thing. MR. H.N. and his wife Mrs. Geeta explained how change was sometimes welcome for a few days, but would after that ‘start to look on your body’. And Mrs. Christian (79) who I spoke to after she had travelled for a few days complained that all the ‘travelling and losing routine’ had been tiring. During another interview in which I spoke with the daughter and daughter-in-law of an older couple they narrated how especially their father (in-law) would do everything according to a fixed routine. He had this routine also when he was younger, but not as strict. “You can say he has led a disciplined life” they summarised.

Some of the Hindus I spoke with additionally attached great importance to astrology. They had, next to specific timings during the day, specific days and weeks for specific actions. Although some Hindus made jokes about the warnings of astrologers and said they did not believe these held a truth, there were direct and indirect ways in which astrological ideas about timings had infiltrated in daily and yearly routines that even those who said they did not care, had been influenced by. Their marriages had for instance all been organised around the approval of an astrologer on the basis of their birth horoscopes.

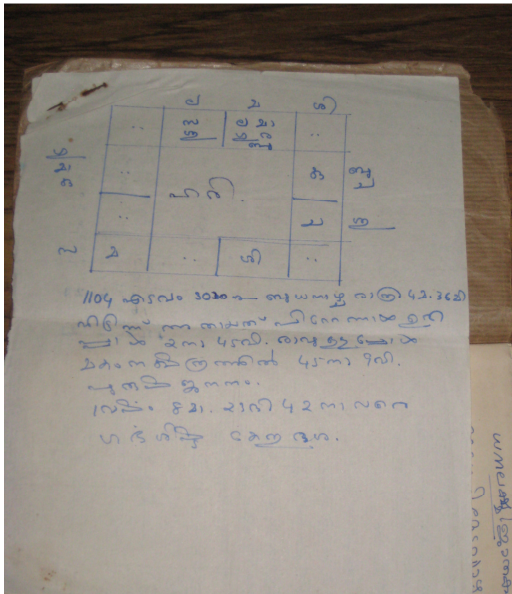


Figure: One older person's birth horoscope

Mrs. Yasmin explained how to her and to her fellow Muslims strict timings were considered crucial especially with regards to the multiple daily prayers, *Salat*, that have to be said at certain prescribed timings. But it was not only with regards to religious life that she said discipline was sought after. She said:

“Discipline is very important. Because of the schooling and working life they have been used to strict timings. Jobs nowadays don't need those strict timings. Also because of joint family life there had to be strict discipline and timings so that people could do things together. But people may say that it is important but not everybody does it.”

Mrs. Yasmin related discipline to some of the institutions considered most important in daily life in Kerala, namely the family, school, work and religion. As will be further explored later on, she placed a somewhat Foucauldian link between the strict timings powerful social institutions used to install discipline in their subjects. These subjects consequently embodied these timings even in their most private interactions in the family realm. Although Mrs. Yasmin saw changes in the household and the labour relations that had decreased the importance of disciplined timings, she saw no such changes in schools or mosques. Discipline was in 2008 continuously installed in these settings, also among the younger generations.

FOOD FOR THOUGHT

These fixed timings also applied to eating and drinking. Before breakfast, many persons had tea. Breakfast would then be at a particular fixed time. Lunch was usually around one o'clock, followed by a rest until about three or four. This period of relaxation or sleep was nearly always followed by a tea. All these commonalities in the basic routines of many older

persons in Thiruvananthapuram made their schedules at first sight look quite similar. Appointments for an interview would nearly always be at ten in the morning or at four in the afternoon.

This focus on the proper time, quantity and quality of food go to show how food, in India as well as in many other places, is so much more than the necessary daily nutrition (Lamb, 2000; Tilak, 1989; Alter, 1992: 240; Donner, 2008). The body was seen as the product of the food eaten and the rate of ageing was thought to be dependent on the quality and the quantity of the food consumed during one's life (Lamb, 2000: 33; Tilak, 1989). This line of interpretation, which links sustaining matter to the life process in a causal relationship can also be linked to Vedic revelation (Tilak, 1989: 111-112).

There was thus a great awareness of food and great importance was attached to eating healthy foods and especially to eating in a disciplined manner at fixed times (Donner, 2008: 155). 67 Year old I.P. uncle as introduced in the previous chapter for instance, was a socially active senior whose motto was that he needed to meet new friends every day. However necessary new contacts were to him, he avoided meetings that interfered with his routine.

I.P.: We are leading a systematic life. Very scheduled days, with food three times a day and exercise. As far as possible we avoid get-togethers that interfere with our schedule. ten o'clock we go to bed. 8.30 breakfast. 12.30-13.00 lunch. 20.00-20.30 dinner. Bath twice a day. It's been 25 years now that we live like this. In the morning I go for a walk. If we don't eat like this, our digestive system goes wrong. We make self-made food. Then we can maintain the mixtures and prepare it ourselves. We also have balanced food. We have learned to do that from experience and also from other sources like books.

I.P. uncle was not alone in his stress on self-made food. At the time of this interview in 2003 there were no McDonalds or Pizza Huts in Thiruvananthapuram. (In 2008 a Burger King had opened on the central M.G. road.) A small cafeteria named Ambrosia was one of the few places where they served food like hamburgers or French fries. Although according to some definitions of 'fast food', one could understand it to mean only those types of venues, the definition of fast food was much broader in Kerala and included readymade sauces or soups that could be bought in certain supermarkets.

There were regular discussions in the English medium newspapers on the problems that a 'fast food culture' were bringing upon Kerala society. The many small restaurants where typical Keralite dishes were served were also considered fast food restaurants. Only food made at home was considered healthy and good. This focus on self-made home food formed part of the larger discourse that stressed the importance of the joint family and strong gender role models. In its emphasis on tasks that were traditionally performed by the

(younger) women of the family, such as cooking but also care taking, this discourse also promoted a gendered division of labour. Since women were considered responsible for good home keeping and this included many ideas on food, this restricted their activities both within and outside of the household sphere (Donner, 2008: 129). Quite possibly this stress on homemade food and the link with particular relatives' (or: women's) duties struck me additionally because of my own Dutch background. In the Dutch cultural context the domains of love and duty are much more sharply separated and tasks such as cooking are not seen as personal duties but rather as means to an end (van der Veen, 1991: 11).

As food intake was at regular times, so was fasting. Muslims had a period of complete fasting during day hours with Ramadan. This was also followed by all healthy senior Muslims I spoke to. Most Christians said they had rules of abstinence and or fasting for Lent and other periods of 40 days or less. Hindus equally talked about fasting. Women especially considered fasting both a religious and a health matter. They told me they fasted for a specific purpose or prayer. Often these prayers were practical, a sick relative needing recovery or a grandchild needing to pass an exam were reasons for which they fasted a few days.

Fasting consisted of anything between having nothing to eat and or drink and omitting a certain kind of food. 37 year old Shubha told me of her 78 year old mother-in-law who, contrary to her husband, believed fasting to be important. Since Shubha's mother-in-law's health had been deteriorating, the family members now discouraged her to fast or told her only to fast by eating chapatti's instead of rice. I came across more ladies who were discouraged to fast by their partners or family members. The pride with which these interventions were repeated made me believe that they only further strengthened the will to fast. Upon questions about fasting I was given different reasons and motivations. Fasting for instance helped some with focussing on their prayers, they said. Their mind turned more easily towards God when they did not take any foods for a limited period of time. Others explained how they fasted to give thanks. After a good thing had happened for instance, they fasted as a way to express their gratitude for the good things in life. Finally, some fasted as penitence. This was often done in relation to something bad that was going on in their lives and for which they prayed. The fasting, they said, was done not to enforce the prayer but to show remorse for all the things that they might have done wrong. By fasting, many explained, some problems could be cured.

Fasting or restricting one's food intake was in these cases also perceived as having direct physical and mental effects. I.P. uncle for instance, very much in line with Ayurvedic ideas about the hot and cold properties of food that link eating 'hot' food to aggression, sex, changing temper and thus youth (Donner, 2008: 157; Lamb,2000: 221; Alter, 1992: 120), related his vegetarianism to his reduced temper.

"I have more discipline now and am less angry, more tempered.

I eat completely vegetarian now and the quantity of the food is less. That helps”.

Even though he was alone in making this link explicit, many more told me of their vegetarianism or fasting. “I’m now eating aged people’s food” Christina auntie once explained as she cooked chicken separately for me and made vegetables with rice for herself.

Although most had changed their food intake with getting older, a nutritional awareness was not restricted to the elderly alone. Some of my younger college friends reacted to chips, coca cola and sweets as to evil that needed to be avoided. Newspapers were filled with discussions about the bad effects of fast foods and the value of home cooked meals. In Malayalam movies villains were easily recognisable by their standard cigarette and glass of liqueur.

The position of alcohol in Kerala was fascinating yet worrisome. It was not a topic that was easily discussed in the circles I moved around in and it was only during my third stay in Thiruvananthapuram that I came to know more about older persons’ attitudes and usage of alcoholic beverages. What I heard about alcohol was mostly told in a whispered voice or indicated with a hand signal. Apparently, even talking about alcohol was considered dangerous. This infectious character of alcohol was also stressed by one of my older women friends who advised me to always stay away from persons who drank alcohol: “don’t sit next to them and don’t talk to them” she ordered. Interestingly enough she gave these instructions while her husband and a male friend of his were having a glass of whiskey in the adjoining room. While the two were not in any way drunk or odd, she was visibly upset. Although I had many reasons to believe that in her husband’s case this fear was not particularly warranted, alcohol did cause many problems in the State. In fact, incidence of alcoholism is rather high in Kerala (Mukhopadhyay, 2007: 132)¹ and the state has the highest per capita consumption of India.² Alcoholism among men is even said to be one of the major reasons for a high incidence of domestic violence (Mukhopadhyay, 2007: 132). Alcohol abuse thus gives plenty of reasons for worry.

Unemployment was most often mentioned as a reason for this popular escape into alcohol (Mukhopadhyay, 2007: 23). High literacy levels are said to have increased expectations, which make poverty and unemployment doubly frustrating (idem.). Strong gendered roles and expectations require men, and not women, to do paid work. So when women are able to hold on to their jobs but men cannot fulfil their prime duty, women may possibly become more vulnerable and men more aggressive (idem.). Other plausible reasons

¹ See also an article in the Mathrubhumi newspaper of the 30th March 2010 called “Keralites are major liquor guzzlers” (source: <http://www.mathrubhumi.com/english/news.php?id=89377>).

² See Soutik Biswas for the BBC: “Kerala’s love affair with alcohol”, posted on the 12th of March, 2010 (source: http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/south_asia/8557215.stm).

are the organisation and availability of illegal and legal toddy and the absence of avenues of enjoyment.³

Although these trains of thought sound reasonable, there is little information available on how alcoholism affects Kerala's different income groups and social classes. These are thus possible starting points for further research on the impact of alcoholism in the state. In such future research I would argue for the possible role of cultural factors to be taken seriously too. The strong emphasis on discipline as a cherished cultural value, for instance, seems to rub uncomfortably against such excessive alcohol usage. Instead of undermining its relevance however, I would like to suggest that perhaps this only further proves the point. With such strict societal standards of personal achievement and control, frustrations easily surfaced. Being drunk could even be regarded as a way to push off responsibilities. An 'excuse' for not abiding to strict discipline for one moment and letting go.

PERSONS AS A BODY, A SELF AND A SOCIAL BEING

Some of the more general food restrictions and strict timings were related to health issues. High blood pressure, diabetics and indigestion were problems to many older persons in Thiruvananthapuram.⁴ Many had diabetics and needed to adapt their food intake accordingly. Those who did not suffer from the disease were worried they would in the future, and equally changed their food habits. Older persons spoke about their increasing problems with digestion, a pan-Indian preoccupation (Kakar & Kakar, 2007:122).

All persons had a great health consciousness. Some, like Mrs. Rena, who with 53 years was the youngest lady I interviewed at the time, and her 63 years old husband expressed this consciousness through strict diets and regular check-ups.

R: Our food pattern has changed. In our younger days we didn't think about food. We took it at any time. Now we live according to more fixed times. Dinner times and resting time, it's all more fixed now. We also are more limited in our food intake now. If we don't pay attention to these things we'll get sick and get digestion problems. Every year we do our cholesterol test and once a month we check our weight so we are more aware about our health.

This great health consciousness among older persons was part of a larger trend in Kerala and was reflected in certain demographic measures. Kerala for instance had an average of about 300 hospital beds per 100'000 inhabitants (Raman Kutty, 2000: 106). A very high number,

³ For a critical blogpost on alcoholism in Kerala, see Dog's own Country (source: <http://savekerala.blogspot.com/2006/02/absolut-kerala.html>)

⁴ Indians are known to have a pronounced genetic vulnerability to diabetics. See for instance "Genetic predisposition to type 2 diabetes among Asian Indians" Indian Journal of Medical Research, Mar 2007 by Radha & Mohan (http://findarticles.com/p/articles/mi_qa3867/is_200703/ai_n19432254)

especially when compared to India's national average of 90.⁵ Most older persons took on a pro-active attitude towards seeking health care. When I came back to Thiruvananthapuram in 2005 and 2008 several had undergone one or two eye-operations to improve their sight. During interviews many explained exactly what their doctors had recently advised them to do with regard to their health problems, and how they were following these instructions. General information on how to prevent certain diseases was also sought after. At meetings of the SCA many a time a doctor would come and explain about certain health problems associated with older age. These meetings were frequent and seemed quite popular amongst the members.

Next to so-called Western medicine or Allopathy, was the all-present referral to the set of ideas from Ayurveda (Obeyesekere, 1977: 155). Ayurveda was referred to as much more than a traditional system of medicine, as it included a philosophy on the person as a body, a self and a social being.

“Ayurveda comprises the Indian notions of the constituents of the person and the nature of the body's connection with the psyche, the polis, the natural environment and the cosmos. These ideas constitute a cultural prism through which men and women in India have traditionally viewed the person and his or her state of well-being.” (Kakar & Kakar, 2007:111).

Boundaries between these spheres are flexible and at times non-existent. Dynamics between mind and body, and between substances and flows outside and inside of the body are stressed. The fluidity of these boundaries and the resulting inter-dynamics make that ideas about moral, physical and mental health overlapped and that problems in one health area were seen to affect the others (Alter, 1992; Marriott, 1990).

Boundaries were also easily overcome between Allopathic biomedical ideas, Ayurvedic principles, religious teachings and moral judgements that all influenced one's health. (Kakar & Kakar, 2007: 109). Different 'causal ontologies' of suffering—different categories of thoughts on what makes suffering come about or meaningful and trace it to some order of reality (Shweder, 2003: 121)—thus seemed to coexist quite harmoniously. Both within one person and between different persons.

In a conversation with Rajappan uncle, some of the interplays and interactions between body and mind as well as different causal ontologies or explications came to the fore. I asked the 70 year old man whether his and his wife's health had improved or decreased during the two years I hadn't seen them between 2003 and 2005. He replied:

R: There has been little change in health for both of us. We're quite normal. This is actually quite exceptional. Maybe it is by blessing of God or something. Not everybody gets this old, but there are things you should do to become old.

⁵ <http://www.nationmaster.com/country/in-india/hea-health>

I'll tell you. First, clean habits: no smoking, no drinking.

Second, openness, sincerity, honesty. That will all make you more healthy and therefore older.

M: In what way does openness or sincerity make you more old?

R: Corruption is there. That is a main reason for sickness and heart failure. Persons who are doing illegal things will not get any sleep in the night. They will be thinking that maybe they'll get caught or that somebody will come and take the money, steal it from them. Then they will have sleeplessness and a high BP [Blood pressure].

Corruption is the main reason for sickness and heart failure. If you're free of corruption, then there is no reason for heart problems or high BP. No diabetes, no sleeplessness. You won't feel any anxiousness so you will be much more healthy. But most persons are old at 50, 60.

In his answer Rajappan uncle used a moral, a religious, a biomedical, an interpersonal and a psychological causal ontology. He, like many others, mentioned God's blessing to refer to good things that had happened to him. Persons from all three major religions referred to God in this way and only in a positive relation, as negative occurrences were never related to God. Rajappan uncle mentioned 'clean habits', which he explained as no smoking and no drinking, which was linked to both biomedical ideas about health as well as moral ideas about discipline. Finally Rajappan uncle mentioned openness, sincerity and honesty as values that kept one healthy. An interpersonal causal ontology could explain the idea that envy, anger or ill-will from others could make one sick. A psychological causal ontology would underline the negative reactions to frustrations and fears and a biomedical causal ontology would see sleeplessness as a direct possible cause for health problems. Finally, stress, too, was seen as an explanatory factor.

From Rajappan uncle's example we can see that neat categories are not in place when persons' causal ontologies are analysed (Kakar & Kakar, 2007: 109). Different explicatory routes led to the same experiences of health and suffering. Rajappan uncle's explanations underline again the simultaneous existence in different orders of being, as "a person is simultaneously a body, the self and a social being"(ibid.).

RELIGIOUS DISCIPLINE AND DISCIPLINE THROUGH RELIGION

"A life without hardships and an end that is peaceful.

This is all I ask of you, Krishna and unswerving devotion for you."

(Translation of prayer: "Anayasena maranam vina dainyena jivanam dehi me krpaya krsna tvayi bhaktimacancalam.")

A great majority of the older persons I interviewed incorporated religion into their daily routines. For many, prayer was the first thing they reportedly did after waking up. Sudha auntie prayed the above prayer for an ‘easy death without bothering other people’. Mrs. Leela of 84, who woke up at 3.30, recited a standard Hindu prayer before she would come out of bed, asking for forgiveness for standing on God, the earth, with her feet.

Many others, from all religions, used the morning for meditation or prayer. Others used a specific timing in the afternoon to do their prayers, the Hindus in their specific *pooja* rooms, others in their bedroom or living room. Some mentioned praying before going to bed as well.

Reading religious texts was another religious activity that the majority reported doing every day. At fixed timings, the Bible, the Bhagavad-Gita, the Koran or other holy books or explanatory texts would be read. Christian Grace auntie of 90 had about ten religious books that gave her some prescribed reading for each day. She had those books from childhood and said she knew most stories by heart. They were stories from the Bible and stories that told of faith. Among Hindus most mentioned the Bhagavad-Gita as the text that inspired them and they read most frequently. Some Christians too mentioned this text when they spoke of their interest in Hindu texts. This interest for the Bhagavad-Gita could be explained by its focus on matters such as the purpose of life, God, death and the cycle of reincarnation—important themes to all older persons. The “Gita” was also most often mentioned when Hindus spoke on the matter of Alzheimer’s or other diseases that affected the mind. There was a great fear to lose control over thoughts (Kakar & Kakar, 2007:30) since in the Bhagavad-Gita, Lord Krishna explains that:

“Whosoever at the time of death thinks only of Me, and thinking thus leaves the body and goes forth, assuredly he will know Me.

On whatever sphere of being the mind of a man may be intent at the time of death, thither will he go”. (The Bhagavad-Gita, chapter 8: The Supreme Spirit. Translation: Shree Purohit Swami)

Some persons therefore told me that they were afraid that if they would get Alzheimer’s and not be able to pray at their time of death this would negatively affect their next life’s reincarnation.⁶

Praying and reading religious texts were said to offer some peace of mind. Both activities were done individually as well as in groups. Although some Hindus attended special prayer or meditation groups, they could also go to temple more anonymously and as often as they wanted or have individual religious experiences without institutions if they so wished. For Christians and Muslims this was usually different. Their religions are more

⁶ How these socially ingrained but originally Hindu concepts concerning the cycle of reincarnation influenced both Hindus and non-Hindus in their philosophical and practical attitudes towards the processes of ageing and dying are interesting and important topics that I could unfortunately not delve deep into.

institutionalised, offer services at special timings and include more actions that demand collectiveness. The Christian denominations furthermore provided neighbourhood prayer groups that met once a week in somebody's house. The Muslims too had religious and social gatherings that were more inclusive and at fixed timings.

Many experienced their religion and those of others also through the medium of television. Different channels offer Koran recitations, Hindu religious readings and explanations of various religious scripts and Christian prayer songs. In interviews I would often hear about persons' favourite programmes in which certain texts would be explained, at times of other faiths than the ones they had been born into.

The knowledge of the other religions was often quite profound. Celebrations in public places or social clubs often include all religious celebrations of the diverse population, which may very well contribute to this mutual understanding. Many expressed their appreciation of certain aspects of the other faiths, thereby sometimes questioning certain principles of their own denomination. One Hindu lady told me how she liked to pray to Jesus, another Christian lady told me how she liked to watch the television programme on the Bhagavad-Gita and marvelled at the wisdom that was recorded in that holy book. Several persons indicated that they could not believe that their religion was the only correct version and two persons said they did not like the institutions that came along with their religion.

Appreciation of other religions or doubts about elements of one's own were not a big secret and often told easily during an interview or in conversations with more persons present. During an interview I had with Mr. & Anna auntie in 2003 we talked about religion. Anna auntie's husband explained how he had been raised with rather traditional ideas about his Syrian Orthodox religion and how his ideas had more or less remained the same since childhood. His wife explained that this was different for her.

A: For me that's different. I don't always completely accept what others tell me. I always have an own thinking and I think that has evolved and changed over the years. I read religious texts and think about them. For me it is difficult to believe that we will be the only ones to find salvation because we have the true God. I have read texts from other religions and they are all so sophisticated and so refined. It is not that the others are ignorant. I have trouble believing we are the only ones who know the correct way. I try to believe it, but I find that difficult. Mahatma Gandhi said that there are several ways to God, several paths to reach him.

In at least two ways there was also a clear link between religion and discipline. First, it was considered essential to be disciplined in the practice of religion. Second, members of religious communities exercised strong peer-pressure in making sure all were leading disciplined lives. To illustrate this link with two examples let me talk about two members of the same Christian neighbourhood praying group. These groups came together once a week

on Mondays and prayed together in the house of one of its members. One a Monday, I was in the house before the other members arrived and talked to the immobile hostess. She was annoyed by the fact that others were coming late and complained about the other members' and her husband's behaviour.

M: They used to come at this time already. Nowadays people are losing their religion. They are only interested in worldly matters. I have no worldly interests anymore. My husband also, he is a good man: doesn't drink, doesn't smoke. But he is not enough prepared. See, now nobody is coming anymore. It used to be completely full this house. The whole week I am looking forward to the Monday. What is better than praying to the lord?

One of the neighbours, Mr. Verghese arrived five minutes later. He had gone to see the doctor on his way to their house. In an earlier interview that same day he had told me how he would always go to these meetings and was very particular about going. Not only was he actively involved in the organisation of the Church and this weekly prayer groups, he explained how the Christian community had a great impact on every aspect of his life and the importance of leading a 'good' life.

V.: I avoid all bad habits like smoking and drinking. My Christian life and society are giving me a lot of restrictions. Regarding talking to people and my activities. My community is very strict about those things. That is a very good thing. Family quarrels often begin when you attach value to the club life. I am afraid of the opinion of my neighbours on the life I lead. That being afraid should be there, other wise you'll commit bad things in your life. In my Church I take an important position, so I don't want to give anybody a chance for criticisms. Others should not feel that I'm doing something bad.

Smoking and drinking were mentioned again and again as bad and character defining habits. Mr. Verghese mentioned the significant peer pressure that he experienced and described it as something restraining yet positive.⁷

Related to discipline was the goal of attaining peace of mind. In the much read Bhagavad-Gita which belongs, together with the other parts of the Mahabharata and the Ramayana to the common idiom of most Indians, Lord Krishna explains that "Only those who have genuine self-discipline, who are "self-conquered", live in peace" (Bhagavad Gita, 1985: 135). Peace of mind was then equated by some with happiness, but it was far more

⁷ Mr. Verghese's long and active participation in several social arena's had lead to a social embeddedness that involved even more persons (Milardo, 1988). This embeddedness is said to facilitate and encourage communication among such shared associates and allows for more involvement and influence and consequently can lead, as it did in Mr. Verghese's situation, to an increased enforcement of norms (Feld & Carter, 1998: 138).

often mentioned as the desired state of being. Older persons spoke of the things that stood in the way of a peaceful mind as depressing newspaper articles, water shortages, power cuts or bad children. Very few of the Hindus I talked to in turn related this peace of mind to a degree of detachment from others. Although detachment is of course often evoked in studies of older persons in India (Lamb, 2000: 142; Cohen, 1998: 143; Vatuk, 1980: 126-148), not even a handful of Hindus I encountered in Thiruvananthapuram said they actively sought to become more detached. These persons portrayed themselves as very devout and throughout our conversations about their social lives their religious life would surface. Those who spoke of detachment further often related it to disappointing personal experiences with friends or family members, making their detachment not only a religious ideal but also a practical solution to cumbersome relations. Christians, Muslims and most other Hindus discarded this more extreme form of discipline in social relations, saying it was no principal they pursued. Instead, they valued social interactions and stressed their importance to their overall well-being.

Whatever the exact denomination upbringing or preferences however, religion figured in all lives. Delving deeper into the religious experiences of Muslim, Christian and Hindu older Malayalees would need additional and far more precise research on this topic. In this study I chose to describe this complex mingling instead of focussing in more depth on the meaning giving principles of one of these religions. What I would like to stress at this point however is that religion did not only figure as a philosophy or ‘guide to life’. Religious activities structured persons’ lives and gave meaning to the different hours or days. Even though religion functioned as a dividing principle in some circumstances it united in others.

“GOD’S GRACE YOU NEED AND EXERCISE AS WELL”

Molly auntie would wake up at six every morning. At that moment her knees hurt her a lot. As did her back. The first thing she then did was watering the plants. She used a tiny bucket that carried about enough water for one or two plants. Since the whole garden was filled with fifty to sixty pots it took her about one hour to water all of them. Of course, she said, “I could use a hose and get the same job done in a few minutes, but I enjoy tending to the plants”. The many trips to the tap were also a good exercise and one she felt she needed. After this stretching of the knees, they hurt her less.

M: I wake up at six o clock and then I like to water the plants and walk around while doing that for about one hour. I use the bucket for watering so I walk a lot. It’s because of that I have kept my health. God’s grace you need and exercise as well.

Molly auntie was 89 when we first met and turned 90 while I was still in Kerala. The second time we met she had reached the age of 91. At that time she still used the same method to water the plants and get exercises in the morning. Apart from watering plants Molly auntie also walked in the neighbourhood streets with two friends. Every evening at around 6 pm one of the other ladies came to collect her and together they walked for about an hour. They used the hour to talk and share thoughts. Their pace was low and they would constantly



Figure: Men sitting and talking in the central park of the city around dusk. The man in the front is wearing exercise shoes for his walk, the others have just come to chat and stroll.

warn each other for loose stones and approaching cars but it did take them through the entire neighbourhood. Sometimes they took the opportunity to quickly visit someone in the neighbourhood if they knew someone was ill or had lost a family member. In this way physical exercise was combined with social causes.

An evening or morning walk, alone or with others, was a popular activity among older residents of Thiruvananthapuram.

The city park or any residential area at around five or six in the morning is filled with walkers, the majority of whom appear older. Walking, at those moments was seen as an exercise and not just as a means of transportation. Sport shoes which were otherwise not worn were put on and the walkers had a certain active and straight up posture that was easily distinguishable.

Exercise was considered very advantageous for older persons and most lived up to this standard. Older persons often started to talk about exercise themselves. I never asked directly whether they did any. Some persons with physical problems said how they missed being able to walk outside. Two persons said they should do more exercise but were too lazy to do any. Mrs. Leela of 84 said that she tried not to eat any fatty foods because of her physical inability to do exercise. Doing exercise was also stimulated by many family members, close or far. When Molly auntie once planned to cancel her evening walk because she didn't feel like going, her daughter-in-law immediately stepped in and urged her to go anyways. When I stayed for some time with a couple with two children far away I noticed how their daily phone calls always included the daughter asking whether they had done their evening or morning walk.

In 2008, then 94 year old Molly auntie told me of her two falling accidents. She first fell on her right leg and broke a bone. It took her months to recover from that fall and she had been lying in bed for a few months. The second time she fell when stepping into a car and she hurt her other leg. It was not broken but it took very long to heal properly. “Now, my son is not letting me leave the house. Even if I want to go in the garden he will not let me and starts scolding me if I’ve gone out.” She said. The statement was ambiguous, on the one hand she seemed to disagree with her son and made it appear as if he was making her stay at home against her will. On the other hand she herself seemed uncomfortable with going out and seemed happy her son was taking care of her. Molly auntie was not doing her evening walk in the neighbourhood anymore and she had also stopped watering the plants in their garden. I had noticed upon arrival already that very few plants were left. Molly auntie explained that her daughter watered some of the plants but had no real interest in plants. “If you have no real interest in plants, you can give them water, but they won’t thrive as well. You need to have a real interest” she said. Meanwhile both the outside of the house and the inside of the house had been redone. Inside, the whole interior had changed. There was a new floor, with big shiny marble stones. It was difficult to understand why so many older persons or younger persons living with older persons chose to redecorate their houses with slippery floors. Falling was a major problem and most falling accidents happened in bathrooms and on other slippery surfaces. Nevertheless, marble and polished floors seemed to increase in popularity. As I saw it, the danger of falling for Molly auntie was smaller outside and had only increased inside of the house with this new floor.

Falling accidents made older persons greatly insecure of their own bodies. Mrs. Chandy explained about wanting to put your feet somewhere and then getting them somewhere else. At the end of telephone calls she and her friends would tell each other to be careful and not to go out alone. Don’t fall was a frequent caution she gave, even though she laughingly joked that of course no one intended to fall anyway. (Near-) falling accidents happened throughout my stay and generated something that resembles embodied knowledge. Being near and staying with older persons for a longer time meant incorporating a constant vigilance to falling. Just as some older persons who had the experience of falling became scared and over-conscious when walking, so did I develop a fear and a sensitivity to those with a failing equilibrium after having caught several falling older persons in the act. I came to understand how unidentifiable sounds can become nerve-racking if one’s partner is prone to falling and how water spills and solo ventures can turn into nightmares.

Perhaps the experience or fear of failing control gave extra popularity to physical exercises and yoga. Yoga and meditation were frequently mentioned as fine ways to keep in good health and good spirit. Well-being of body and mind were in discussions of yoga, physical exercises and meditation intrinsically linked (Alter, 1992; Kakar & Kakar, 2007: 109) At a ‘Staying younger while living longer’ seminar organised in October 2003 by

HelpAge India the session titled 'Health aspects' by Dr. P.K.Jayarus of Medical College was largely devoted to the beneficial effects of yoga and meditation. Two of his lecture sheets read as follows:

HERE IS YOGA!!

Locus of control-self
 Culture related
 Stood the test of time
 Not a cult & not a religion
 Provides scientific spirituality
 Best stress modulator

ROLE OF YOGA IN THE CENTURY

Improves quality of life
 Maintains health
 Relieves anxiety
 Useful in mild to moderate depression
 Major role in stress induced disorders
 Yoga consoles always, comforts often & cures many
 Hence complements conventional therapies in all diseases

Yoga was thus considered beneficial to the body ('maintains health') as well as to the mind ('anxiety', 'stress' and 'depression' can be relieved). It was scientifically, not religiously, promoted, in line with efforts from the 19th century onwards to emphasise the scientific nature of indigenous traditions so as to incorporate them in Indian modernity (van der Veer, 2007: 323).

Mrs. Leela: My trouble is with my legs and my back. My legs have arthritis and the back trouble started long ago, when I was 48. They treated me then but off and on it has always been a problem. By doing yoga and my pooja I have survived. Now for two years my legs are the big problem. I have a disintegration of two vertebrae's and that is why I have this big bump on my hip. It is very painful to me. If I stand for a few minutes I will get pain, if I sit for a few minutes I also get pain, so I need to move and change position every now and then. [...] Except for my illness, I have no regrets. It is only my illness that influences my life badly. Because of it I cannot do yoga. That is the worst part of it. I don't mind that I can't go out that much, actually I am more of a 'home bird'.

Mrs. Leela of 83 mentioned her yoga twice during the interview I had with her in 2003. The quote comes from the answer she gave to the question: “could you describe your health situation”, without any referral on my part to yoga or exercises. Mrs. Leela was of the opinion that her health would have been worse had she not done yoga and pooja (praying). “By doing yoga and my pooja I have survived”. Also, she stated that one of the worst, or the worst, result of her health problems and pains was that she could not do yoga anymore. To her this was more of a problem than not being able to go out that much.

Mrs. Leela was Hindu, but Christians and Muslims too talked about how they did yoga. Yoga was seen as a physical fitness with a philosophy behind it that was not necessarily exclusively Hindu (Alter, 2004: 173, 164; van der Veer, 2007: 319). 70 year old Mrs. Fatima was a Muslim who spoke about yoga. She had lost her husband about ten years prior and told me how bad she had felt the first years after his death. Again it is relevant to note that in her case too emotional and physical experiences overlapped greatly.

L: My husband and I we were always together. [shows me a picture of the family].
So I have felt bad for several years after he passed away. Then I would do yoga, walking and watching television. But prayers were the most important after my husband’s death.

Another Muslim auntie explained how she thought yoga posed no problem for Muslims and she knew quite a few who did. She herself used to do yoga but had stopped because of pain in her legs. At times she still did some pranayama, breathing control exercises, and tried to start again with the other exercises. She just would not join in with the Sanskrit prayers because these addressed specific Gods. Saying ‘ohm’ did however not give any problems because “that is just the supreme being, so that can also be said for God”. Instead of Ohm she could also say ‘Allah’ in the same fashion as Ohm, with three phases for three parts of the body. In fact, she explained, Muslim prayers have similarities to certain yoga asanas—as these too involve the whole body to make the prayer more intense.

82 year old Mrs. Christian had stopped doing the more difficult yoga exercises but still did some breathing exercises now and then. When I asked her about Christians doing yoga she elaborated on the benefits of yoga and said:

“Yoga helps you in many ways. First of all it improves your health. Breathing exercises help the lungs also. It will again give you some discipline. That itself is a discipline. Your body, but also your thoughts are disciplined. You are obeying the order so you’re body and mind are disciplined”.

As with prayers or religious readings on television, yoga was also part of the world of new media. Lata auntie shared with me the experiences of early morning Yoga classes of famous Swami Ramdev in front of the television. At around six in the morning, before her husband

got out of bed and before she started her household chores Lata auntie drank a few glasses of water and turned on the television. There, broadcasted from the other side of India, was Swami Ramdev in front of an enormous mass of yoga pupils. Explaining different postures, breathing exercises and meanwhile talking about diet and attitudes towards life. Lata auntie encouraged me to participate in these early morning sessions and saw them as greatly beneficial to her own health. Even with the great and shared agreement on the need of physical exercises and discipline of the body it would be an illusion to think all were successful or even willing to rigorously incorporate these values into their own lives. When Lata auntie would scold her husband, Anand uncle, for not doing his exercises he would joke that he did his yoga already and would laughingly make some strong nasal noises resembling *pranayama* breathing exercises. Although he verbally proclaimed the necessity of physical exercise he—and many others—could simply not bring himself to doing them and used humour to ward off what he considered his wife’s dutiful reminders.

REMAIN CALM AND KEEP YOURSELF TOGETHER

Discipline in the sense of composure was valued especially in times of great distress. This became particularly noticeable during a visit to Anna auntie who had lost her husband just ten days prior. I had interviewed Anna auntie and her husband two years before and had gotten to know quite a few of their friends. Together with four senior friends we went to visit and offered our condolences.

During the interview I had had with Anna auntie and her husband two years earlier we had talked about death. They had both expressed their wish to die quickly and without much pain and trouble. Although they spoke about the subject quite easily in a detached and calm way, they explained that they didn’t talk about this subject amongst themselves or with friends. They preferred being optimistic and thinking about good things to come, then to worry about illness or death.

Anna auntie’s husband’s death in 2005 was very sudden. He had been feeling a little weak and ill in the morning and died the same evening. When we saw Anna auntie ten days later she was in utter and complete shock. The fact that everything had gone so fast, she said, had made it so much harder for her to deal with her husband’s death. She repeatedly said: “If only I had had some more time to talk to him before his death.”

It was a very emotional visit and the interaction between the widow and her friends was revealing yet painful to observe. We had come with three men and one woman, all friends of her late husband and her. It was Anna auntie who spoke most, since she wanted to tell us how everything had happened. She herself was still trying to grasp and understand all that had changed in her life and at times she became teary and emotional.

Every time Anna auntie became emotional one of the men would start to talk. They talked about all kinds of things, but mostly told some light-hearted stories. Although

everybody listened carefully when Anna auntie was speaking, one could tell that they were trying to change the ambience by their own stories and remarks. One told a funny story of a ‘very old man’ who lost his wife and wanted to get remarried. His children didn’t want their father to remarry but he felt he needed some company and put some matrimonial ads in the newspaper to look for a wife. It was a long story with plenty of funny details that contrasted starkly with the other story of the sudden death of a beloved husband. Another interesting contrast came upon leaving. While Anna auntie told the other lady visitor that no one could really know what it meant to lose one’s husband until it really happened. One of the men said “everything will be all right eventually” and someone else said “time heals all wounds”.

The visit made a big impression on me and gave rise to several questions, not least of which some serious ethical ones that will be further discussed later. The visitors, the men especially, were clearly trying to remain unemotional in a very sad setting. Was this because they were afraid to become sad or show their emotions? Because they were so used to going to these kinds of visits that they didn’t want to get too involved? Was this a form of emotional detachment they wanted to establish? Or was it a way of trying to help Anna auntie to get over her own emotions? Or simply awkwardness around intense emotions? A few days later I had an interview with yet another friend of the deceased man and fellow society member. With him and his wife I spoke about Anna auntie and her loss and his take on the matter was illuminating.

R: She is handling it well, she is a strong woman.

M: What would be handling it wrong then?

R: That would be if she would start crying and saying: “Why is this happening to me, this shouldn’t have happened to me.” She should remain calm and keep herself together.

Whatever the exact reasons, we can see clearly this repeated stress on keeping one’s self (or oneself) together and keeping one’s balance. This was something I noticed not only during the emotional visit to Anna auntie but also in many interviews when sad or difficult topics were raised. Persons would repeatedly explain the importance of staying active and positive in times of difficulties. Dealing with grief through an emotional catharsis, in the form of long talks or discussions were not advocated. Instead, emotions had to be managed and controlled and emphasis was placed on staying calm and composed: being disciplined in one’s emotions.

LDF CALLS FOR DAWN-TO-DUSK HARTAL

From THE HINDU Thursday 5th of June 2008:

Thiruvananthapuram: The ruling Left Democratic Front (LDF) has called for a dawn-to-dusk hartal on Thursday to protest against the increase in prices of petroleum products.

Front convener Vaikom Viswan said here on Wednesday that the hartal had been called as the price increase was avoidable. The Left parties had placed proposals that could help avert such a measure, but the government decided to go ahead with the heavy price hike. The government decision was most deplorable and must be fought tooth and nail, he added. The LDF convener said milk supply, newspaper distribution and hospitals would remain exempt from the hartal which would begin at 6 a.m. and end at 6 p.m.

All the major pro-LDF unions and service organisations have come out in support of the hartal call. Terming the government decision inflationary, the CITU State secretariat said it could have been avoided if the government accepted the Left parties' proposal for changes in the tax structure.

Communist Party of India State secretary Veliyam Bhargavan said the minor changes in the tax rates would not help mitigate the impact of the steep hike in the prices of cooking gas, diesel and petrol. All India Transport Workers' Federation general secretary K.K. Divakaran, MLA, termed the price hike arbitrary and called upon transport workers to strike work on Thursday and make the hartal a success. The Kerala State Private Bus Operators Federation said the diesel price hike would land the operators in a deep crisis.

The Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) has called for a dawn-to-dusk hartal on Thursday and road blockade on Friday in protest against the fuel price hike.

Hartals or bandhs were a common phenomenon in Thiruvananthapuram and Kerala at large. Some hartals were more all-encompassing than others. Depending on who called for the hartal and who supported it. A real hartal such as the one on the 5th of June 2008 brought public life to a complete stand-still. This particular hartal was a protest to the central government's decision to increase petroleum prices. It was called for the day before by the State's ruling parties and several workers federations. On hartal days like the one announced above, buses and auto's did not drive and those who went out with their own vehicle risked being obstructed by the activists on the street. Schools, banks, all public offices and shops apart from milk booths closed. The latter would quickly run out of milk since the news of an upcoming hartal spread within hours and resulted in frantic buying the evening before.

This particular hartal was directed at the Central government. Apparently, it did not matter to those who called for a Hartal that the National Government is located in Delhi and

will be little affected by another disrupted day in Kerala. Only in Kerala and West-Bengal—the two Indian states where communism thrived—were such protests regular and all-invasive in public life. The High Court of Kerala has decided in 1997 that bandhs are illegal as they are a way of protesting that seriously inconveniences the people and often damages the public good. Even the Supreme Court has approved of this decision and has expressed the need to stop calling for bandhs. In reality this meant that those who called for protests had stopped calling these public strikes a ‘bandh’ and instead named it a ‘hartal’. Otherwise not much seemed to have changed.

With large, state-supported hartals it was common understanding that all appointments had to be cancelled. With smaller hartals or bandhs it was necessary to first investigate the nature of the protest and the potential reactions of the larger public. Not all political powers had enough workers or (paid) supporters to disrupt social life. Still, fear of violence and chaos silenced the masses of meek civilians and gave power to even the smallest groups of political protestors. On hartal days those who were dependent on a part-time servant for their cooking or cleaning thus had to manage by themselves. Since the poorer servants mostly inhabited other, more distant areas of the city it was impossible for them to come for work without public transport. Those who needed groceries similarly had to wait one (or two) more days and those who had appointments had to postpone them. Doctor’s appointments were re-scheduled and those who needed to pick up relatives from the airport postponed that until the end of the day.

The Women Muslim Association, in which many older highly educated Muslim women were active, distributed a monthly pension to about a 150 poor older women every first Thursday of the month. Since buses did not ride during hartals and other transport was not available to poorer women, their pension collection was regularly disrupted by hartals. The standard procedure had become that in case of a hartal the distribution would take place the day after the hartal. The poorer women had been told that this was the rule but if it was not possible to come on the next day, they could only collect their hard needed pension the following month.

78 year old Mr. V.J. Nair, like most other older persons, disapproved strongly of those who called for hartals and bandhs.

“There are many other ways to express your grievances. The way they carry out their agitations shows their lack of regard for other people in society. It is in fact a bad legacy of Mahatma Ghandi. Ghandiji invented this kind of protest but that was to get rid of a foreign invader and in the struggle to get freedom. Now it can be because of anything. They destruct public property and it only takes five men’s protest to lay down the entire traffic on the main roads. All politicians are using these protests nowadays and encouraging trouble. How can you rule and fight against the rule at the same time? Conveniently for them the central government is not a Marxist

government. This kind of indiscipline bothers many very much. They are put through a lot of inconveniences over this. Nothing is possible when there is a hartal. It brings the common men's life to a complete standstill.”

For older persons hartals were a prime example of indiscipline. They could not understand why political arguments had to be fought out on the streets and distanced themselves from the politicians and workers who organised and staged such protests.

DISCIPLINED CITIZENS

Discipline thus had as its antithesis the chaos older persons experienced outside of their homes. Hartals, fights on the street, dirt and poverty were all aspects of a public reality considered greatly upsetting. The ongoing project of middle-class identity making then firmly posited disciplined citizens against the uncontrollable and chaotic masses (Donner, 2008: 151; Srivastava, 1998: 83). Since “self-discipline is the characteristic of the ‘modern’ citizen—‘others may only function within a concatenation of imposed forces and restraints’” (Srivastava, 1998: 83). This became particularly clear during meetings of the SCA and other associations where talk about what happened outside was heavily influenced by a discourse that posited ‘us’ versus ‘them’. It may even explain the exclusive usage of ‘citizens’ for those from the middle and upper classes. As the poorer masses did not fulfil their duties as (self-) disciplined subjects they were withheld the ‘citizen’ title.

As said, strict timings were for instance considered vital. Meetings were held at precise timings and also informal social events were appointed precisely. As society structures time, adhering to strict timings was a demonstration of one's good citizenship. Servants on the other hand were often scolded at for always coming late, precisely one of the many attributes that excluded them from their proper ‘citizenship’ (Ray & Qayum, 2009: 65-91).

On a Thursday afternoon in 2008 at about five o'clock I called Mrs. Leela to try and make an appointment. Mrs. Leela was 88 years old and mostly confined to her house because of her serious health problems. She regularly told me to come and visit her ‘at least once before going’ but she did not want me to come without calling. “Do call before you come” she stressed again and again. She did not want me to come when she was having other visitors or when she was having her weeks of Ayurveda massage treatment because that was too tiring for her. For weeks I had called her every now and then to make an appointment, which she would then postpone to an indefinite future time. That afternoon I was happy she agreed to a visit.

“The treatment is over, the massage treatment. I'm not at all well, but what can I expect. I cannot expect to be fit at this age. The servant situation is very poor now. I have only one cook. The chauffeur has left. He took a loan for 10'000 rupees and

then took off. That is how it is nowadays. This state is not at all developing. With hartals and murders and chaos. There is so much potential but it doesn't come out. People are lazy. But tomorrow I have no program. You can come for a half hour or so at 10.30,11.00.”

Mrs. Leela's description of her, as it was often called, 'servant problem' was an often heard complaint (Ray & Qayum, 2009: 40, 107). Mrs. Leela regretted very much the changes that had occurred in the relationship she had with her servants. There has been a shift all over India from the earlier common full-time servant who was paid for his or her presence to the now more common part-time servant paid for specific tasks. It is more generally a continuous shift between two social imaginaries, namely between the—often imagined or modified—feudal past and the capitalist present, that gives rise to mutual feelings of dependency and mistrust (Ray & Qayum, 2009: 115-118). Mrs. Leela and with her many other older persons found this shift problematic. She spoke with fondness of earlier days when servants and their families and employer's families still had long standing more interdependent relationships with each other and wished to incorporate many aspects of the once feudal relationship, like affection, obligation and money loans, in her contemporary arrangements (Ray & Qayum, 2009: 125).

Mrs. Leela shifted easily from servant-talk to talk of murder, hartals and chaos. Again she was not alone in this association, as many talked with fear and mistrust of servants as representatives of a different class and world (Ray & Qayum, 2009: 107; Donner, 2008: 11). It indicated older persons interest in finding trustworthy servants and their idealisation of earlier times in which they presumed these relations were easier and more reliable.

A few minutes after my telephone call to Mrs. Leela, the news of another bandh was announced on television. Certain protests had ended in fighting between political workers of the BJP and the Marxist led government supporters. In disagreement with the way the police and the government had handled the agitations the BJP, which had zero seats in parliament, called for a 'dawn-to-dusk' hartal in the capital city for the next day. Mrs. Leela lived too far away for me to go by foot and so I cancelled the appointment. It was no problem, "Just call some time before you want to come" she said. As Mrs. Leela did not feel she could influence or control the chaos around her she was negative but accepting of the situation. Like all others, she did not feel able to substantially change things in this regard through her own political participations. She had more faith in charity projects than in local politicians, who were generally considered very undisciplined.

Discipline as experienced by this social elite in Thiruvananthapuram merged with nationalistic post-colonial and older pre-colonial ideas (Srivastava, 1998; Donner, 2008; Foucault, [1975]1989: 191). Different yet related forms of discipline had played a role in the

nationalist project in which spiritual values taken from older spiritual traditions like Yoga were re-formulated and represented as truly Indian (van der Veer, 2007: 319; 321). This may seem contradictory as

“The transformation in Asia of ancient disciplines of the body or disciplines of the self, as Mauss and Foucault called them, under the influence of the imperial encounter and nationalism has made Yoga [and Qigong] signs of Indian [and Chinese] tradition and modernity [...] But in both cases, a politics of difference emerged that had to assert a historical pride in one’s national civilization against imperial projects. The claim that traditions were forms of superstition and signs of backwardness and that modernity had to be scientific could be responded to by a counter-claim that these traditions were, in fact, scientific when brought down to their very essence. Especially in the human encounter with the frailties of the flesh, such as disease and death, medical science clearly showed its limitations. It is thus particularly in concern for health that these practices come to compete with other (often western) forms of medicine (van der Veer, 2007: 325).

Although it leads too far to trace each of these developments’ precise histories, it is important to recognise the existent links between collective identity formation and the various meanings of discipline. While deserving far more substantial further research it explains the cultural and historical embeddings of these values and gives rise to many more research questions. For now, I have concentrated specifically on the various practical meanings older persons related to their valued discipline and have indicated that this value is strongly instilled in their cultural lives.

Where Foucault’s prisons needed the panoptic structure with a central point for the guards as to be able to check and control each and every individual prisoner, the family and the larger middle class society enabled this panoptical working in Thiruvananthapuram. As became clear above in Mr. A.M’s quote on the control exercised by his fellow church members through instilling a fear of exclusion, both formal and informal controlling mechanisms were firmly in place.

Nevertheless, other institutions too (had) had their share in disciplining subjects. Older persons explained how they had learned to become disciplined in their early school days (Donner, 2008: 139; Srivastava, 1998).⁸ Above the quote from Mrs. Leela already indicated the teachings of discipline in school. Anna auntie also narrated of the discipline during her schooldays:

⁸ By means of an interesting and elaborate case study of a famous elite boarding school, Srivastava traces back the historical and cultural origins of the important value of discipline and its different forms.

“Discipline is very important. We learned that in school. Honesty also is important, the Christian school emphasised honesty very much. We would be checked in school to see whether our underwear was clean and whether the nails and hair was clean.”

Several of the men had later gone into the military where they had further concentrated on attaining bodily and self discipline. One retired colonel elaborated:

“In the army they instil discipline. We should not waste any time or materials. You make only as much rice as you need. Things like that. Other people are not that disciplined. They waste money and they go to clubs or they drink even if they don’t want.”

But also families, households (Kumar, 2008:6) and religious institutions did their disciplining-work. Through food, timings but also through duties as will be discussed later, men and women’s bodies were controlled by various institutions throughout their lives. Older persons had internalised this discipline and used it to their advantage to make sense of the chaos around them and work with the ongoing changes in their lives.

KITTY PARTY

Before I interviewed Bindhu auntie, I had never heard of kitty parties. I asked Bindhu auntie what associations or clubs she was a member of and she replied about her many social activities:

“Then there is a kitty party that I’m part of. We’re all members [of a social association], fifteen women and we go to somebody’s house and meet there. We play tombola and chitchat and gossip. Once in a year, the men are allowed and we have dinner together. Otherwise we meet once a month with the ladies who are all my age. Then there is the card club that meets once a week.[...]”

A few months later I joined Bindhu auntie at a kitty party. The participants to the kitty party created an exuberant atmosphere with lots of laughter and joking. There was indeed a tombola, but before that started there was a small lottery in which the person who held the highest number won some money. I was explained how every month they all gave a small amount of money that was then distributed to the person who would win, “so that she can buy some nice bracelets or something for herself”. Such an expenditure was considered more appropriate when legitimated through this group activity than when bought on a personal note or in a whim. This made it a more controlled and legitimate way to indulge oneself.

Towards the end of the party, when foods and chaya had been served, some ladies disappeared towards a small room next to the kitchen. It turned out that the hostess also had

an ailing and confused older mother who was lying in bed. Her small room had no windows but two doors that could be locked. She was there with a full-time nurse who helped her bathe and take foods. I was allowed to have a look, but only for a few moments together with the other women. When I came back in the living room one auntie I knew well told me how this older mother had been a wonderful and accomplished lady in earlier times. When I asked her whether she was going to greet her, auntie replied that she didn't want to, as she preferred to remember the lady as she had known her before.

Throughout the years I came to see two more such mentally and physically ill older persons in small tucked away rooms. They happened to be women too, mothers of the senior daughters I had just interviewed. Sometimes their presence was only revealed towards the end of a conversation. Although they were surely well-looked after with regards to hygiene and food and all had full-time or part-time assistance in the form of servants or special nurses these three older women with whom I never got the chance to be alone were physically and perhaps also socially marginalised.

Other persons I got to know who were physically or mentally seriously ill still inhabited the communal areas of houses and were engaged in daily social activities. They were capable of coming out of bed, alone or with help, and sat with the others in the household. The tucked away mothers illustrated the possible limits to familial care, although I could not spend enough time with them to have a balanced judgement of their situations. Their presence gave rise to difficult questions about those who fail to be disciplined because of physical or mental limitations. If being disciplined is considered such an important virtue, those who are unable to act with discipline may not always be excused for their inabilities. They themselves too may feel awkward or uninterested in seeing other persons because of their inability to live up to certain social norms and may demand to be left alone. Those who associate themselves with these persons too, may be held responsible for certain undisciplined behaviour or may want to minimise social interactions. Although these questions regarding social stigmas and their possible consequences are incredibly difficult to research they seem important to keep in mind. When discipline becomes an untenable aim and leads to strong social disapproval this could possibly lead to unfavourable conditions for certain groups of older persons.

An indication of the severity of possible neighbourly dissent was given to me by Sheila auntie when she told me of the period after her husband's death.

“Here, people talk about you when they have criticism. In my case, my neighbours are very narrow-minded. They are not at all learned people, but they mingle in everybody's lives. That is really bad for me and my other neighbour...

After the death of my husband and also of my son-in-law, I still went out for functions. My neighbours started to say bad things about that. But I don't care.

[...] But according to the people who gossip you should wait for a much longer time. Anyway, never mind the people who talk badly about you. You should just ignore those people and do your own duty.”

Referring to her duty, as will be further explored later, was the most powerful and effective way possible with which Sheila auntie could discard her neighbours' commentaries. It shows the power of a dominant orthodoxy on discipline and duties and how even those who might be seen to deviate, stay within the discourse to justify their actions (Bourdieu, 1977). Sheila auntie's quote shows the potential force with which individuals who do not conform can be confronted. It is this force that contributed to the strong orthodoxy on discipline even if many found controllable ways to act undisciplined every now and then.

Nevertheless practices and ideals concerning discipline remained contradictory and ambiguous. On the one hand all older persons spoke of the importance of discipline and strived to achieve discipline in at least a few areas of their lives, on the other hand many actively pursued activities that were generally considered undisciplined as having fun and going to parties. Mattison Mines observations in the Tamil context are very similar and may offer an explanation:

“Self-explanations reveal that culture as well as society is age-layered. As people age, their interpretation of themselves, their relationship with ideals, and how they fit in society changes. Self-explanations also reveal that a sense of control in life becomes increasingly important, while at the same time the cultural dictates limiting pursuit of personal interests diminishes. [Tamil] individuality is more freely expressed in older age than in younger, a reverse of what happens in the West, I believe (Mines, 1988).” (Mines, 1994: 19).

In Thiruvananthapuram too, such contrary developments were visible and gave great variation to individual behaviour. Older persons, as no others, underlined the importance of discipline. They talked about discipline and applied it to various aspects of their lives. On the other hand some older persons were very successful in modifying this social ideal to their own convenience, talking of discipline but choosing not to act accordingly. The older persons who did so seemed more at liberty than they had been at earlier moments in their lives. Only those who were physically unable to act with discipline and cognitively unable to explain or defend their devious behaviour in socially acceptable terms were in potential trouble. Their wellbeing depended heavily on younger persons who were able and willing to accept them and protect them from social scrutiny.

CONCLUSION

“If everything is clean and systematic we don’t feel old. Some people have the tendency to think we’re old so let it be and they keep rubbish. If you do that then you will feel more old. Whatever we have we should keep it in a nice way. We should do dusting and sweeping in the morning and then take a bath” (69 year old Mrs. Nayar).

Older persons attached great importance to self-discipline in many aspects of their lives. In this chapter I have shown the various ways in which discipline was sought and bodies, minds, time and social behaviour were managed. Notions of discipline informed ideas about time, eating particular foods, fasting or keeping one’s self together. The importance of discipline was not limited to one particular area of life. It was in all matters of daily living that older persons claimed to be more disciplined than before or mentioned discipline as a positive and guiding value. When asked about the good ways to become older many came up with this concept and explained how they applied it to various aspects of their lives.

The different areas in which discipline was strived for were closely interconnected as physical, mental, familial and overall wellbeing were seen as heavily inter-linked. These connections became particularly visible in older persons’ views on health and health care in which different—and at times mutually enforcing—causal ontologies were used to make sense of health problems and suffering. Interplays between body, mind and social life made discipline in one area relevant in attempts to be in command of another, as was illustrated by the regular fasts many older women in particular held in order to express their thankfulness or worries.

After all the changes that were discussed in the previous chapter, the stress placed on routines and continuity may have taken the reader by surprise. Nevertheless, the external changes and pressures that were experienced as forced upon them from the outside had a clear relation to the self-imposed routines. Through self-discipline older persons attempted to live a balanced life and deal with changes. Also, through a balance of mind, body and social comportment, middle class older persons positioned themselves against the masses of ‘others’ who because of their disregard for discipline engaged in what they considered unhygienic, chaotic and uncontrollable behaviour. Hartals, all-encompassing public strikes formed the epitome of such acts of indiscipline that older persons felt were out of their control. Discipline was therefore in many ways a counter reaction to the chaos that older persons experienced around them.

The discussion of the expressions of discipline has taken me near some of the borders of this research and has made visible some of the many possible venues for further explorations. Although I have wished to examine the broader issue that came up through older persons continuous stress on the value of discipline and therewith focussed on for instance those aspects of bodily experiences that were directly relevant to the study of

sociality, each of those elements (time, food intake, alcohol intake, death, religious practices) would warrant a separate study. An important link that needs future exploration is for instance the experience of bodily deterioration in relation with discipline. It is imaginable that older persons in other cultural contexts too strive for more routines in their days out of a fear of losing their faculties. Also interesting would be a more precise focus on the attitudes of younger persons in Thiruvananthapuram towards discipline in all its facets. Although I have mentioned several of the social institutes that advocated discipline to all ages and have shown how discipline was in general considered a strive worthy value, younger persons may have different ways in which they choose to incorporate this or other values in their lives.

The study of discipline has led to an investigation of issues of power and control: power in the form of authority in relations with younger persons or servants but also power in the form of control over personal and social life and the power that was exerted by social institutions that actively promoted and installed a sense of discipline in their subjects. Despite this dominant and forceful discourse of discipline, there were also older persons however who could not or would not act disciplined. Those who could not live up to these expectations formed a complicated social liability to their caretakers. Their dependency and vulnerability would be an interesting hypothesis for future research. Those who chose to act undisciplined attempted to turn this into socially acceptable behaviour either through references to their duties or through a reference to other signs of discipline, as for instance an emphasis on the deliberateness of their actions. Those who could not act disciplined because of mental or serious physical illness became particularly vulnerable as their undisciplined behaviour affected their social personhood. I have argued that the deference that older persons were socially expected to receive was due not only to their advanced age but also to socially attributed characteristics as wisdom and discipline.

In the next chapter I explore yet another crucial notion of sociality, namely that of duties. In a similar way as discipline, duties gave meaning to social relations and formed important directions for social behaviour. Leading a disciplined life was one of older persons' most important duties and was necessary for them to be called 'gracefully old'. Growing old gracefully was often referred to as an ideal that included many of the disciplined acts described above and the fulfilment of the duties described next.