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

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MOBILITY, DISTANCES AND A NATIVE PLACE

INTRODUCTION

One December morning in 2003 while I was waiting for an auto rickshaw I heard someone call my name. It was Molly auntie, a lady I had come to meet during my first weeks of fieldwork in August of that year. This morning Molly auntie was dressed up like I had never seen her before and she called to introduce me to her daughter who had come to visit her from Australia. The daughter had come the previous week for a three months stay that included Molly auntie's upcoming 90th birthday celebrations. Both Molly auntie and her then 66 year old daughter were wearing silk saris and were ready to go out. Molly auntie looked radiant and said she was very happy. Now that her daughter was here, she explained that she would not be going to the day care centre that she sometimes attended for activities with other older women. These three months she would be busy with going to friends and relatives in her native place. Her daughter told me how she was trying to get her mother to come and live with her in Australia: "I told her, I will just book the ticket and then we can decide later whether we really buy it or not". Molly auntie said it was too far and the daughter and I joked that all she would have to do was to step in the airplane, watch a few



Figure: Seat covers at the airport

movies and then get off again in Australia.

Although I first thought that we were just joking, it turned out that Molly auntie was actually very seriously considering the proposition. She said she was waiting for a sign from God, telling her what she should do. Molly auntie was tempted to go to Australia with her daughter, because she had enjoyed living with her in Germany and Australia before. Nevertheless, she dreaded the flight and did not want to die in a foreign country.

Molly auntie's house was situated in a quiet and well-kept residential area. Molly auntie was a devout Christian and belonged to the (Protestant) Marthomite community. She was a widow with three children: her youngest son lived in Thiruvananthapuram, the older son lived about 2800 km away in New Delhi and Molly auntie's only daughter lived in Australia. Molly auntie lived in the same neighbourhood as I did, we seemed to 'click'—which is a critical but variable feature in research relationships—and she was not very mobile. These three attributes made it easy for me to stop by her house on a more regular base. In the afternoons I would sometimes stroll past her house and come to the porch for a

little chat. At the end of each visit she would insist that I come again quickly, which also made me feel more comfortable about walking by for a quick chat.¹

I had not expected Molly auntie to take her daughter's proposition into such serious consideration. In preparation of my fieldwork I had come under the impression that migration in Kerala mostly affected older persons as the people who stayed behind. In academic literature that addresses the combined issues of ageing and mobility older persons who stay 'behind' play a leading role (Zachariah, Nair et al., 2006; Kreager & Schröder-Butterfill, 2004). However, Molly auntie and eventually almost all older persons I came to meet were not mere figurants in their children's mobile lives, instead they were the protagonists in their own histories of mobility as it turned out that older persons had full lives of movements. Their own movements were (and continued to be) just as significant as their children or grandchildren's. Their earlier movements moreover continued to impact their later life.

In other ways too, older persons in Thiruvananthapuram led mobile lives: They used technical devices as telephones and internet to keep in contact with persons elsewhere; if their health permitted they moved around in their houses, the city, the state and the country and the choices that they had made during their lives had effected their social status. All these various actions are seen as mobility in the fourfold definition by John Urry (2007). Urry described longer term migration or other kinds of semi-permanent geographical movement of persons as only one type of mobility. He further distinguished mobility as a category of things or people that are capable of movement (e.g. mobile hospital, mobile phone, mobile person); mobility in the sense of a mob, a rabble or an unruly crowd and finally mobility as social mobility (Urry, 2007:7-16).

In this chapter my chief focus is on the geographical movement of persons, which the word mobility will refer to if no other indications are given. The relations between these movements and social mobilities are also touched upon. As are the related objects and techniques that make geographical movements possible. In other chapters social mobility and mobility-generating devices are further discussed in their own right. Mobility as a mob has been briefly discussed in relation to the earlier mentioned frequent public strikes in Thiruvananthapuram called *hartals* or *bandhs* and finds no further mention. I will thus focus on the mobility (in a rather broad sense) of older highly-educated persons who lived in or visited Thiruvananthapuram between 2003 and 2008. Because of recurrent stays I was also able to meet persons who lived abroad most of the time and persons who shifted back and forth and spent about as much time with children abroad as in Thiruvananthapuram. In an

¹ Although more older persons were welcoming, Molly was (with a handful of others) the most insistent that I would come again. Her remarks were not simply part of a cultural habitus of courtesy; she indicated repeatedly that she was 'not just saying' that I should come again but really meaning it. With most others I would have to explicitly ask whether I was welcome to visit them again later to which they would respond with varying degrees of enthusiasm.

attempt to research mobility in full swing, I have incorporated several mobile research experiences in this chapter. Unfortunately however, I have not been able to conduct proper multi-sited research (Marcus, 2007:1127-1143; Falzon, 2009; Gallo, 2005; Herzfeld, 2001: 6). Since mobility was not the key focus of this research but rather an all-invasive attribute to the older persons' social lives, I had no time or means to fully incorporate multiple research sites. What I did manage to experience myself about the constant sense of flux in Thiruvananthapuram were two visits of older persons to their 'native place'. Also, I experienced directly the older persons' use of telephone, internet and mass media. Revealing experiences were my many air flights and several train journeys to and from Thiruvananthapuram. And finally, because of the long time span of this research I did get several opportunities to interview and observe older persons who were mostly living abroad but were visiting the city.

Even though mobility was initially a side-topic of this research, the lives of older persons provided many insights into the social dimensions of a history of mobility. In this chapter I will therefore focus on two related issues: the effects of the ongoing mobility (of themselves and others) on older persons' social life and sociality and the specifics of older persons' lifelong mobility. I hope that this uncommon but necessarily limited focus on older persons' mobility offers some insights on mobility in general.

Meeting Molly auntie with her daughter on the street made a special fieldwork moment in those early days of research in 2003. Over the years I kept meeting Molly auntie during my stays in Thiruvananthapuram and came to know more about her and her children's mobility. The information that I gathered from our meetings and conversations forms the backbone of this chapter. Through Molly auntie's partial mobility-history, the visits when her daughter was around and our semi-structured conversations, mobility was given a personal appearance. The complexity and long duration of older persons' mobile lives necessitates the research of detailed individual accounts, particularly to compliment the more common focus on large populations of working younger persons in migration studies. However, in order to provide a rich account of mobility in its broadest sense this chapter also includes several interview fragments, co-lived experiences and observations of other older persons than Molly auntie.

CULTURES OF MOBILITY

The great distances between the domiciles of Molly auntie and two of her three children was not exceptional. Both national and international migration from Kerala constitute mass-phenomena that have attracted great academic interest from economists, demographers, sociologists and anthropologists (Zachariah, Nair et al., 2006; Venier, 2008; Osella & Osella, 2007; Gallo, 2005). Remittances, return migrants, international financial streams and the absence of family members all have greatly impacted the state's economic and social

situation. Kerala's history of mobility goes long back. Kerala has been said to have a 'culture of migration' for its long history of movements of persons dating from pre-colonial times when Kerala was a transit point of world trade (Osella & Osella, 2004: 111). Mobility has thus for long affected all the various communities in the State, yet differently and in consecutive waves. Both before and after independence different communities of persons have been interested in moving to different regions with different perspectives. To stress this multiplicity of reactions to a history full of movements we can even speak of plural histories and cultures of mobility as the exact characteristics of mobility were very different in individual cases depending on a range of factors as socio-economic class, age, gender, caste, educational background, host- and sending locality, family background, type of labour and time of movement.

During colonial times there were the relatively highly educated Malayalees who found jobs as supervisors on plantations in Southeast Asia (Sandhu & Mani, 1993: 192). At that time those with little education often went to work in the industrial centres in India. After independence internal migration continued and international migration towards the upcoming Gulf countries came to form a mass phenomenon (Osella & Osella, 2004: 112). This decennia long large-scale international migration from Kerala to the Arabic Gulf has received most academic and policy interest. The last and largest migration waves typically involved men from lower-middle class families on time-bound labour contracts. International migration of highly educated persons has been less studied even though it has been a long constant. During my research period the children of highly educated older persons worked as doctors, engineers, academics or in other high-status jobs in countries like the US, Canada, Great Britain, Australia, Dubai and Kuwait.

Mobility of Malayalees within India has also received less attention even though in total more persons are involved than in international mobility and the economic significance for Kerala is great (Zachariah, Nair et al., 2006: 44-48). More persons have returned to Kerala from other Indian states than from other countries. These persons too come from a great variety of educational, familial and caste backgrounds (Zachariah, Nair et al., 2006: 52, 95). There are also differences between those who have returned to Kerala and those who have stayed 'out'. Those who have (so far) stayed elsewhere are generally wealthier and have benefited from more education (Zachariah, Nair et al., 2006: 143).

Malayalees elsewhere form no clear diaspora. Migrants who have left Kerala at different times in history form a heterogeneous population of persons with different nationalities, different migratory experiences and different levels of attachment to Kerala and live all over the world. All these factors greatly complicate research and make it difficult to paint a complete picture of mobility. Nevertheless, the great scale and duration of these different forms of mobility made families in middle and upper socio-economic classes who did not have several members who lived outside of Kerala exceptional.

TEMPORALITY AND MOBILITY

When mobility was discussed in relation to older persons in Kerala it related mostly to their absent children. Older persons whose children were out of the State were often pitied for having to rely on fewer care-relations. Younger persons were reproached for their self-interested mobility, their ‘foreign’ life-style and their lack of filial responsibility. In a societal discourse that was at times mirrored by academics, older persons were portrayed as victims of modernisation and globalisation.² The financially privileged older persons were also felt sorry for. In large-audience films, English medium newspaper articles and academic literatures these highly educated seniors were pictured to suffer from loneliness and their unreliable ‘Western’ children.

Some older persons did become physically immobile because of health problems. When children lived elsewhere such situations easily became extra frustrating to all involved. Adult children elsewhere were often limited in their flexibility to come to Kerala because of their jobs and their own children’s education. Although I met children who managed to drop everything and come to Kerala during emergencies it was often difficult to provide hands-on assistance for longer periods of time. However, older persons’ relation to mobility had more dimensions. They too were—or had been—active agents in cultures of mobility. Healthier older persons were extremely mobile. They would go for longer visits to their children in other States or abroad. Molly auntie’s high mobility in later life was not exceptional to persons who had in principle returned to Thiruvananthapuram. When children needed assistance or care especially during pregnancies or child rearing older persons frequently went abroad or to other states to help them out. Although it was customary for women from all religious backgrounds to go to their parents’ place for the last stages in the pregnancy, this custom was changing. Instead more and more older persons went to their daughter’s, especially if they lived far away and the travel was thought to be too exhaustive for the young mother-to-be. When grandchildren got older the grandparents were still often the ones who travelled far in order to attend ceremonies and provide assistance when necessary (Irudaya Rajan, Mishra & Sankara Sarma, 1999: 331-332; Vera-Sanso, 2004; Donner, 2008: 137).

An acknowledgement of temporality is necessary for a more complete understanding of histories of added movements. Since mobility experiences were often cumulative, single categories may not be sufficiently accurate to describe the persons involved. Hassan for instance was born in a Muslim business family in Kanyakumari in 1940. At that time Kanyakumari belonged to the same Travancore state as Thiruvananthapuram did. Later in 1956 when the states of Kerala and Tamil Nadu were formed and Kanyakumari became Tamil Nadu, Hassan was already attending college in Thiruvananthapuram (Kerala). After

² In a way, a variant of the modernisation theory had become a common discourse. This was similar to what Ferguson describes in the South African context: “sociological terminology and folk classifications had become disconcertingly intermingled in informants’ intimate personal narratives (1999: 84).

marriage Hassan lived in Saudi Arabia for five years during which his wife and their three children remained in Thiruvananthapuram. Later, Hassan's wife Fatima lived in Palakkad, a northern district in Kerala, for two years to further her academic career. At that time Hassan lived in Thiruvananthapuram with the three children. In 2006, the three children were married and lived in Dubai, Muscat and Thiruvananthapuram. In 2008, the son who had been in Thiruvananthapuram had also moved to Dubai and the daughter who lived in Dubai was about to move to Saudi Arabia. Fatima herself had just returned from a one month visit to the daughter in Dubai who was down with the chickenpox. Hassan and Fatima's mobility history thus illustrates the challenges that complex mobility histories pose for standard categorisations of migrants.

Another interesting example formed Mrs. Peenamma's history of mobility. She was born in Kottayam district (now Kerala) in 1941 and moved to Thiruvananthapuram after marriage. Soon after their marriage, she and her husband Mr. George moved to Kuwait where they lived for 35 years. Their two daughters were born and raised there. In 1986 after retirement Mrs. Peenamma and Mr. George moved 'back' to Thiruvananthapuram. One daughter stayed behind in Kuwait, the other moved to Canada. The daughters never lived in Kerala for more than their one month holidays. Mobility was thus not always predictable or easily identifiable. A full analysis of a person's mobility therefore acknowledges temporality as present situations and definitions may change in the future but are also affected by the different movements that may have already taken place in the past.³ An awareness of temporality in the study of mobility brings about the recognition that there is movement over space as well as over time (Biggs & Daatland, 2004: 4; Gallo, 2005: 228; Urry, 2007: 29; Osella & Gardner, 2004: xl-xliii). Svein Daatland and Simon Biggs write how:

"Migration' refers to the movement across boundaries, into different states of being as well as physical relocation. An awareness of the age dimension of migration sensitises us to movement over time as well as over space. It is a process of leaving things behind, experiencing the new and maintaining connections. [...] Continuing change marks both sides of the boundary between cultures as cultures themselves maintain their own trajectories, so that return is not a return to something exactly as one has left it. Age highlights the temporal dimension as well as the spatial, when it comes to movement, and while at one level this is simply a part of experience, it has at another rarely been highlighted in the academic study of age, culture and migration" (Biggs & Daatland, 2004: 4).

³ Different categories of migrants and types of mobility are oftentimes distinguished. Categories like cyclical migrants, permanent settlers, economic migrants, refugees, return migrants, second or third generation migrants and internal (within a country) and external (across country borders) migrants are most often evoked in attempts to most accurately describe the different movements persons make. Since these types of mobility are often seen as theoretically distinct they are not always studied within the same framework of analysis.

As said, Malayalees have been mobile for centuries. For poor and rich moving out of the State or out of the country was no new phenomenon. This accumulation of movement makes the history of migration complex and all the more interesting. It may even nuance some of the academic and lay views on the mobility of older persons' children. These adult children are not the first ones to be so mobile and in many cases have been brought up in a mobile lifestyle.

To give an impression of this mobile lifestyle, it is illustrative to look more closely at one individual's history of mobility. What follows is a brief account of Molly auntie's main geographical movements from birth up until her 95th birthday. It serves as a starting point to discuss the differences and similarities among the older persons in these cultures of mobility.

ONE OF A GREAT MANY HISTORIES OF MOBILITY

Molly auntie was born in 1914 when her parents were stationed within Kerala, but about a hundred kilometres away from their 'native place' Kottayam. Molly auntie's father was a civil servant for the British and during Molly auntie's early childhood years her parents and Molly auntie's three brothers and one sister lived on a compound in a rather remote area. When Molly auntie reached the age of five she went to stay with her maternal grandmother in Kottayam. There were no schools close by her parents' place and this was seen as the best solution.⁴ Molly auntie never returned to live with her parents during her school years but would always see her parents during Christmas and other celebrations. Molly auntie's study ventures did not end after her schooldays in Kottayam. For her intermediate and college degree she came to the capital city and studied at the Women College in Thiruvananthapuram, about 148 kilometres away from Kottayam. In 1933, at the age of 19, Molly auntie got married to a 25 year old doctor from Kottayam who was also staying in Thiruvananthapuram together with several of his relatives. When their children were five, eleven and seventeen years old Molly auntie's husband passed away leaving her a young widow aged 40. At this point in time Molly auntie moved to stay with her brother-in-law in New Delhi. There, Molly auntie's children continued their education. Molly auntie got a job and spent the next 33 years teaching in New Delhi. Throughout her time in Delhi, Molly auntie was part of a close community of Christian Marthomite Malayalees. It was through her brother-in-law and these fellow church members that she secured her jobs as teacher and later headmaster. During this period all three of her children were married off within the community and Molly auntie shared her apartment with her oldest son and his family.

After her final retirement at 72, Molly auntie went to live in Thiruvananthapuram. There she bought a house close to where her sister was also staying. Two other brothers of her deceased husband were also living in the city. Molly auntie's oldest son whose two

⁴ Unlike the originally matrilineal Hindu Nairs, Christians in Kerala usually referred to their patrilineal side as the 'native side'. Molly's stay at her maternal grandmother shows us however that these descent rules were rather flexible and that there was a great accommodation of matters of convenience.

children were born and brought up in New Delhi stayed there. Molly auntie's daughter and her husband had in the meantime left the country to live in Germany and later Australia. Two years after Molly auntie's move to Thiruvananthapuram her youngest son and his wife and their son joined Molly auntie in her house.⁵ He had managed to secure a good job in Thiruvananthapuram, his wife wanted to go back to Kerala and their son wasn't born yet. After the move to Thiruvananthapuram Molly auntie's mobility did not stop. She lived with her daughter and her family for three months in Germany and twice for six months in Australia. Also, Molly auntie spent at least one month a year in New Delhi where she would then live with her oldest son and his family. The school that she had worked for in New Delhi organised yearly meetings to which she was always invited and which she liked to attend. This yearly visit was still going strong in 2003 and 2005 but stopped in 2006 when Molly auntie was 93 years old.

“MY SISTER WAS ALWAYS CALLING ME”

The condensed description of Molly auntie's geographical mobility above, is a summary of the information Molly auntie gave over the years. It is clear that geographical mobility played a major role in Molly auntie's life right from her earliest years when her parents were living on a work-related estate far up into her nineties. Also, it reveals how Molly auntie's mobility is only one aspect of a whole family's history of movement. The account goes no further than Molly auntie's parents, but illustrates clearly how for four generations mobility was a continuous given.

Molly auntie rarely deliberated on the reasons for her mobility. She described her moves matter-of-factly and with little emphasis on her own agency. She would for instance mention other persons as having influenced a certain move or decision and she would always place great emphasis on God's helpful hand. When I asked why she had returned to Thiruvananthapuram after retirement for instance, she only and repeatedly said: “My sister was always calling me”. With this answer Molly auntie conveyed that her return to Thiruvananthapuram had been anticipated and appreciated by others. It could be that Molly auntie stressed her sister's wish because at that time Molly auntie left the city in which her children were residing. Reference to her duty to answer her sister's frequent pleas was perhaps a way to balance her neglected duty to stay close to her children. Molly auntie's answers however did not clarify how and with which motives her sister called her. They also obscured the reasons why Molly auntie chose to move to Thiruvananthapuram at this particular moment in time.

During our conversations in 2003, 2005 and 2008 Molly auntie often told of her stay in New Delhi and how she had enjoyed her life there as a teacher. It was only in 2008 that

⁵ In Christian families in Kerala older parents often stay with their son and his wife, contrary to the previously matrilineal Nair Hindus who prefer staying with a daughter and her family.

she wanted to share something about her motives to move so far away: “My brother-in-law was staying in New Delhi and told me to come where he was staying. He knew that otherwise after my husband’s death I would have had to stay with my mother-in-law in Thiruvananthapuram and that was not a very good idea for me with my young son”. This was a short but potentially controversial remark, since as a widowed Christian daughter-in-law, one of Molly auntie’s most important duties would have been to live with or close to her deceased husband’s parents. Molly auntie half-whispered it as if she were telling a secret and it felt inappropriate to ask for more information. It was clear that this subject needed careful treading around. Molly auntie’s comment was remarkable but not exceptional as mobility in this cultural context was not always linked to economic objectives only. Non-financial reasons for geographical mobility such as gaining esteem (social mobility), interest in another country, a wish for more independence from those who stayed behind or a wish to be closer to those who had gone ahead also incited mobility (Zachariah, Nair et al., 2006: 109). Family relations functioned as pull as well as push factors for individual mobility (Gallo, 2005: 222).⁶

Molly auntie’s decisions to move were not taken individually or in a social vacuum. Relatives and community members played a large role in Molly auntie’s—as well as her children’s, grandchildren’s and parents’—mobility. Relatives acted as sponsors, functioned as pull factors but also as push factors. Although it was impossible to unravel the exact processes by which these decisions were made, Molly auntie’s account of them was equally interesting. Molly auntie cited her brother-in-law as the person who told her to come to New Delhi. This made the proposition sound less problematic socially, since it was her mother-in-law’s own son who had made it. Perhaps Molly auntie’s brother-in-law really wanted to avert an escalation between his mother and sister-in-law, but it could also be that Molly auntie’s mother-in-law had suggested this to her son herself or that Molly auntie had asked her brother-in-law more directly.

In any case, mobility was initiated by individuals within the collective to organise the best possible geographical distribution of individuals and therewith ensure the well-being of the collective. The cultural expectation of a daughter and mother-in-law living together was circumvented through a mobile alternative. Interestingly, this same cultural expectation in turn followed through many years later when Molly auntie lived with her son in Delhi and later still when her other son came to live with her in Thiruvananthapuram, demonstrating again how individuals gave meaning and shape to the cultural expectations that their sociality set up for them.

Again, time changed motives and reasons for moving changed over time into different reasons for staying. Motives changed with experience, time and new connections.

⁶In other cultural contexts this has been discussed by Sørensen, 2005; Hondagneu-Sotelo, 1994; Osella & Gardner, 2004: xxxi, xxxvii; Wise & Velayutham, 2008: 117.

Advantages and disadvantages changed (even unexpectedly) due to differences in life phases, life styles or a change in one's (family) status or priorities.

DIFFERENT LIVES BUT SIMILAR ROUTES

Molly auntie's history of mobility had many aspects to it that were very common among older persons with a higher education in Thiruvananthapuram. By far the majority of the research population was not born in the Thiruvananthapuram district itself.⁷ Most older persons with higher education had moved out of their native districts and sometimes out of the State to get their degree. In this sense geographical mobility was linked to social mobility from their childhood years onward. There had been brothers and sisters who had been less studious or for whom relatives had thought out a different path which had made them stay in their native place, in the *tharawad*, often to inherit some property there. Only a small minority were living on the property were they had grown up. Even these had, however, been away from Kerala for many years in between.

In their childhood years already, only few lived permanently in a joint family setting in their native place. Among Malayalees a 'native place' was a common term used to denote the place where one's paternal or maternal family had their family properties and the ancestral house,⁸ depending on one's matrilineal or patrilineal descent. This emic understanding of a native place meant that it did not necessarily need to be one's place of birth. Even for persons who had never actually lived in their native place it could still be a significant space.

In their childhood many had spent every year's summer holidays in an ancestral house together with their grandparents, uncles, aunts and cousins. In this manner most older persons had fond childhood memories of their native place. They had experienced a form of joint family living even when they were brought up in a separate household elsewhere and the family property had already been partitioned before their time. I will come back to the force of this emotional and social space to demonstrate how transitions between joint and nuclear family living were far more fluid than often portrayed. These joint living experiences were one of the intermediate possibilities on the continuum between joint and nuclear family living. Joint family household life was about a shared identity, common values, a way of living, and conflict and financial management. These values were also instilled in persons who did not usually live in close physical proximity.

A majority of the older persons had gone on to make a living as civil servants. In these functions they had been stationed in different states of India throughout their careers.

⁷ This is a broader phenomenon. According to census material there were 413600 migrants born within the state of enumeration living in Thiruvananthapuram district in 1991, 88,7% of the total number of migrants in the district (Census, 2001). This is an impressive 12,79 % of the districts' total population of 3,234,356. Thiruvananthapuram district is therefore clearly a district where persons from other districts of Kerala come to live.

⁸ Among the matrilineal Nairs this house is called the *Tharawad*.

Those who had worked for the Indian Army Services had been positioned in places like Delhi, Kashmir, Punjab, Maharashtra and Assam. But also those who had worked in more administrative or public functions or as account officers had been lived all over India. In fact, the only persons who had stayed in Kerala for the majority of their careers had been working at the Kerala university. A large minority of the older persons who now lived in Thiruvananthapuram had moved even further away to different countries and had spent their professional lives in countries like the US, Canada or Kuwait.⁹ Their children had been born or brought up in many different parts of India or the world and had spent their childhood years out of Kerala.

Growing older in a culture of mobility meant belonging to many different persons in many different places. Several older persons I knew had alternate living arrangements in order to spend time with all children. This involved moving country, state or city on a frequent basis (Risseuw, 2008: 207; Lamb, 2009: 18). The couple introduced earlier, Radnam auntie and I.P. uncle would spend six months every two years in Australia with their only daughter and her family. I.P. uncle explained what their stays looked like:

I will also be giving tuitions to the children. I coach them almost every day for some hours, mainly in maths. They love that. Now, they ask me questions over the email and then I reply the answer. Also I will help a bit with the computers in my daughters clinic. We'll be helping with the shopping as well and since they are constructing a new house I'll probably be helping out there.

M: It won't be like a holiday or a rest then?

Last time I went to visit them, I didn't get one day rest. We work a lot.

Radnam auntie and I.P. uncle both enjoyed living in Australia, although I.P. uncle was more appreciative of their in-between stays in Thiruvananthapuram. When in Australia, he said he missed his many contacts with neighbours and association members. According to him it was more difficult to get into contact with Australians. Radnam auntie on the other hand repeatedly expressed her wish to stay with her daughter permanently. The couple told me that in their case what kept them from moving to Australia permanently were the visa limitations. As they explained, older persons were only allowed entry for six months at a time. Visa regulations (Sørensen & Olwig, 2002; Sørensen, 2005) and complex and globally interconnected social, political and economic processes were at times chief impediments for the older persons' mobility.

Some older persons who were in serious need of hands-on care lived with their different children for a few months at the time. One daughter explained that her ailing

⁹ A research on the mobility of older persons in Thiruvananthapuram is of course problematic in the sense that it leave out the stories of the large group of older Malayalees who did not return from other states or abroad. Although it is known that there are high numbers of return migrants in Kerala, it is very difficult to find reliable estimate on how many older Malayalees have become permanent residents elsewhere.

mother liked a regular change of scenery which was why they moved her every few months from Kerala to Tamil Nadu. I doubted whether this was really what this dementing lady desired and suspected that it was possibly also more convenient for the children to divide the care labour involved. Again the various motives were impossible to unravel, but the effect was clear. Even with partial memory loss and great difficulty in walking, this lady of 87 years old was in some ways still very mobile. Older persons—both healthy and unhealthy—remained active participants in their cultures of mobility even in their older age.

WORKING THE DISTANCE

Physical distances did not always match emotional distances (Wise & Velayutham, 2008). Among the mobility prone Malayalees there were strong social connections that transcended national and State boundaries. Migration to certain places, like Dubai for instance was to many less foreign than moving to an unfamiliar district of Kerala. Molly auntie's story accentuates the possible importance of connections in the experience of mobility. In Kottayam, Thiruvananthapuram, Delhi, Germany and Australia, Molly auntie was never without relatives and other fellow Malayalees. In New Delhi her contacts were especially close with a large group of fellow Marthomite Christian Malayalees—who often had origins in the same Kottayam district as Molly auntie. Their strong presence in Delhi facilitated Molly auntie's stay there through an initial job offer, students to teach and the marriage partners of her three children. It is interesting that such a strong sense of community could prevail when so many of the community's members were and had been mobile. Academics as well as Malayalees themselves often emphasise cultural ruptures or conflicts as a result of this mobility. Arjun Appadurai for instance described how "Generations easily divide as ideas about property, propriety, and collective obligation wither under the siege of distance and time" (Appadurai, 1996: 44). But when mobility is a historical given this seems a one-sided explanation that assumes the inevitability of intergenerational conflict—as opposed to intragenerational conflict—and a causal link between distances and differences in opinion. Instead, another interesting question could be: How, with such distance and so many different localities and states involved do persons over time manage to retain such a relatedness to a particular place, family and community? Perhaps the ongoing mobility actually helped to make the continuance of connections possible. During their stays away from the native region, whether in Thiruvananthapuram or in other States of India, members of the older generation returned to Kerala for lengthy visits. Although frequent visits were not always possible, all holidays were—and to a degree still are—in their entirety spent on visits to members of the extended family.

Also, it was not unusual to spend a longer time with relatives if this was considered more practical for work, school, care or other reasons. Molly auntie's stay with her grandparents in Kottayam during her early school days and with her brother-in-law after her

husband's death were exemplary. In the same vein many older persons had their grandchildren and other relatives stay with them for longer sojourns. Relatives who needed to be in the capital for hospital treatment, bureaucratic dealings or education would easily stay for a few weeks or months.

When I met Molly auntie's daughter in 2003 she was making it a point to visit her mother every other year for three consecutive months. During all three of my fieldwork periods in Thiruvananthapuram I met Molly auntie's daughter who incidentally made her visits to Kerala at the same moments as I did. Her husband and children were in those six years never able or willing to join Molly auntie's daughter on her visits to Kerala. The husband was working as a lawyer and did not have enough holidays and the children were enrolled in high school and reportedly didn't have enough free time to come for a long visit. The decreasing duration of the holidays of children and grandchildren formed a threat to these continued networks of relatedness. Although persons could be extremely inventive and flexible in maintaining their transnational social ties this was much easier if there was at least some sort of common memory or identity to build on. In 2008, one year after Molly auntie's son in Delhi had unexpectedly passed away, the deceased son's wife and daughter came to Kerala to spend their two weeks holiday a long visit to Molly auntie in Thiruvananthapuram, visits to the daughter-in-law's own native place and short visits to Molly auntie's deceased husband's relatives in Kottayam. 94 year old Molly auntie was at that time not healthy and strong enough to accompany them on their journey to Kottayam and so the daughter-in-law and granddaughter also functioned to convey Molly auntie's wishes to her in-laws there.

The above shows how transnational families were buffered by extensive social networks, allowing transnational experiences to form a fluid continuum, rather than a radical divide that compartmentalised life into separate worlds. For older persons like Molly auntie there had been a continuance through modern means of communication, occasional visits back and forth and a clear (imagined) locale of reference: the native place. All these frequent (in)direct transactions of material and non-material goods between the native district in Kerala, Thiruvananthapuram and the various (temporary) destinations of Malayalees elsewhere surpassed geographical boundaries and further strengthened connections. They gave shape to the transnational affect—the non-material conditions which fostered and underpinned transnational networks and relationships such as the emotions of shame and pride (Wise & Velayutham, 2008: 125). The long summer holidays and other stays, the indirect communications through other community members and relatives combined with a cultural context in which social relationships were not seen to be primarily dependent on the intensity of the contacts, all formed part of the background in which this transnational affect came about for mobile Malayalees.

Still, even though some distance could be partially overcome through transnational ties that transmitted affect, information and material goods, distance could also be strategically used to conceal information, hide material goods and limit affect. This was easier for those who moved to places where not many Malayalees had gone before than for persons who were part of a mobile community elsewhere. An interesting example formed an informal chat with a lady whose brother-in-law happened to live in the Netherlands. During our entire conversation she tried to find out more about her brother-in-law's Dutch salary. She would ask me in various different ways how much a person in his profession would generally gain and how much they would have to pay for their daily expenses. The brother-in-law had been living in the Netherlands for many years already and in earlier experiences I had noticed that there was no hesitation in asking a person for his or her salary directly. Apparently the man and his wife had so far managed to skilfully dodge these questions. This control over the information flow had only been possible because of the relatively small number of Malayalees in the Netherlands. Had the brother-in-law lived somewhere within a tight community of Malayalees from the same socio-religious background he would not have been able to remain so private. He—unlike most lower-skilled workers—had secured his position through an official application procedure for a job vacancy. Like other professional Malayalees abroad who work as specialists in unconventional places he had experienced a greater degree of choice in what information he revealed and what things he kept to himself. Indirect communications and movements between him and his family in Kerala were however far more limited than for most other Malayalees. The indirect movements as well as the physical and personal connections between places thus greatly impacted the various mobility-experiences (Urry, 2007: 19).

Information and knowledge flowed along certain paths and through particular personal and physical connections. Like the inhabitants of any other place, Malayalees knew much about certain areas or subjects and little about others. Most persons for instance knew little about Western classical music but much about English classical literature. Social institutions in Kerala also enforced the already existing information flows or created new paths. A Russian cultural centre in Thiruvananthapuram for instance organised regular 'Russian names days' for which they invited all those with a Russian name. With these events they extended the already existing relations originating from a joint history of communism. The *Alliance Française* on the other hand organised film viewings that attracted great interest because of the otherwise unavailable explicitness in French films. Because of their popularity a relatively recent new path of information flow had been created.

GOING NATIVE

For healthier older persons in Thiruvananthapuram frequent short trips to their native village or town were common place. All highly educated persons were from families with landed property. And many had their own share of land in their native district which they still looked after with the help of the relatives who were staying there. Older persons regularly supervised typical rural activities such as growing of rubber trees or other plantations. If there were relatives of an even more advanced age, these had to be visited as a social duty too. Furthermore there were numerous marriages, cremations (or burial) ceremonies and religious festivals in the native place that demanded their regular attendance and involvement (Osella & Osella, 2004: 109; Gidwani & Sivaramakrishnan, 2004: 340).

To understand why persons like Molly auntie, who had been mobile their entire lives, still felt part of a localised community the 'native place' was crucial. Throughout periods of study and work elsewhere, relatives managed to come together in this (imagined) locality. The ancestral house and native place did thus not necessarily lose their importance because of long-term generational mobility.¹⁰ For the older generation the native place gained instead an additional meaning as a social, emotional and even imagined space in which dispersed family members could be brought together through their collective memories and their emotional and financial ties. It needs to be noted that this could lead to confusions. Those who had lived in the native place experienced it differently from those who had only visited it regularly and had been away for a long time. Whereas the imagined native place may have remained the same, the actual physical native place was subject to age and change. Native places too were historically and socially constructed places that had been formed in a certain



Figure: Mug with the picture of the family's now closed up ancestral house as distributed during a family reunion.

time and did not remain the same over time (Gupta & Ferguson, 1997: 36).

The value of the native place and the ancestral house in particular was illustrated clearly during my conversations with a 67 year old lady whose ancestral house had been deserted and locked up for several years because the family members who lived close were with too few to occupy and maintain it. Even in a locked-up state, the house still formed an essential part of this lady's and her other relatives'

¹⁰ A focus on generational mobility forces us not only to take more time but also more places into account. It therefore provides a good antidote to the strongly prevalent nation-state container thinking in migration studies (Levitt, 2001).

lives. Although the actual physical space had changed beyond recognition, the house symbolised an emotional and imagined social space. During a family reunion that had specifically been organised to get together with all relatives who had moved away they had printed a small booklet with stories about the ancestral house and distributed a coffee mug with a picture of the house. In a collective act of imagination, the older generations had overcome the boundaries of time and place. They met in places that did not exist anymore but still had a place in their memories of times long gone.¹¹

Time had also changed the persons and relations that had been connected to those common native places (Gallo, 2005). Interestingly, those older persons who lived in Thiruvananthapuram—as well as those older persons abroad—had often received more education than some of their siblings and cousins in the native place. This is not to say that those who now lived in the native place had never moved out or were never highly educated but, although inheritance rules were different in every community, in most well-to-do families there were some who received higher education and some who looked after the family properties. Those who lived in the native place therefore in general had less education but easier and sometimes more access to the inherited family properties such as land and buildings.

Geographical mobility had brought about social mobility and had thus contributed to an increase in differences amongst relatives. These differences in education, property and overall status within the family made that relations between those in the native place and those ‘outside’ were based on more than affection or a common history alone. Mutual interdependences, culturally defined duties, long-term reciprocity and money matters all played a role and infested the translocal relations with power issues.

Older persons returned to their—or their spouse’s—native places as long as their health situation permitted—and often a little longer still. There was for instance a man with severe Alzheimer’s who was physically and mentally extremely dependent upon his wife, his fulltime nurse and their servant. He and his wife came from the same native village, as did their servant. This given turned out very practical since the three of them would regularly go to their native place about a three hours drive away. The servant would help them on the trip but would be free to see her own relatives during the two days stay. Although this possibly meant an even larger degree of control over the young girl’s activities for the couple it was a great benefit, as they would not have been able to make these frequent trips without her.

I joined one older lady to her deceased husband’s native place in Pathanamthitta and one older couple on a trip to the husband’s native city of Alappuzha. Both these trips took place in 2008 during my last months in Thiruvananthapuram and spanned one full day. The

¹¹ In *The Vanishing Tharawads of Kerala* S. Jayaraj describes the closure and dismantling of many of the Tharawads in the state (the Hindu of August 12, 2001).

trip to Pathanamthitta seemed very similar to the trips I had heard other older persons talk about. We left by car and with the driver early in the morning at five o'clock. At about eight o'clock in the evening, which was already considered rather late, we returned. In between there was no time to be wasted. There was a building on an inherited estate that needed construction work. A younger cousin who lived in the village was overlooking the work on a daily basis but needed money and approval for the next phase. The rubber plantations and the new tapper's activities had to be inspected. Two sick older relatives had to be paid a visit. And finally, the deceased husband's youngest brother was going back to the Gulf for another year and needed to be wished a good sojourn. The activities seemed typical of many persons' trips to their native place.

Our trip to Alappuzha was a little different...

RESTRICTED PLACES FOR OLDER PERSONS

Our trip to Alappuzha was planned to see the famous yearly boat races there. I went with a couple I knew quite intimately and called my grandparents. I had enquired about the boat races once since they took place in my grandfather's native place. Later, my grandmother told me to ask grandpa whether he would take her and me to see these races. She said she had always wanted to see them but he had never been very enthusiastic. Now she thought he would be more flexible if I would ask him. She was right and (then 79 year old) grandpa agreed to organise the trip. If I would have known beforehand how extremely busy the venue would be and how difficult it would be for a 79 year old who needed a stick and some help with walking I wouldn't have asked. Walking with my grandparents at the venue through the pushy crowds and getting onto boats that got us to a podium on the water was an experience I wouldn't have minded missing. The experience reminded me of the reasons why older persons who have trouble walking rarely go to these extremely busy public events. Nevertheless, the few moments in fear exempted, the races were great fun. Before and after the races we went to visit grandpa's sister who lived on a part of their ancestral property and several of his maternal relatives who lived close by.

The fear and great responsibility that I had felt during those busy moments before and after the races had been an eye-opener. I had stood behind grandpa with my arms right behind his back. While the crowds had been pushing I had pushed back in order to stay with him at all times. With his weak legs and walking stick he had lost balance several times and it was only coincidental that I had been able to catch him every time. For the first time I understood an often mentioned aspect to many older persons' diminished mobility: the younger persons' sense of responsibility and duty. In many interviews this point of forbidden mobility had been raised but I had as of yet failed to understand its complexity. Molly auntie for instance had told me how her son had started to forbid her to go to Delhi by herself. He would only allow her to go if someone would accompany her but since no one

could take the time off Molly auntie had had to cancel. Others too, told me of trips that they would have liked to go on and events that they would have wanted to attend. At times older persons' mobility had even been curtailed within their own house. Kitchens, bathrooms, porches and gardens became prohibited areas. Up until the trip to Alappuzha I had interpreted these comments mostly as indicators of unwillingness. Unwillingness either on the part of younger persons who were said to be so strict or on the part of the older persons themselves who perhaps could have insisted a bit harder. Older persons quite frequently pointed to their children as the instigators for their (in)actions and as I have shown before this had to be seen within the cultural context. Children had a duty to look after their ageing parents and thus it was socially appreciated when children lived up to this expectation and were openly seen to care for their older parent's wellbeing. By saying that a child forbade something, an older person showed that he or she was being cared for. This was an indirect indication of good family relations. The other way around this meant that when an older person would get into trouble this would look bad on the children. Accidents in the kitchen, falls on a slippery bathroom floor and problems during travels could in this respect all be blamed on the children. They were the ones who should have taken better care.

The boat race spectacle for me highlighted once more the ambiguities within this cultural stress on duties. On the one hand, the cultural expectations instilled a strong sense of responsibility on the part of the younger generations. Their duty to look after their seniors led in most cases to commonly appreciated attentiveness in times of trouble. However, the restrictions that this often caused in the daily mobility of older persons should not be underestimated. Our attendance of the boat races would very likely have been discouraged by my grandparents' children, had they known about the trip beforehand. In all honesty, I would have probably discouraged them from this whole undertaking had I known the specifics in advance. Other older persons told me of the instances their children had discouraged or forbidden them from going somewhere. The other way around, greater freedom of movement was regularly mentioned as a great plus to living far away from the children.

As said before, the real intentions behind each individual case of restricted mobility were impossible to unravel. My experiences in Thiruvananthapuram convinced me that the cultural duty of filial reciprocity was most certainly misused at times to suit individual wishes. Just as it was often performed with the best of dutiful intentions. But irrespective of the muddle of motivations behind all these actions it is clear that there was a direct relation between some of the restrictions on older persons' mobility and the strong social force of their offspring's duties.

SOCIAL MOBILITY AND COSMOPOLITANISM IN THIRUVANANTHAPURAM

At monthly meetings of the Senior Citizens' Association in Thiruvananthapuram associates who had just, or were about to, spent several months with their children abroad, in other states, or in other cities were commonplace. Molly auntie had spent at least one month a year in New Delhi until she turned 93 and she had spent three months in Germany and in total one year in Australia after she had already turned 72.

International experiences were a popular topic of conversation and in talks with young and old as success was equated with leaving the state. At one meeting of the Senior Citizens' Association a former President of the Association who now lived in the US but was visiting Kerala was asked to give a speech on his latest experiences in the US. Talks about translocal experiences often contained extensive comparisons of the different localities and excluded persons who did not have similar experiences to share. Among the well educated transnational stories and experiences seemed to function as a similar lynchnpin of social distinction as the commodities—as imported TV's and fridges—did for those of lower socio-economic status (Osella & Osella, 2004: 113).

Still, amongst those who were mobile, clear and unbridgeable social divisions remained. Even though mobility led to changes within different socio-economic population groups, the differences between these groups were difficult if not impossible to overcome. These differences went further than those between rich and poor, between the well-educated and those who are not, between those who come from socially esteemed castes and those who do not. They were differences in composure, dress, speech, social capital and appearance that mobility alone did not erase. The differences that became so painfully clear for instance at the airport of Abu Dhabi where when my flight to Thiruvananthapuram was delayed for twelve hours, some Malayalees were offered an upscale hotel together with the Western tourists and some were led to a hangar.

The older persons of this study would in such situations would have most surely been led to the upscale hotel. They would know their way and rights in international travel. They would not take 'no' for an answer and would emanate such self-confidence and *savoir-faire* that no ground staff member would dare to give them a bad deal. They possessed qualities that are difficult to describe but—for those concerned—easy to see; qualities that they had developed in their upbringing in a culture of mobility and that they had perfected during their own mobile lives.

The majority of the older persons in this study had experiences in at least three very different contexts: the native place, the city, and out of Kerala (abroad or in other states of India). Their accounts seemed to indicate that in all three—or more—contexts they had managed to fit in. It may be argued that the social environments within which these older persons travelled exhibited certain similarities. Perhaps we can speak of a transnational subculture, possibly an interesting hypothesis for further research. Nevertheless, I would

argue that most of the older persons exhibited great flexibility in taking on different cultural contexts.

Their internationally oriented English medium education from before or right after independence, their younger years abroad and in other states and their frequent movements in older age made those who were healthy enough impressive adaptors. If cosmopolitanism is defined as a condition of being in a state of flux and of living at close quarters with a difference (Osella & Gardner, 2004: xl) the persons in this study were surely cosmopolitan. The older persons (and their relatives and friends) exhibited a great flexibility in taking on different cultural contexts. This increased adaptability had been fed by past experiences with mobility. Since they were part of a culture of mobility and lived in a cosmopolitan community, these experiences could be their own or those of others. Throughout their lives and still in older age, when thinking about future decisions about schooling, living and working, other localities were seen as offering plausible options. The gamut of possibilities open to them was therefore much larger than to persons who were less cosmopolitan, as they had mastered “that art of being which is able to straddle a political world of difference and deploy the technologies of one to some advantage in the other” (Gidwani & Sivaramakrishnan, 2004:345).

However cosmopolitan they were, older persons had a clear sense of belonging to Kerala. Even persons who continuously chose a living elsewhere, like the former president of the SCA who now lived in the US, experienced a great emotional involvement and attachment to Kerala. This sense of belonging easily extended from their native places to Thiruvananthapuram and from Kerala to the more distant places they had grown attached to. There were strong ideas about locality and powerful nationalistic tendencies towards Kerala and towards India at large.



Figure: Notice board for a residents' association

Living in

Thiruvananthapuram was, to most older persons, a well considered choice. Since this research was based almost exclusively on persons who now (mostly) lived in Thiruvananthapuram their opinions may be different from all those who had decided to grow older elsewhere. Nevertheless, it was interesting to hear about the different reasons for coming (back) to

Thiruvananthapuram and staying there. Although the reasons were as diverse as the people, some common themes did stand out. They had to do with the negatively experienced attributes of other places (push factors) as well as with the positively rewarded features of life in Thiruvananthapuram (pull factors). One frequently mentioned push factor for instance was the quietness and boredom most older persons had experienced in other 'Western' countries. With children off to work and grandchildren off to school, days had been long for most older persons waiting at home. Since their network of friends and relatives was mostly much smaller elsewhere they had have fewer daily contacts (Lamb, 2007:90-92). Older persons further believed that social relations in the West were not as caring, interested and helpful as the relations they had with persons in Kerala. This did not primarily concern family relations but especially relations with persons in the vicinity such as neighbours, persons on the streets and in the shops and friends who lived close by. I.P. uncle for instance said he needed to be able to have a chat with persons and greet familiar faces in the street. Others said it was important to have persons who would help you if you would fall ill. These relations were seen as lacking in the Western countries most highly educated younger persons had migrated to.

Other pull-factors formed the relatives and friends in Kerala. Most of the older persons, even if they were out of the State for a long time, had always remained in close contact with their relatives and old friends in Kerala. They had returned for functions and longer holidays. Those who lived in other states of India had often spent their one month holiday in Kerala and those who had lived abroad had come back as often as they could. Now that they lived in Thiruvananthapuram most of the time, many older persons developed a renewed interest in old school friends. I.P. uncle for instance had contacted several of his old school mates in the last years. The contacts established during early childhood and college time were seen as extremely valuable and worth cherishing. The fact that so many had stayed in touch or had remembered the acquaintances of long ago helped to increase the size of their networks in Thiruvananthapuram.¹²

This too was seen as a great benefit to coming back to the State. Another reason that was often mentioned was the cost and standard of living. The older persons in this study all possessed enough wealth to contract several persons to work for them on a part-time or full-time base. Whereas labour was far too expensive to acquire in countries like the US, Canada or Australia, it was relatively easy to come by in Thiruvananthapuram. With a large part of the population living in unemployment, potential servants, cooks and drivers were always available. Further, many referred to the nice and comparatively moderate climate in Kerala as compared to that of other places they had stayed. And a last pull factor that was regularly mentioned was the wish to die in close proximity to other deceased relatives in Kerala. This

¹² Staying 'in touch' was most surely made possible by their particular sociality in which contacts did not lose their validity over time or because of distance. The latter is a very real possibility in other cultural settings as for instance in the Netherlands.

was for instance the ultimate reason Molly auntie mentioned for not joining her daughter in Australia.

CONCLUSION

In this chapter I have demonstrated the importance of seeing mobilities in a longer time perspective. Such a perspective includes older generations and is more than a still-picture of persons in working age. Since academic and non-academic assessments of mobility are informed by ideas of the 'before' picture, this before picture needs to be appropriately documented. In a popular discourse that is at times resonated in academic studies younger persons are reproached for selfishly moving away and leaving their older parents behind. In popular media as well as in some academic studies the mobility of younger persons is taken as a sign that Kerala is modernising and westernising. In these literatures, there is a stress on a perceived increase in selfish and individualistic behaviour. This line of reasoning unnecessarily victimises the entire heterogeneous category of older persons of whom some have been just as mobile as their children. It also falsely blames younger persons for being part of a history of mobility that neither young nor old could have foreseen.

The above does not mean that there were no essential changes. Accumulated movements may make it more difficult to maintain a sense of community. Also, migration patterns and characteristics of mobility have changed over time and still change regularly. Developments in the host countries or states greatly impacted translocal families allowing for great variations in the personal experiences in different contexts. The scope of mobility was also subject to change as far more persons were leaving the state now than ever before. The increased intensity of mobility may have great implications for how translocal relations will be given shape in the future.

Molly auntie's case was illustrative on many accounts. It showed for instance which types of generational mobility tend to escape most large-scale research on mobility. Also, it illustrated how certain seeming oppositions displayed features of a continuum as for instance the artificial dichotomy of joint and nuclear families. The jointness of families survived distances and time as the imagined native place helped many to stay connected in time and space. Such a jointness was part of sociality and gave shape to this specific culture of mobility. Cultural notions about duty and relatedness further informed older persons' possibilities and limits to mobility. The motivations for and restrictions to mobility were interesting but very complicated to display as socially unacceptable motivations were covered with more conventional references to duty. The link that was most elaborated upon in this chapter is the one between individual and generational mobility. I hope to have demonstrated that more detailed attention to an individual's family history of mobility will provide a better understanding of mobility in its complex totality.