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

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“YOU SHOULD CALL, YOU HAVE TO CALL” AND OTHER EXPECTATIONS AND DUTIES

INTRODUCTION

In a group discussion at the end of a yoga class, some of the other women and I spoke about relationships in the household and about living with your in-laws. 37 year old Bindhu, a married woman who lived with her husband, children and mother-in-law said:

“Even today, this morning I realised that I was asking permission for something from my mother-in-law. It was something very simple, I can’t remember what it was... Anyway, it was something I knew she would of course give permission for. It was maybe even silly to ask. But I am so used to asking her permission for anything that I will also ask it for small things she would never object to. It is only because she is my mother-in-law and she is the oldest person in the house.”

The other young women present laughed in recognition at Bindhu’s remark. Later, through another example, she explained how other relatives behaved towards her mother-in-law.

“My mother-in-law is the oldest relative in the city. Of her family she is the oldest one alive. So when relatives come to the city, any distant relative even, they will first come and visit her. If they don’t, it is taken as an insult. Since she is the oldest family member they are supposed to pay their respect to her first before they go on other visits. So every Saturday and Sunday our house is filled with people. We get so many relatives who come to see her.”

Bindhu did not mention that this also meant that she was probably in the kitchen most of the Saturdays and Sundays, providing *chaya* [tea] and snacks to all who came to visit. Just as relatives felt the need to come and visit their eldest relative, Bindhu most probably felt the need as the daughter (in-law) in the house, to provide for the guests. Bindhu asking her mother-in-law for permission, the mother-in-law receiving her relatives from out of town and Bindhu providing food and *chaya* were all behaviours that could easily be expected and to the other young women in the class Bindhu’s story was very recognisable. But what made this behaviour so expected and normal? Why did so many daughters, daughters-in-law and eldest of the family behave in this recognisable fashion? And: if behaviour seems so predictable in these instances, how come there was still such a degree of variation across communities, families and individuals? Thus, to what degree were these expectations broadly shared or kept private, fixed or negotiable and articulated or implicit?

This chapter entails an investigation of the expectations that belonged to different social relations and social situations. The cultural concept of duty inspired and influenced

many social relations as it allowed persons to make explicit what they expected in their relationships. Through references to their duties, persons explained their own behaviour and reminded others of what they wanted them to do. These expectations and duties were in turn influenced by a person's position vis-à-vis others as many duties were age, gender and social status related. To make this more clear there will be a more precise focus on those specific duties and expectations that older persons encountered in their social lives. These expectations concerned their friends, neighbours and children, but also their own lives and standing in society. I will consequently argue how the concept of duties needs to be taken into account in an analytical approach of individuality. Finally, throughout the chapter mention is made of the ambiguities, contestations and manipulations of duty that made social life even more interesting and variable.

“YOU SHOULD CALL, YOU HAVE TO CALL”

Next to the relatively clear expectations at certain moments, every social relationship knew uncountable and constant—at times conflicting—expectations. Mary auntie and her neighbour Mrs. Anna who figure at length in the last two chapters, had been neighbours for many years. They belonged to the same Christian denomination and lived opposite one another. This way they had shared many moments in their later life. Their husbands had even owned a company together. By the time I met them Mary auntie was living with her husband Joseph uncle and Mrs. Anna had been widowed for eleven years already. Mary auntie was bedridden and Mrs. Anna would visit her. She would come to Mary, sit with her for some time in the front portion of the house were Mary auntie was laid up and listen to Mary auntie talk. Sometimes they prayed together or Mary auntie would ask Mrs. Anna to sing a devotional song. After a few minutes Mrs. Anna would stand up, use the Malayalam phrase for ‘I’ll be going and coming’ and leave the room. Only when she was out herself or too tired to come, Mrs. Anna would stay in. All other days she would go and make the visit. “And when I don’t come, she’ll call me up and tell me to come. She wants me to come every day, so that she can talk to me for some time. I can’t remember when this visiting has started, we were neighbours you see, so I always visited her” Mary auntie said.

Mary auntie and Mrs. Anna illustrate that once relationships are entered into, they entail certain definite and explicit expectations. Friendly neighbours have to visit and enquire about health and well being. Children have to call and help out in cases of need. Older persons have to be visited and younger persons have to pay them respect by going to their house.

When I first spoke with Mrs. Anna she wasn’t too enthusiastic about visiting Mary auntie. She expressed some doubts about the seriousness of Mary auntie’s illness and the necessity for her to stay in bed. Mary auntie often repeated her wish to die and go to her heavenly Father and Mrs. Anna would repeat again and again that that would happen soon

and that she need not worry. Still, whether Mrs. Anna was enthusiastic about visiting or not was really not a matter of concern to either of them. As a befriended neighbour it was her duty to come and visit as often as she could and Mary auntie had no problem reminding her of that duty.

“Call me”, “visit me” and “bring something” were common expressions. In my case, it was something that made my research easier in some ways since it gave me clear



Figure: One of the older ladies I spoke with telephoning from her verandah.

indications of what certain persons expected of me and wanted me to do to acknowledge my relationship with them. Older persons would tell me that I had to call them again before leaving or after coming back from a trip. One auntie I was particularly close to would tell me I had to at least visit her every time I was in the neighbourhood. Another uncle frequently told me I was not calling him frequently enough. He would then proceed to explain his exact expectations of me: “It has been so

long since you called us. Monday we talked and now it is Friday. Why didn’t you call? When are you coming? Since you are like our daughter it is my duty to look after you.”

During the years that separated my visits to the State, it was partly because of this directness and the explicit expectations that I kept in close contact with some of my senior friends. “Dear Manja, it has been two weeks since your last mail. Please write us.” Or “Dear Manja, why the silence? Please e-mail us to give us your news” were regular opening sentences of e-mails.

When someone did not live up to these expectations or explicit directives this led to a socially legitimated annoyance. When a 90 year old lady and I were talking about a common acquaintance, she bluntly said: “He has forgotten about me. He doesn’t enquire about me anymore. When you see him, tell him I said this.” The tone meanwhile was not complaining, sad or annoyed but rather matter-of-factly. To her, this was an unproblematic statement that indicated that she wanted him to come and visit her sometime soon.

At another instance Meera auntie of 73 complained that a friend of hers had not come to visit her. Since the friend and her husband were younger she had expected them to visit, after they had returned from a trip abroad. Now, it had already been several weeks after they had come back and they still had not given her any news. Later, when I happened to be present while this friend came for the long-awaited visit, Meera auntie kept stressing

the same point to her friend: “You should have come earlier! You have taken such a long time to visit us. After coming back you should have called us”. The friend then explained that after her sister’s death she had not felt like seeing anybody for some time and had been very sad. This was a good enough excuse for Meera auntie but she still repeated a few more times that the friend should have at least telephoned her.

When persons did live up to expectations, it was not deemed particularly necessary to compliment or acknowledge that. An instance that demonstrated this principle occurred at a wedding I was invited to attend. I was visiting senior friends when a former colleague of theirs came to their house to invite them for their daughters’ wedding. Wedding invitations like this one were supposed to be distributed personally and since it was mostly the parents of the bride and groom who invited they would spend long days going to the houses of friends, relatives, colleagues, association members and other acquaintances to invite them. That day, my friends and the couple whose daughter was about to get married chatted and I was introduced. When the couple was about to leave they extended the invitation to me and made me promise I would come. A few weeks later, on the day of the wedding, my friends and I reached the party hall. The preparations were still going on but the colleague immediately approached us. She more than enthusiastically greeted us and said that it was wonderful that I had come. Thereupon my friend asked whether it wasn’t wonderful that she had come. This made the colleague laugh and she replied: “It’s only normal you’ve come. You had to come.” It was interesting to see that to the colleague this was an obvious difference. I had no relation with them which made my attendance noteworthy and explicitly rewarded. My friend on the other hand was in a relationship with her colleague on which these expectations were based. My friend interpreted the: “It’s only normal you’ve come” as a positive affirmation of their relationship.

In a similar vein saying ‘thank you’ was considered very formal. It was a habit that I personally had to unlearn since it was not always appreciated. Verbally expressing thanks denied relationships their intrinsic expectations and therewith value (Appadurai, 1985). “It’s only natural” on the other hand meant that the relationship one had was such that both parties could harbour these expectations and could reciprocally ask the other to deliver. Appadurai too placed the link with the concept of duty: “[...] thanking someone who is simply doing his duty is not simply linguistically infelicitous but, if I am right, potentially morally inappropriate, for it implies a voluntaristic act of generosity rather than a morally prescribed gift” (1985: 238).

In any relationship there are expectations, hopes and wishes. Among the older persons in Kerala however these expectations were generally made explicit. These expectations did not only concern particular actions but also general behaviour and duties. Just as expectations were made explicit, certain behaviour was insisted on and duties were enforced.

“WHAT IS THERE TO LIKE?”

Social life in Kerala was largely informed by social expectations and duties. In many different contexts, regarding small and large actions, Hindus, Christians and Muslims spoke of their duties. Indologists will quickly link duties with the concept of dharma (Kakar & Kakar, 2007: 185), as would most Hindus. Duties however were not exclusively Hindu or related to one particular religious worldview. To the contrary, although duties included certain religious ideals and all denominations in Kerala gave unique instructions on how to lead a pious life the importance of fulfilling one's duties transcended the communities. Different religious communities had different ideas about what would happen to those who did not fulfil their duties or the reasons why duties had to be performed, but in all communities duties formed important (social) directions. Some were commonly known, others were more privately experienced but all were intrinsically linked to social expectations, social relations and social situations.

Because of this shared notion of duty, Muslim Jemilla auntie for instance related easily to her Hindu neighbour's problem of a son's unmatchable horoscope. In an emotional conversation he narrated Jemilla auntie and me his many attempts to find a suitable bride for his son. The son was now in his early thirties and for many years now his father had been trying to arrange a marriage. He had invested a lot of money and energy in finding the best astrologers and had performed many special pooja ceremonies but so far to no avail. As the older son had to be married before his younger son, both sons were now rapidly getting too old which caused the father great emotional and physical stress. To Jemilla auntie horoscopes were, as she had incidentally explained at another occasion, superstitious and even nonsensical. Perhaps she did not really understand why her neighbour allowed these horoscopes to have such a devastating effect on his family. But Jemilla auntie recognised very easily that her neighbour saw getting his son married as one of his most essential duties. She therefore empathised with his frustration of not getting this primal duty done. The importance of duties and the references made to them were a shared cultural manifestation, even though the nature of duties differed per individual, per situation and per religious background.

Personal duties played a much greater role in shaping individual lives than personal interests, talents or tastes. Malayalees I met rarely said they liked or disliked something, food excepted. On social relations, my personal gamut of spontaneous questions therefore often proved inadequate. When a friend for instance told me of a sister who had just moved to study in Bangalore, my first spontaneous reaction was usually something like: “Is she liking it there?” to which my friend then would not be able to answer. She would laugh the question off or would need to take some time to find appropriate words to describe the sister's new environment. At other occasions I tried to ask about (relations with) third persons using phrases like “What is she/ he like?” “How is he/she?” or even “what kind of a

person is that?” to which I was answered for instance with an “He is a doctor”, or if I tried again, with “Well, I told you: he is a doctor”. Even in the intense social environment of the campus of the university where I was stationed during the greater part of the three research periods, students rarely elaborated about other persons’ or their own characters or personal preferences, again other than food. And when I asked a seven year old grandson about his school and whether he liked to go there he responded with the often heard: “What is there to like?”. Although I found it hard to unlearn my spontaneous reactions, his answer made every sense: why would you like or dislike doing things if you have to do them anyway. Duties simply had to be done and there was no question about it.

In fact, it often seemed as if duties were not supposed to be liked. Instead, duties were generally portrayed as inflicting pain and suffering. Duty and pain not only went hand in hand but mutually enforced each other as a common discourse held that those who were in most pain had been most dutiful. This collective glorification of suffering created a strong sense of belonging to specifically those persons who were the greatest source of the suffering (Herzfeld, 2001: 221-224).¹ Discourses on parenthood for example centred around notions of sacrifice and suffering (Donner, 2008: 133), which in turn gave children a strong sense of responsibility towards their parents. Suffering was thus seen as a positive and necessary experience that could be relieved by striving towards a ‘peace of mind’ through leading a religious life—with discipline—but not through an abandonment of duties.

Daily behaviour and composure were just as much influenced by the idea of duties as larger decisions or actions. In fact older persons often mentioned duty as a reason for particular actions. Because duties were socially acceptable motivations they were easily brought forward to legitimate behaviour. An explicit reference to another persons’ duties was also a powerful way of appealing to them or even pressurising them into requested behaviour. That was sometimes done explicitly by reminding others of their duties or less explicitly by referring to the existing relationship. Social expectations were therefore made explicit and frequently shared to reaffirm the relationships people had.

Whereas certain duties were straightforward and generally understood, there were just as many duties that could be ambiguous or contested. Because of their ambiguity, duties were manipulated or forced upon others. Those in powerful positions often used a discourse of duties to the advancement of their own causes. Different motivations too played a role when duties were referred to, but they were all linked to a set of ideas and convictions that concerned one’s role in the world and relations with others.

¹ Shweder, Much et al. compare different ways to make sense of suffering and write how “ Wherever one looks on the globe it appears that human beings want to be edified by their miseries. It is as if the desire to make suffering intelligible and to turn it to some advantage is one of those dignifying peculiarities of our species, like the ability to cook or conjugate verbs or conceive of the idea of justice” (Shweder, Much et al. 2003: 119).

POSITIONS AND EXPECTATIONS

In Thiruvananthapuram's cultural context, one's position in a family, in a household or in any other social network brought along certain expectations. Seniority was thereby, especially among the older persons, considered very important and both implicit and explicit codes of conduct took seniority into account. Although special references that were added to names—*chechi* and *chettan*—explicated seniority much of the expected behaviour towards older siblings, friends and relatives remained subtle and implicit. Whereas it was normal for instance that a senior person gave council and directions to younger persons, this was not so the other way around. When big decisions needed to be taken or during official functions and gatherings one's relative age counted even more heavily. This relative age depended for women also on the age of their husband, women who were younger than their sisters-in-law but married to an older brother were called *chechi* and treated as senior.

Gender too was a great shaper of position and duties. In general, there were certain characteristics and ways to behave for men and women. Women, for instance were expected to be able to adjust more easily than men. Not only were women often thought to naturally possess qualities that made them more adjustable, it was also demanded of them and called their particular duty. A great deal of adjustment was required during marriage when women were generally held more responsible for the couple's wellbeing because they were supposed to adjust to their partner's preferences to a larger degree. This notion had led—and was still leading—to an age-difference between most husbands and wives, the idea being that a younger woman was more impressionable and would more easily obey her older husband. Another intended result of this age-difference was that the majority of wives were able to look after their husband until his death. Again, a common discourse stated it was easier for women to adjust to widowhood than it was for men to live on after their wife's death. This practice of women marrying older men had contributed significantly to a 'gender-gap' amongst older persons and especially amongst widowed older persons (Chen, 1998: 31).²

Another such adaptation that had been required of many older Christian women was that they take on the religious denomination of their husband's. Since inter-denomination marriages between the Christian communities (*Marthomyte* and *Jacobite* for instance) had been frequent it was expected of the bride that she changed her denomination to that of her

² According to the Kerala Development Report nearly 60% of the women above 60 in Kerala were widows as against 11,5% of men who were widowers (Government of India Planning Commission, 2008: 348). Nationwide, half of the women were already widowed at age 60-64 and the percentage rose to a 93 percent for women aged 90 and above. At this age, only half of the men were widowers (Irudaya Rajan & Kumar, 2003: 79). Widowhood in India thus follows several patterns: an ageing population, an overlap between aging and widowhood and a gender gap. Each of these patterns was more pronounced in Kerala than in the country as a whole (Chen, 1998: 31). Although naturally, not all widows are old, the incidence of widowhood did rise sharply with age. Consequently, practically all women spent at least some portion of their life as a widow, if they lived past the age of 60 (Vatuk, 1995).

new in-law family. For older Christian women this had often entailed far-reaching changes. At age eighteen or twenty they had been suddenly expected to stop or start praying to the Holy Virgin Mary or to stop or start with wearing jewellery. These significant changes had not always been easy. Whereas some husbands or fathers-in-law had been lenient and had allowed them to quietly pursue prior rituals, others had been forced into the new ways.

The roles gender and age played in decision making processes were of course very much dependent on individual ideas on gender and on specific persons. These ideas could be very egalitarian within small groups. Among couples there was great variation in how they experienced and shaped the differences between husband and wife and how they spoke about their different 'roles'. There were a few men who said their wife was the one who made all decisions and was in charge of the financial matters. However, these men realised this was socially odd and exceptional and presented their cases as such.

Most key decisions were however not taken within an isolated small sphere. Other – senior—relatives easily got involved and at times critically opposed an individual's ideas or wishes. This reaction, or the anticipation of this reaction, gave an additional rigidity to socially dominant ideas about different roles and duties.

Chechamma auntie's experiences at the death of her husband illustrated the pressures that a larger community or group of relatives could exert. At the same time it demonstrated the space for negotiation and manipulation individuals could find. 71 year old Chechamma auntie spoke in detail about her husband's last rites. Between her and her husband, there had been an unusually large age-difference of eighteen years and he had not been well for a long time. In preparation of his own death he had asked a male friend to execute his last wishes.

“We [Chechamma auntie and husband] had talked about it for a long time...everything, also the will. Most people here they don't even prepare a will. That's why they don't accept the death. When you talk about preparing a will there is a hesitation... they say: am I going to die? My husband, we had talked about all these things. He prepared a will. He had complete instructions given on about where he should be buried. What he should dress, what kind of service in the church. All these things... he had written these things down 2,3 weeks ago. He had written it down 2,3 weeks before his death.

He had called one of our friends. He knows that I can't do anything. Because when something like this happens, people have different opinions and they come and take over. So he made sure that this is done this way.”

M: “How do you mean they take over?”

C: “Well, you know there are different kinds of services... Suppose when my husband passes away and then my brother-in-law comes and says : we're doing this. And then our ideas cannot be implemented, whatever he wanted.

Even for something my brother-in-law said: oh I want my brother's funeral to be very well done [with which he had meant elaborately and expensive]. Then I said: I want my husband's funeral to be done as he wanted it to be done [which was very 'simple']."

M: "So if that hasn't been talked about before... "

C: "I won't have voice there. The men will come and I'm supposed to be keeping quiet. Now I'm not like that.. but as a precaution to that my husband had called this friend and asked him to see that it would be done."

M: "So the friend, he was not a relative, had that authority?"

C: "Ya, he said ok. This is what he wanted.

So then when the church pastor came he [the friend] said: this is how he [Chechamma's husband] wanted to...

M: "So a friend can have that authority?"

C: "Because my husband did it [had spoken to him and had written his will down].

And I think even that my husband talked to my brother-in-law also.

So they knew that... Then in spite of that my brother-in-law may say: he said all these things but we have to do this.

[For instance] Because my husband didn't want anybody to take pictures of him.

Somebody came with a camera and my son said "no". Then my brother-in-law said: "let him take". Then my son was so angry and said: "No, papa said no" and he was so angry."

[interview from tape]

In the interview Chechamma auntie explained the forces that she experienced when 'the men came and took over'. She also spoke of the generic power of the older brother-in-law. Chechamma auntie was an assertive woman with clear personal opinions, but in larger company she knew that she was expected to keep quiet. Even though others also knew that she was not 'like that'. Chechamma auntie's husband had been an academic and a very religious man whose opinions were very much respected. The solution that he had found in instructing a friend had worked but that had never been guaranteed. It needed respect for the dead man and his wishes, the clear directions that had been given to the friend and perhaps the brother-in-law, the assertiveness of Chechamma auntie and the interference of her son to circumvent the oldest brother's claims. It goes to show the power of the dominant discourse and the importance accorded to rights and duties that come with certain positions. At the same time it illustrates how even within a well-known and powerfully dominant discourse, families and individuals had their own ways for manoeuvring around it or using it to their own advantage.

There were other cases, too, in which persons told me about how they had managed to change the expected roles to their advantage. One Christian lady, who had been a professor in Philosophy and who had two younger brothers, had for instance managed to convince her brothers that—contrary to their community’s custom—her senior mother should stay with her.

“It is a custom amongst Christians that the sons take care of their mother. But I was very particular to look after my mother and so my brothers accepted. Also because I am the eldest and I know how to use logic and convince them.”

The logic had consisted, so she said, of several arguments. She had told her brothers that it was important for her to look after her mother and ‘pay back’ for all the care and love she had received during her life. Also, she convinced her brothers that her mother would feel better at ease with her as compared to with her daughters-in-law. All these arguments, and—as she admittedly said—some emotional blackmailing, had helped her to change the expected arrangement. The arguments she had forwarded had without a doubt also been employed by the brothers to explain to others why their mother was not living with them.

Since the research focussed on highly educated older persons who had often received more education than their siblings and parents, perhaps this had helped them at times to convince others to let go of conventional expectations. Nevertheless even this privileged group—with age and education to their advantage—knew the weight of social expectations and duties and could only in special instances manage to find alternative possibilities.

EXPECTATIONS IN OLDER AGE

Elder, the pumpkin cutter

You must have seen the sort of elderly man who lives in a family and is always ready, day and night, to entertain the children. He sits in the parlour and smokes the hubble-bubble. With nothing in particular to do, he leads a lazy life. Now and again he goes to the inner court and cuts a pumpkin; for since women do not cut pumpkins, they send the children to ask him to come and do it. This is the extent of his usefulness—hence his nickname, ‘Elder, the pumpkin cutter’. He is neither a man of the world nor a devotee of God. That is not good.

(Sri Ramakrishna, 1971)

There were duties such as either being a man of the world or being a devotee of God that comprised life-long directions on how to live. But there are also duties that are more subtle and momentary. The latter are formed by the behaviours, tasks and responsibilities that fit a certain moment and a certain social identity. In the popular lessons by Swami Vivekananda, he explained that: “[...] environments change the nature of our duties, and doing the duty

which is ours at any particular time is the best thing we can do in this world. Let us do that duty which is ours by birth; and when we have done that, let us do the duty which is ours by our position in life and in society” (Vivekananda, 1921: 64).

Older persons often looked back on their lives and thought about their duties. They told me in hindsight of their accomplishments and their struggles. Men in particular spoke of the jobs they had had. Women often reflected on their children and some specified that they had raised them well. Marrying off of children was a duty of great consequence to both men and women and the few who had not yet managed to marry off their children experienced this as a great challenge.

Judging from what was given most attention a majority felt that they had completed their most vital duties. Some were still involved with businesses or attended to the financial matters of the family but many were in the process of handing these over. Utterances as: “I have nothing important to do” were shared matter-of-factly and reflected this idea. For most older persons, the primal duties of life had been fulfilled. But even when the largest duties were completed, smaller day-to-day duties remained. These were the things people felt supposed to do when alive and active to either be a “man of the world” or a “devotee of God” or a bit of both. These day-to-day duties involved things like basic hygiene, keeping contacts and following the basic ‘rules’ of social conduct, doing pooja or going to church or mosque, being involved in the community and giving to charity. Mrs. Mohammad, a widowed Muslim lady of 70 explained:

“Earlier, I was always working for the family, now I should be doing things for society. Having done my duties gives me a good feeling. I think I did very well. My children and my husband were all satisfied. Now, I think more about social activities then before and about the poor families and uneducated women of our Muslim communities.”

Although they were sometimes described as ‘nothing important’, older persons’ behaviour testified that these daily duties that were often summarised as: “keeping busy” or “staying active” were experienced as essential to their wellbeing. As Rajappan uncle expressed:

“Our purpose in living is over, we have fulfilled all our responsibilities, so these are just the last days. It is inevitable. But until that we will be active.”

In a way the importance of these smaller duties only increased because these were the only category of duties left. I sometimes wondered whether the ‘anxiety dependency’, as described by Sylvia Vatuk (1990:67-68) was related to this fear of not fulfilling the remaining duties. Being a burden on others means not being able to perform even the most minute duties oneself.

For those with enough financial means, giving to others was also spoken of as a duty. In many neighbourhoods it was normal to see poorer persons going from door to door to ask for money. Sometimes these persons would go to households for which they had done some labour in the past, sometimes they asked indiscriminately for charity. Whether through this personal charity or through donations to organisations, money-giving was seen as every persons' duty and was not considered a private affair. To the contrary, it was something that could be demanded with pressure. Amounts to be contributed were equally and without hesitation—and also in my presence—openly discussed. Spending wisely and putting one's acquired wealth to good use was a very central and often talked about duty.

In a lecture “What I learned in old age” the then president of the Senior Citizens Association disclosed his greatest lessons in life. One critical lesson to him had been the one Shakespeare had given to his Polonius character in Hamlet: “Neither a borrower nor a lender be; (For loan oft loses both itself and friend”). The president had experienced that relations tended to turn sour when money was involved and told the audience that it was better to avoid this problem by gifting money instead of lending it. Many recognised this problem of money influencing relationships, but the lesson was a hard one to live up to and formulated in an entirely different cultural context. When I got to know this president personally, I came to learn that he himself too regularly extended loans to persons even though, in the end, the borrowers always disappointed him. Still, lending money to others was a duty that was difficult to escape. A thirty-some year old man who lived in a Gulf country and was in Thiruvananthapuram to see his family and renew his daughter's passport explained the pressure that was involved in money matters:



Figure: Some of the—very active—senior board members of one association

“If I would need money I wouldn't want to borrow it from anybody here. I would go to a bank in Great Britain and borrow the money there. Here, people will either ask for too much interest or for no interest. Then you will be indebted to them.[...] No, also not from relatives. They will expect things in return at a later stage.”

This young migrated professional was right in pointing out the link between money and expectations. But what he—probably because of his experiences elsewhere—had come to see as a disadvantage was considered as an advantage by most. While in a country like the Netherlands, solidarity and interdependency has in many ways become anonymous and general, solidarity in India (and Thiruvananthapuram) was particular,

personal and had a face (van der Veen, 1991:20). From the several societies and associations that I came to know well, I learned about the very diverse—but always direct—ways of fundraising. When one association needed a new building to be built, it published the amounts generous members had donated in their monthly newsletter. Another small association needing money had sent a small delegation to the houses of all members to personally ask them for a sum of money. And one member of a very large and active association that needed a large sum of money for its daily running explained me their way of fundraising. To keep the association running they asked their wealthiest members to lend large sums for a few years. This particular member had lent the association a few lakh (100'000) rupees for two years, after which other members were asked. That way nobody was troubled too much, the members only missed their savings for a limited period of time, and the association had enough capital for their annual budget. The force of the collective and the appeal to duties made it nearly impossible for individuals to refuse such money lending requests from persons or associations in need.

Other common ways to be—visibly—useful and take on new responsibilities were through the active (board-) membership of social organisations, through the writing up of personal experiences and through starting, financing or organising social projects. Mattison Mines writes of the neighbouring state Tamil Nadu that when he first met older persons—men especially—they introduced themselves by listing the offices they had held or were still holding in community institutions (1994 :13). This was similar among older persons in Thiruvananthapuram. Their positions in school boards, religious funds and charity organisations made older persons feel useful and gave them a great degree of satisfaction and authority. But they were also seen as normal and as their duty now that their working lives had come to an end. From the way in which public functions were mentioned when persons introduced themselves or others it was clear that being actively involved was considered valuable. Mines called this a person's 'civic individuality' and my research confirmed the importance of this public identity for older persons (Mines, 1994:13). There was a consensus, as described in Sri Ramakrishna's parable of Elder, the pumpkin cutter, that it was not commendable to be "sitting idle". Sri Ramakrishna offered a choice between being a 'man of God' or a 'man of the World'. Just being 'a man' was not enough. Older persons were expected to contribute and perform their duties as a way of growing old gracefully. They could do so in ways different from younger persons, depending also on their physical condition, but they had to contribute nonetheless.

In their efforts to find ways to contribute, several individuals for instance had used their post-retirement years to write a book. I came to know more than a handful of persons who had written books about their experiences in life, with short stories (including a message) or about their religious ideals and thoughts. Several of these books had been

written in Malayalam but I received the ones in English to read for myself. The books were all very educational and most of them especially written for the younger generations.

In a similar vein older men and women often told me how they informally counselled youngsters. Passing on their own experiences and knowledge was seen as a central duty, one that men in particular spoke frequently about. Youngsters—as unmarried younger persons were called—were understood to a degree but nevertheless reprimanded when they strayed from the correct path of discipline and duty. They were seen as not yet full-members of society who simply needed these directions from the older generations.

Younger persons then tried to balance their own and their elders' wishes. As Mines wrote:

“Given circumstances and cultural norms, Indians continuously weigh the costs and benefits of complying with seniors against those of self-direction [...] Acquiring control over their lives, individuals recreate the hierarchical social order with themselves as seniors, since by their seniority they achieve the power to control their relationships and make their own decisions” (Mines, 1994: 183)

The notion that youngsters were not fully capable to make decisions and lead their life correctly made it possible for two very different discourses and outlooks to simultaneously coexist.

GENDER AND A RITUALISATION OF HOUSEHOLD WORK

Amongst most highly educated older persons, strict ideas about a gendered division of labour were commonplace. “The father is the head of this house. The mother is the heart of this house” it said on a small notice plate in one couple's house; and most persons would agree.

Perhaps this division of labour had once given wife and husband a more or less even workload in hours per day. However, now that those who once had had paid jobs were retired, the division of labour became biased—or at least in the eyes of an outsider. Although some retired men laughed at their own inability to do household chores, only exceptionally did they tell me of efforts to learn or take over some of their ‘wife's work’. At times, I was told by a proud man that he was good at making *chaya* or that his job was to hang away the wet laundry, but men's contributions to the household did generally not go much further than that. Because of their inexperience with certain household tasks some widowers had difficulties in keeping their household running. Next to an incapability to look after themselves, it was difficult for single man to find an in-living male servant and female servants were not always willing to stay with a single older man.

Women were without exception seen as responsible for the household labour and in particular for the cooking. All employed at least a part-time servant who would perform chores like cutting and washing vegetables, doing the laundry, cleaning and sweeping. Some

of these servants also took over or helped with the cooking. They did a lot of the most tiring and dirty works and without them some household situations would have quickly become untenable. Nevertheless, even a hard-working servant's input still left more than enough work for the woman or women of the house. (Ray & Qayum, 2009: 125) Almost all felt they had to closely supervise their servants when cooking, cleaning or cutting, as domestic work was to be supervised but not performed (Ray & Qayum, 2009: 50, 64). Even Mrs. Grace, who was self-proclaimed lazy and didn't like to cook, told her servant exactly and each day what to buy, what to make and how to prepare it. If women were physically and mentally able to supervise or do the actual cooking themselves they wanted to be in charge (Ray & Qayum, 2009: 51).

In all this management of household chores and especially in cooking there was a certain strictness about the correct way to do things. Households were run in a very particular way and any outside change to this particular way was experienced as disturbing. Of all the household chores, older women felt most uncomfortable if they did not have control over cooking (Donner, 2008: 155).

One auntie was experiencing a lot of trouble getting her cooking done in time. Slowly dinner time moved from eight to nine and sometimes to ten o'clock at night, gravely upsetting her own and her husbands' rhythm. Very rarely and out of dire need, they would let me buy some food for them at a restaurant. However, they were always upset at the quality of the food, no matter how many restaurants they allowed me to try. At several instances the husband told his wife it would be better to employ a servant for the cooking, next to the servant already employed who did some cleaning and cutting in the mornings, but this suggestion was always brushed off. "They can't do cooking. They don't even know how to make chapatti" she would explain her refusal. This fitted exactly in the larger discourse of complaints about the cooking skills of servants and professional cooks (Lamb, 2007 ;Donner, 2008; Ray & Qayum, 2009: 86-87, 107). This scepticism towards the cooking of others—servants as well as restaurant owners—was an indication of how imperative it was to these women to remain in charge of certain household tasks. These tasks were too important to lose out of sight or leave to others. Several reasons may further explain this desire to maintain control over certain household chores.

First, as mentioned before, there was often only one correct way to do things. A certain order of tasks, the use of certain tools, a certain timing, a certain frequency. Household tasks, even the simplest as cutting vegetables for instance, were done in an almost ritualistic way.

Several possible reasons could be mentioned for this—what I would like to call—ritualisation of household tasks. To start with, most religious world views in Thiruvananthapuram promoted a strong awareness with which any task should be performed. Concentration, dedication and discipline were strong positive values and advocated by

(religious) teachers from all main religious groups. As the household was to a degree public and open to scrutiny from neighbours and relatives this was also a way in which especially women's bodies were socially disciplined.

The ritualisation of household tasks was effected by the different values accorded to different substances as known from Hindu literature and Ayurveda (Ray & Qayum, 2009: 52, 59, 152-155). The care with which certain household tasks were performed in a particular order is very well understandable in the light of substances with pure or impure properties. This set of ideas also highly influenced the nature of the domestic work delegated to servants (*ibid.*). In conversations the characteristics of substances (such as food, drinks, cups, used plates etc) were sometimes explicitly mentioned but were always part of an internal body language (Ray & Qayum, 2009: 153). Even those who said they did not attach much importance to the qualifications of substances, had embodied the most important social norms on purity. This was for instance clearly visible with the famous right/left hand distinction that persons sometimes did not mind neglecting on purpose but never confused when they acted unthinkingly.

But even though the embodiment of a cultural discourse on purity surely played a role and even though a certain ritualisation was appreciated in more domains than the household alone, the ritualisation of household tasks had in my mind most to do with gendered identities. Strong ideas about gender and about being a good housewife formed the main identity maker for the majority of women. Consequently, much importance was given to these tasks. They were seen as much more than means to an end. Household tasks were a source of pride but also led to criticism and gossip when performed incorrectly (Donner, 2008). Household tasks were more than just tasks; they were part of women's principal duty. The question why high literacy rates in Kerala have not led to more opportunities and freedom for women has occupied several scholars (Mukhopadhyay, 2007). Standard



Figure: A strict segregation of the sexes in public spaces

indicators of women's well-being such as high literacy levels and good scores on health indicators have led many to be convinced that women should be best of in Kerala. However, if one looks beneath the surface, these authors indicate that not all is well or getting better (Mathew, 1995; Osella & Osella, 2000; Ramachandran, 1995; Lindberg, 2005). A strict segregation of the sexes in public spaces, soaring dowry rates and a rise in (domestic) violence against women, as well as early indications of dropping sex ratios are most often

mentioned as worrying signs that not all women fare well in Kerala (Mukhopadhyay, 2007: 5-7).³ It is sad to see that all great results on important demographic measures have not led to all-round improved gender equity. Apparently something else may have been impeding these changes. In search of an explanation, cultural factors—such as duty—more than demographic and economic indicators have to be explored.

In Malayalee soap operas some of the stereotypical notions of good womanhood came most clearly to the fore. These daily soap operas were extremely popular among the older women in particular and although the storylines and characters were by no means representational they had become part of many persons' daily lives. Several types of women were distinguishable in the most popular storylines of daily Malayalam soaps.⁴ One stereotypical type was for instance the powerful girl who was very smart, well behaved and had an independent career but only because her father or husband stimulated her in this way (Usha, 2004: 18).

“The most popular characters were [...] both independent, intelligent, and responsible women, capable of much achievement, yet never stirring away from the socially acceptable norms of obedience to elders, particularly menfolk, loving, caring, sympathetic to male problems, faithful and hardworking” (Usha, 2004: 18).

Yet another prototype was the weak victim who could only be saved from evil by a strong male figure after other male figures had done her harm. What the different types of female roles thus had in common was their dependency on at least one strong male figure.

“The ideal woman thus becomes the epitomes of patience, love, sympathy, tolerance, suffering and self-sacrifice [*sic*]. As in the sitcoms, she remains faithful to her partner despite his tortures, torments, and abuses” (Usha, 2004: 18).

Usha found how women from all layers of society, including those with jobs and high education, had rather conservative ideas on the appropriate duties, composure, dress and demeanour of women. The ideal wife/mother/sister/daughter-in-law/daughter was obedient, submissive and self-sacrificing (Usha, 2004). As Kakar and Kakar write:

³ The study clearly illustrates the difficulties with status (Mukhopadhyay 2007:7-9) when it is used as a one or two dimensional concept. While some indicators for a social group may seem promising others may show a whole different truth. For the status of older persons this same point was made by Vatuk (1980:128) and Sokolovsky (1997) amongst others. Status is far too vague and multi-composite a concept to be productively used in social research. It requires great specification and dissection before it can be reformed into workable concepts.

⁴ In a working paper called Gender, Value, and Signification: Women and television in Kerala (2004) V.T. Usha investigated the portrayals of women in popular Malayalee soap operas and advertisements and combined these portraits with the roles female interviewees deemed appropriate for women in the household and at work. The small study shows precisely how conservative the Malayalee mainstream television programmes were with regards to gendered stereotypes.

“Tradition continues its hold on the middle-class woman’s mind in that she views domestic and maternal obligations as central to her identity. This is true of the housewife as much as of the high-profile career woman” (2007:67).

Cultural ideas on different gendered duties had a stronghold on the daily lives of both men and women. These duties should not only be formulated as limiting and restrictive as in fact many women would say they acquired great self-respect and gratitude from the fulfilment of their duties. However, whereas this homogeneous discourse on duties agreed well with certain changes (better healthcare, better education) it held back others (household tasks for men; freedom of movement, dress, career choices). It explains why societal change may have been slower -or in a different shape—than expected by scientists and social planners and formed the reason why even the very well educated and often retired older men and women did not easily let go of these dominant ideas. Men felt a strong urge to exhibit their career and educational qualifications (Mines, 1994: 153), could not be seen doing women-jobs and felt financially responsible for their families. Women on the other hand took pride in their control over the household work, acted submissively towards men—or at least made sure to appear submissive in public—and lived up to strong societal directives of dress and composure. In other words, older persons were in their daily lives striving to be dutiful men and women.

“MY CHILDREN ARE TELLING ME ...”

In a beautiful and moving short story by Malayalee writer M.T. Vasudevan Nair called *Doors of Heaven Open* a grandfather has suddenly fallen ill and is expected to pass away (2004).⁵ The younger relatives who live elsewhere are called and one after the other they come to their native town to be in time for the expected rites. After two days of uncertainty and waiting in which the children and grandchildren continuously speculate on the remaining time, the grandfather slowly improves and regains consciousness. The last scene sees all the grandchildren and children bidding their grandfather farewell in an atmosphere of anti-climax. When all are gone the grandfather called Master remains in the room with his sister:

⁵ In *False Documents* E.L. Doctorow has pointed out the serious contribution of fiction, ironically described as false documents, for exploring, exposing and understanding human life and the world from an admirably holistic and unbiased position of objectivity. A fiction writer is both a creator and a rapporteur, and discerning writers are aware that “facts are the images of history, just as images are the facts of fiction”(Doctorow, 1983: 24). These “false documents” may be regarded as the most potent of all resources that register the myriad stranded, multi-layered, nuanced and subtle experience of life within the family system, of consenting individuals sharing a common space (Dasgupta & Lal, 2007:20). Nita Kumar makes a similar point when she urges her readers to take seriously the insights of literature (2005: 19, 21).

Master cleared the phlegm in his throat and said softly: 'Are you listening? If I fall seriously ill again, don't send for the children. They've hundreds of things to do. No telegrams, no phone calls. Don't inform them till you're sure it's all over.'

His words trailed off as he gasped for breath.

Master looked at a distant point outside the window and murmured : 'Let whoever is free come after that. Tell Achu as well.'

Narayani Amma looked at her brother. His eyes dulled with age that gazed out through the window were filled with tears.

'You are crying, Ettan [older brother]!'

'No, of course not... My head feels hot, that's why my eyes are watering...'

Mater rubbed his eyes. 'You can go too.'

His sister did not answer. She kept chanting in her mind: 'Narayana! Narayana!'

(Vasudevan Nair, 2004: 129)

Narayani Amma, Master's sister, is the only one who stays and sits with him while she prays to Narayana [Sanskrit name for Vishnu and judging from their names the family deity]. Now that the others realise that grandfather is not about to die they have quickly returned to their own lives and worries. M.T. Vasudevan Nair's story makes painfully clear the possible downsides to duties. It shows how disappointment may come not only from those who neglect their duties but also from those who perform them. Master's children do exactly as they are supposed to do in this case as they rush to come to their father's house. However, they feel heavily burdened with this duty and leave no opportunity to discuss their fathers future death. Duty is in this case such a strong motivator, that it leaves little room for others as compassion or a personal desire.

In smaller ways this downside to duties was also experienced by some older persons in Thiruvananthapuram. Mrs.Leela for instance did not like going to public places anymore because of all the dutiful younger persons who would be too willing to help her with her stroller. She liked going places without attracting much attention and this attitude made that impossible. In the same vein younger persons seriously restricted their older parents mobility with a stress on their duty to look after them.

Duties thus changed with time and this was clearly visible in the relationship between parents and their children. As most older persons had fulfilled their most important duties towards their children, these were now in turn supposed to fulfil some of their important duties towards their older parents. While some older persons still seemed to feel more responsible for their children's welfare than the other way around, societal discourse emphasised the adult children's duties.

In conversations these duties were often referred to in differing measures of explicitness. Many times older persons said their children had told them to do this or go

there. Children were for instance telling them to come and stay with them. These repeated remarks were an indirect way of demonstrating the children's sympathy and their good relation. If older persons wanted those in their environment to appreciate their situation they would make remarks like: "They asked me to come, so I went." Or "My children are always telling me to come, but I don't want to travel that much". If, on the other hand they wanted to be pitied and needed sympathy -which was much less frequent—they would say something like: "my children are forgetting about me".

Children's advice also functioned as a legitimisation. Rachel auntie for instance had decided to take up a function as a professor in a college in the neighbouring state of Tamil Nadu. For this function she had to travel to Tamil Nadu about once a month. Not everyone in her surroundings appreciated her travelling by herself and taking up a job at her age. I noticed on several occasions that Rachel auntie would start a conversation about the job by saying that her children had encouraged her to take up something new. "My children are saying: Mummy, it would be a good change for you. A change of place and a change of people." She would also at other moments in the conversation say things like: "[...]I used to remember much more. That's why my son tells me to go and get my brain active." The children's approval, in Rachel auntie's case, functioned as an authorisation to others. By referring to her children and their duty Rachel auntie could stop others from criticising her and at the same time she could smother potential criticisms directed at her children for letting their widowed older mother travel such great distances. Simultaneously these utterances were used to demonstrate their close relationship and her (migrated) children's strong involvement. Rachel auntie skilfully used the duty-discourse to come to the desired result.

With so many different persons who appealed to their duties, conflicts of duty were a realistic possibility. At times I suspected that alluding to a particular duty could be an individual's best way to escape another uncomfortable duty. The discourse on duty was so strong that it could only be opposed through references to other duties. The powerfully dominant discourse on duties was only contestable from within the orthodoxy, as contesting the experience or the importance of the duties themselves was unimaginable (Bourdieu, 1977: 159).

A common example of a conflict of duties in the lives of the older persons concerned the visits of grandchildren. When grandparents were asked about their grandchildren's visits they invariably started to talk about their grandchildren's extremely full study schedules. Studies were taken extremely seriously, requiring round the clock schooling, tuition and homework counselling regardless of whether the children were considered good or bad students (Donner, 2008: 130). Especially children in the 10th or 12th standard with upcoming exams were said to be never free for leisure or visits. But even for children of other ages or abroad, study was almost always given as a reason for fewer visits. Although

pride was the dominant emotion that grandparents exhibited when they spoke of their grandchildren's achievements, a certain annoyance and disagreement with these overflowing schedules that had no place for them was also quite common. In all these examples, the children and grandchildren's duty to visit, write or phone the grandparents conflicted with (or were made to conflict with) the grandchildren's duty to study and the parents' and grandparents' duty to facilitate this.⁶ Since the study-excuse was really the only socially acceptable excuse available, its possibly strategic nature merits underlining.

The most notable duties were thus towards family members. It was also in the context of the family, that the word 'duty' was used most often. Although all had duties towards friends, neighbours, society and their own lives, duties towards the family were not only the strongest but also the most difficult. More than those other duties, the duties towards family members were sometimes in contrast with what would have been most easy, convenient or pleasant. Through duties, the family's influence on individuals had become much stronger than that of caste for instance in reproducing inequalities (Béteille, 1993: 450). Duties towards caste members were not nearly as demanding as those related to relatives. The family had therewith become not only an active agent of social control but also an active agent of social placement (*ibid.*).⁷ Nevertheless, social institutions such as the family or the school were—much more than caste—unquestioned in their reproduction of inequalities (*ibid.*).

TALK NICELY

Next to contextual requirements in specific relationships, there were general expectations that applied to all social contacts. One such an expectation that I heard frequently was to 'talk nicely'. When grandchildren were around during an interview, they were for instance instructed to "go and sit with auntie [me] and talk nicely". Also, when I was requested to visit someone for a social reason I was sometimes told to just go and talk nicely. At the Alzheimer's centre that I visited several times there was a man who did not speak much. He too was instructed to at least talk nicely with me, even though he was clearly not interested in partaking in a conversation.

What talking nicely meant differed from context to context. Talking nicely to a senior person was different from talking nicely with a peer. Yet both followed a similar logic of asking basic questions about the persons' relatives' wellbeing and his background. The expectation to talk nicely was not always easy to live up to for older persons. Sulochana

⁶ Donner writes how mothers in Calcutta too were caught in between their duties towards their parents(-in-law) and their demanding duties concerning the supervision of their children's education (Donner, 2008: 129)

⁷ Béteille makes some nuances that, because of space constraints, have not made this text. The argument for instance concerns the urban intelligentsia, possibly more so than the artisans and cultivators in the rural areas. Also, Béteille stresses that caste does in a major way influence electoral politics all over the country. He argues however that the school and the family are far greater obstacles in the advance of equality than caste because they are active agents of social placement and control (Béteille, 1993).

auntie for instance said that she had a strong preference for going to society meetings rather than house calls. She liked seeing her friends but as Sulochana auntie explained she was not a big talker and long conversations tired her. At the meetings there was only limited time before and after the program to chat and the conversations were less dependent on strict expectations and more context specific.

Rachel auntie too had a problem with another one of the basic expectations in conversations. I once asked her whether she ever had trouble finding a topic of conversation with friends she hadn't seen in a long time as she had lived out of the country for several decennia, to which she replied that "We just ask about the family". Then, when we continued on that topic Rachel auntie explained that it was troubling sometimes if she forgot names of a person's relatives.

There may be things that I am supposed to know. That way we have to be careful. I know I've met all the children. I know this is Rajeev and then the other one, I didn't remember the name. So I kept asking; where are the other two? And finished that because I couldn't remember the names. Which I am supposed to. Because they came there. Another time I might remember but now I didn't. So I just got around by saying...I just talked around by saying. I should actually ask them: where is so and so and where is so and so.

[...]I listened to her calling him Deephu. So I knew this was Deephu.

Sometimes you know some old friends come here. And they pretend to be knowing us so much. So we are looking for clues.

M: Do you write things down?

Yes, but this person is that person you may not know after they suddenly turn up like this. Just like she came. To get into the conversation... that's because I would be really bad if I wouldn't remember her. [...]

I used to remember much more. That's why my son tells me to go and get my brain active.

[...]It's considered a bad thing. They come with the big expectation of getting to you.

My mother she gets confused. Sometimes she'll ask: is that Rachel?

Some gentleman came and he was talking to my mother. So he was saying: don't you know me. She couldn't remember but he insisted. After he was saying.. but this and that. Then I had to tell him. She even forgets me sometimes. Still, he insisted.

But she still looks quite smart and healthy, so people expect her to... [interview from tape]

This standard way of keeping conversation, or talking nicely, could thus become quite complicated for those who tired quickly or had difficulty remembering names. A third complication formed hearing problems. For a good conversation, hearing was of course

imperative. Older persons however could sometimes have great hearing disabilities. In the cases of older men, their seniority and gender helped overcome the problem to a certain extent. Because seniority was so decisive in conversations and all other forms of social conduct the senior men were oftentimes more at liberty to shape the conversations to their own interests and abilities. For older men for instance it seemed easier to just tell of a certain experience they had, or phrase questions without having to really know the answer. It would be interesting to have this hypothesis further investigated but my observations led me to expect that hearing problems in general pose a very different—and possibly much greater—problems for women than for men. Still, hearing disabilities hindered older persons' lives in almost certainly more ways than those who hear can imagine and for some 'talking nicely' became very complicated.

Quite opposite from talking nicely was scolding, which too was referred to frequently. Anna auntie explained how the difference between scolding and fighting was that one person scolded another, whereas fighting was mutual. Scolding therefore entailed a hierarchical relationship and was not something a younger person or someone in a powerless position would easily do. Older parents in their own words frequently scolded their children and grandchildren for (not) doing something and in fact it was seen as only natural that they would do so. Scolding affirmed, rather than endangered, relationships as it was expected that older persons would regularly exercise their right to tell others their mind.

SOCIALITY AND THE SELF

“People everywhere [...] are apt to have some notion of personal identity over time and of the boundaries between themselves and others. [...] Less certain are the questions of what self-constructs may be like, how vulnerable they are to facts of context and of sociocultural milieu, and how and if they contrast with ideas concerning other aspects of what people are about” (Rosaldo, 1984: 145)⁸.

In conversations as well as in popular media, I found social relations were not often discussed. This is different in the—to me familiar—Dutch context in which popular magazines are filled with articles, stories and even multiple choice tests about the character of relations, relational expectations and problems.⁹ In Kerala, among my young student friends as well as the older interviewees, friendships and kin relations were never questioned

⁸ Rosaldo herself writes about the Ilongots for example: “In short, it seems misleading to identify individuality with the Ilongot sense of self, first, because Ilongots do not assume a gap between the private self and public person and, second, because the very terms they use in their accounts of how and why they act place emphasis not on the individual who remains outside a social whole but rather on the ways in which all adults are simultaneously autonomous and equal members of a group” (1984: 147)

⁹ “What is friendship?”, “What characteristics does your ideal future life partner possess?” and “What dilemma’s infest the relationships between mothers and daughters?” are seen as legitimate and important questions in the Netherlands. They form part of intense discussions among (women) friends and with strangers in the popular media—for instance in television shows and magazine articles.

or analysed, they just existed. As mentioned, the expectations that formed part of different relationships were considered so normal and were so easily vocalised that they needed no any additional philosophising or evaluation. Conversations about relationships were therefore rather matter-of-factly without much value judgement even if the relation's context was complicated. Being involved in complicated or demanding relations was to the contrary considered so normal and part of the day-to-day sufferings of anybody's life that this was not experienced as a situation that needed resolving.

Relations contain expectations not only of the other but also of the self: the autonomous person who is capable of having these social relations (Carrier, 1999: 32). Investigation of the cultural context of relationships in Kerala therefore necessitated study of the cultural notion of the self. The notion of self has been extensively discussed by various (Western) academics for the Indian context. Several prominent social theorists contrasted the Indian with the Western notion of self and concluded that individuality played little role in Indian social life (Dumont, 1970: 9). Indians were said to value collective identities above their individual identity and were supposed to lack the Western abstract sense of the individual as an integrated whole (Marriott, 1976). This classic dichotomy has since been rightly criticised by many.¹⁰ It takes too far to repeat the entire argument and its criticisms here, however, "this Dumontian view of the relationship between the person and society in India has been very influential and in fact continues to spread" (Mines, 1994: 5). Mattison Mines in his *Public Faces, Private Voices* (1994) illustrates most evidently how individuality—although different from the Western manifestation¹¹—plays a role in Indian society. Mines' observations on individuality and social life in Tamil Nadu are very accurate and largely extendable to my own observations in urban Kerala. There is, however, one relevant addition based on the concept of duty that I would like to make, since it could further explain sociality in the cultural context of Kerala without resorting to the artificial individual—collective identity dichotomy.¹²

Whereas the abovementioned debate focuses on identity, I believe that it is crucial to shift this focus to motivations. Motivations are both more relevant and more transparent. Conceptions of self are extremely complicated to convey or make clear and therefore difficult to research. Motivations on the other hand are easier to articulate and discuss with those in the field. Duties were strong motivators. They and other social expectations formed

¹⁰ For an overview see Mines, 1994: 5.

¹¹ Marilyn Strathern calls the Euro-American idea of 'the freestanding, self-contained individual' a folk model, in which, "because society is likened to an environment [...] it is possible for Euro-Americans to think of individual persons as relating not to other persons but to society as such, and to think of relations as after the fact of the individual's personhood rather than integral to it" (Strathern, 1992: 124-125).

¹² To explain this cultural variation, Kakar and Kakar refer to Schopenhauer's hedgehogs dilemma (Kakar & Kakar, 2007: 189). Hedgehogs on a cold night approach one another for warmth but are then pricked by their quills. The optimum position is reached when there is a balance between the pain of the nearness and the cold of the distance. For persons, this balancing point is different in various cultures (ibid.). This analogy works because it focuses on motivations instead of conceptions of identity.

a link between the self and others as they made individuals think and act beyond the limits of her own ego. Bindhu for instance, who was introduced at the start of this chapter, considered her mother-in-law in all her actions and thoughts. Why? Not because her mother-in-law and other family members formed part of her collective identity. But because Bindhu had internalised the culturally shared conviction that it was her (personal) duty to do so. Bindhu wanted to fulfil her own duties as a good daughter-in-law, wife and mother because this made her feel dutiful (and thus good) and because it was socially expected of her. Not because she had no sense of self or no individual identity. In fact even from the short quote it was obvious that she reflected on her own role.

Persons in Kerala thus thought on an individual level, and their motivations could be in essence self-oriented. Nevertheless the self in Kerala was part of a larger group and was seen to fall short and disappoint greatly when others with influence and in close emotional proximity were dissatisfied. Kakar and Kakar write: “The high value placed on connection does not mean that an Indian is incapable of functioning when he is by himself or imply that he does not have a sense of his own agency. What it does imply is his greater need for ongoing mentorship, guidance and help from others in getting through life and a greater vulnerability to feelings of helplessness when these ties are strained” (2007: 197). Duties had such powerful cultural resonance and were moreover so explicitly shared and dictated, that an individual would feel it and would be made to feel it when duties were not fulfilled. Therefore, it was not individual likes or dislikes or interests and disinterests that influenced the individual’s motivations but the more collectively evolved social duties and expectations. The social, and particularly familial, pressure to live up to these collective expectations was considered legitimate and should not be underestimated. Interestingly enough this pressure oftentimes existed because other persons saw it as their duty to exert it. An understanding of duty thus helps to explain individual motivations. It also elucidates why these motivations have long been understood as promoted by a collective identity but are in actuality inspired by culturally induced individual duties.¹³

There were of course great variations in the ways people reacted to these culturally prescribed positions and duties. Not everyone agreed with the duties that were socially required at a particular time. But even those who did not agree or act accordingly acknowledged their strength and accompanying social pressure. As the writer turned politician Shashi Tharoor wrote: “We Indians are as self-seeking as anyone else, but we are not individualists in the Western mode: India is not hospitable terrain for “atomic man”, since India is not a society in which atomized individuals can accomplish very much” (2007:90). Mattison Mines shared a similar observation when he wrote how “Indians constantly weigh in their minds the costs of rebellion against those of compliance”(Mines,

¹³ Mary Douglas and Steven Ney in their *Missing Persons; A Critique of Selfhood in the Social Sciences* also indicated that self-interested motives may be culturally distinct as opposed to other-interested motives (Douglas & Ney, 1998: 9).

1994: 159). The cost of rebellion thereby not only included damaging social relations with others but also blemishing one's own self-worth. Duties thus provided the crucial link between others and the self that gave collectives as the family such a strong foothold in the mind of individuals.

Thereby, Western 'individualism' too is often referred to without close cultural dissection. In a wonderful, but unfortunately unpublished report about the Dutch welfare state as seen by (Indian) cultural anthropologists, van der Veen writes:

"Therefore a distinction should not be made between a group of individuals who have made arrangements to cope with the odds of life versus individuals who have to fight against these on their own. No, it is the distinction between groups of people who have consciously united with chosen associates in order to fight specific adversities and deficiencies, that affect them individually, versus groups of people who consider themselves to be united in defence of what is seen as a common interest, i.e., well-being of the group of people on whom they depend for the safeguarding of their individual interests"(1991:23).

CONCLUSION

This chapter has centred around what I have come to see as constitutional elements of day-to-day sociality in Thiruvananthapuram, namely expectations and duties. Culturally formed expectations and interpretations of duties made it possible for older persons to shape and give meaning to their relationships with others. An understanding of these expectations provides a clearer insight in persons' behaviour and experiences as for instance knowledge of the commonly shared expectations that accompanied the position of a daughter or daughter-in-law facilitate an understanding of a young woman's deferent attitude towards her mother-in-law.

While some expectations remained implicit, others were formulated explicitly or came to the fore more clearly in specific situations. Explicit reminders of expectations or references to their or my duty even helped me as a much younger researcher in behaving more or less appropriately within older persons' sociality. To a certain extent it also helped those who were dependent on other persons' goodwill for visits as they could make sure their wishes and desires were made clear. Calls upon another persons' duty could be so powerful that they were only deflectable with claims to another conflicting duty. Duties thus informed sociality to such an extent that many found it difficult to communicate their personal wishes and likes as these were seen to be of minor importance and impeding duties. Although duties regularly brought personal fulfilment they were not associated with enjoyment but rather with suffering. This suffering was considered normal and unproblematic in the sense that it needed no resolution, only acceptance.

With so many different persons who appealed to their duties, conflicts of duty were a realistic possibility. And whereas certain duties were straightforward and generally understood, there were just as many duties that were ambiguous or contested. Because of this ambiguity, duties could be manipulated or forced upon others. However, those who were in more powerful positions or were more skilful could use a discourse of duties to the advancement of their own causes.

A person's position was in many ways crucial in shaping his or her duties. This position was among other things influenced by gender and age. Although most older persons had fulfilled their largest duties, day-to-day duties remained such as leading a disciplined life and giving money and advice to youngsters. Gendered duties too had a strong impact on the organisation of public and private life and at the same time blurred the boundaries between these spheres as conduct and duties within the household were subject to great public and familial scrutiny. This collective emphasis on and control over an individual's duties influenced cultural notions of self. I have argued that although collective identities were not more valued than individual identity, individual identity was strongly shaped by the need to fulfil duties. The social, and in particular the familial, pressure to live up to collective expectations was considered legitimate and forceful. Individuals were therefore strongly motivated to perform according to other persons' expectations. Nevertheless, they performed their duties primarily because of their individually—although culturally shaped—experienced need to do so.