

**Women in Practice: A Comparative Analysis of Gender and
Sexuality in India**

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Thesis

The tendency of the West to search for a generalized model of Indian thought and character has led to misrepresentations of the peoples and societies of India. The belief that investigations into South Asia can be based upon a single discernable “fact” of Indian character diminishes the history and broad cultural expanse of the region. The meaning of gender and the experience of women in the South Indian region of Kerala on the Malabar Coast differs from the experience of women in other regions of India. Also within Kerala, religious affiliations, caste status, and location impact the social status and experience of women. Constructions of sexuality and gender within the southern region of Kerala are different from those of more northern and central regions of Kerala. Within the region of Kerala, sexuality is linked to household prosperity, as evidenced through the marriage rituals of the nation.

Theory

Anthropological inquiries into the meaning of gender in India resulted in the realization that gender categories are constructed differently throughout this nation than in the Western World. The word gender in the scholarly community has become a politically correct synonym for the study of women. Gender, however, does not refer simply to the study of women, but to the manner in which male and female differences are socially constructed. In anthropological studies, there has been a general move away in

anthropological studies from attempts to formulate universal categories of gender. The criteria for analyzing gendered categories and social status vary cross-culturally (Mukhopadhyay and Higgins 1988:465).

Western definitions of gender tend to group humans into two distinct static categories based upon the physical appearance of genitalia. However, this construction is not universal. South Asian gender definitions emphasize the different essences or humours attributed to men and women as opposed to the overt physical emphasis of the western world. Humours are present more or less strongly in every food or body tissue. Humours include hotness (as associated with fire) phlegm, bile, ether, gross body, subtle body.. Women are seen to possess different proportions of these humours than men. These humours are combined through the process of mixing. Mixing occurs most frequently in bodies that are more open and less closed off to the intrusion of other elements and humours. It is better to be more closed, for this limits the effects of pollution upon the body (Marriot 1990: 16). Women are possess the humour of hotness, moreso than men, and they are also defined as more open. It is this combination of essences that is linked to their reproductive ability. These essences, however, are not static categories but change over the course of a life-time there-by changing an individual's status as a gendered being. Despite the acknowledgment of that gender is constructed differently in South Asia than in the West, there has been little analysis of the variations in gender definitions within South Asia.

In Indian culture according to anthropological gender scholars the experience of women within gender definitions has generated a universal picture of the Indian woman. The portrait of the Indian woman is typically based upon the experience of upper-class

women in more Northern regions of India. Noted scholars of gender in South Asia like Susan Wadley, Sarah Lamb, Anne Gold, and Gloria Raheja focused their studies in the North and utilized high-caste women as their primary source of information. Their work is typically used as a framework for the study of gender and more specifically women in South Asia. While a broad framework for gender studies within India would be useful outlining the typical experience of women it would be based upon the assumption that there is a “typical” female experience. Such beliefs undermine the capacity of women to manipulate their circumstances as well as the wide ranging differences in the experience of women.

A variety of theoretical models have been utilized as lenses through which to view the study of gender in India. Wadley, positions the meaning of gender in India within a paradigm of order and disorder. Women as a gender must be controlled because of their capacity to create disorder within society. Influenced by Sanskrit texts, many Brahmins feel that women lack wisdom and are born with many demerits, however, women also have great power. They have power both to give life as well as a great capacity for destruction (Wadley 1994:41). Women’s resistance has the power to disrupt the patriarchal order of the society. The power of women is strongly linked to sexuality. Women, as objects of sexual attraction that are attributed a much higher capacity and desire for sexual relations than men, have the power to influence and dissuade men from a higher purpose. Inappropriate sexual relations can create dire consequences for men. Therefore, to perpetuate order and merit within society it is necessary to reign and control the power of women through restrictions on her sexuality (Wadley 1994:51).

This model shows that women are not simply silent victims of an oppressive gender system, but are afforded a certain amount of power in society. Their power is derived from their capacity to resist the prescribed social order of Brahmanical traditions and patriarchal hierarchy. Such constructions of gender and sexuality as potential disruptions to a patriarchal framework become problematic when applied to groups without such a strict patriarchal framework. In Kerala, the social hierarchy is not formed upon strict patriarchal schemes. Many castes are in fact matrilineal, in which women become binding forces within society. Women play a pivotal role in creating social order, not simply disrupting it.

Sarah Lamb, in her study of aging in Bengal, also holds that gender meanings and women's status are deeply rooted within her position as a sexual being; her status however, is a fluid category that changes with age. The nature of women is perceived as more open and hot than men; as such they are more vulnerable to pollution during their married years. Women, however, are not simply defined by their gender as women, but also by their age. What it means to be female changes over time, as the body of a woman changes over time. During her reproductive years, women are particularly vulnerable to pollution and must therefore be protected and often confined in Brahman families. As women age however, their bodies "cool" and "dry". In part because of these humoral changes as they age, women are granted more freedom within the community. A woman's status in Bengal is directly linked to her position within the reproductive cycle, and is tied to the bodily changes of puberty, menstruation and menopause. Once a woman has passed her sexually active years, she no longer has to be regulated to a great

extent. In essence, she becomes more like a man and does not need to be protected from pollution (Lamb 2000:185).

A women's capacity for creating disorder is linked in large part to their reproductive capacity and her nature as a sexualized being. A woman derives power, both creative and destructive from her reproductive capacity. As such, it is during this time that she faces regulations governing her sexual behavior (Wadley 1994:51). The status of women, however is not a strict gender formation, but a fluid category which alters with age as well as caste status. The changes in gender status throughout age are strongly linked to changes in her reproductive capacity and depiction as a sexualized being (Lamb 2000:51).

The nation of India represents extreme diversity with regard to language geography, social class and religion. Despite these differences many anthropologists have tried to study India as a holistic entity. The history and cultural geography of Kerala, represent a unique and divergent representation, yet anthropologists such as Dumont and Yalman affirm the cultural uniformity of India and believe the castes of Kerala and the kinship ties of that region can be analyzed in Pan-Indian framework.

Context

The state of Kerala occupies a 38,864 sq km stretch of land on the southwest corner of Southern India. It is bordered by the Arabian Sea on the West and the Western Ghats on the East. The state was formed in 1956 from the merger of many smaller states. Travancore dominated the Southern part of present day Kerala, whereas

Calicut dominated the Northern reaches. Kerala has a tropical maritime climate that is characterized by little fluctuation in the temperature throughout the year. The land of Kerala is lush and green compared with the more arid climate of Northern India (Menon 1979:17). The geographic distinctiveness of Kerala has served to isolate this region from the rest of the country (Menon 1979:1). Malayalam, the most recently developed Dravidian language, is the predominant language of the region (Menon 1979:329). The majority of Kerala subscribe to the Hindu religion; however, this region also has strong Christian and Muslim minorities. The major castes in the region are the Namboodiri Brahmans, the Nayers and the Ezhavas or Tiyars as they are known in Northern India. At the bottom of the caste hierarchy are the Pulayas and the Parayas (Uyl 1995:68).

The long stretch of sea coast has played an important role in shaping the history of Kerala. Foreign trade exerted a decisive influence on the region, and has created a more cosmopolitan society than the rest of India. However, the location of Kerala as well as the pepper cultivation made it a key location for conducting colonial conquests (Menon 1979:53). While Kerala has been relatively isolated from the rest of India, foreign trade and colonial occupation influenced the social structure and cultural practices of the region.

History

Civilization began in Kerala with the realm of the Chera around the beginning of the Christian era. Women at this time in history were afforded professional freedom, and a minimal amount of sexual regulation. In conjunction with this sexual freedom female

imagery played an important role in female worship. Women were associated with power through fertility, but this power did not necessitate extensive regulation (Den Uyl 1995:101). From the fifth century onward, Sanskritization began to affect Keralese society. Male Gods began to replace female goddesses, although Bhagavati remained an important figure (Den Uyl 1995:116). In the fifteenth century, Kerala had increasing contact with European traders such as the Portuguese and the Dutch. This contact had wide ranging implications for Keralese society, creating a culture that was more cosmopolitan than the rest of the Indian sub-continent (Den Uyl 1995:132).

The history of Kerala unfolded in a different manner than the rest of South Asia creating social heterogeneity in the region. Their earliest cultural traditions provide women autonomy and power within the society. The status of women in this area depreciated as foreign influences began to penetrate the region. Sanskrit, Hinduism and European society gave women a lower position in sociality and imposed stronger regulations upon the freedom of women than did more traditional practices. While Hindu influence in the form of Sanskritization, and the importation of western values during the colonial era had far reaching affects on the culture, they did not entirely replace pre-existing social hierarchies which gave women an important status (Saradomi 1996:148). The social history of the region, which valued women in religions ritual, in professional status, and in providing personal freedoms continues to exert influence on modern day Kerala.

Marriage Rituals

Marriage rituals, particularly those of the dominant Nayer caste of Kerala have been extensively studied by anthropologists. While these ceremonies are no longer practiced, they have been well documented and widely interpreted, particularly due to the obvious differences in marriage patterns of the Nayars to the rest of South Asia as well as to the Nambootiri Brahmans of the region. Such rituals are strongly linked to the sexuality of the female participants, and illustrated cultural beliefs regarding sexuality.

The Nayars have three major marriage/ rite of passage ceremonies which are related mainly to the female gender: the tali tying ceremony, the tirandukalyanam, and the sambandham rite. The tali tying rite took place before the onset of puberty. During this ceremony the girl was married to a man, preferably a Nambootiri Brahman, and ritual defloration took place. The ritual husband had no further duties to the girl after the completion of this ritual, although she had to observe a period of death impurity upon the death of her ritual husband. The tali ceremony was a female centered ritual which emphasized fertility and household prosperity (Moore 1998: 258). The tirandukalyanam ceremony was the puberty ceremony; during this ceremony femaleness is celebrated as women occupy the parts of the household typically inhabited by men (Moore 1988:264). The third ritual the sambandham ritual is one in which men play a role, and while the tali tying is no longer in practice the sambandham continues to be important. The sambandham ritual is less auspicious than the tali, and puberty rites. This ritual marks the union of the bride and groom. The marriage, however, was not necessarily a permanent arrangement (Moore 1998:264)

In his 1961 study of Nayar marriage rituals, Dumont positions this ritual within a pan-Indian context.. Dumont depicts the traditions as stemming from a basic Indian

framework. He feels that the particular nature of the Nayar marriage ritual is primarily as a compliment to the severely orthodox practice of the Nambootiri Brahmins (Dumont 1961:107). The purpose of the Sambandham marriages of the Nayars is to protect the caste purity and the strict rules of primogeniture within the Brahman caste. Dumont classifies three main types of marriage 1) primary, 2) legitimate secondary, 3) illegitimate secondary. Primary marriages are virgins' marriages, which are auspicious events. Secondary marriages, however, are less prestigious events. Dumont states that the tali tying right of the Nayar represents a primary marriage, whereas sambandham to the Nayars are secondary marriage. The Brahmins, however, view these marriages as a form of concubinage for the offspring do not possess inheritance rights (Dumont 1961:109). In this way, the Nambootiri Brahmins can engage in sexual acts without jeopardizing their family property, and caste regulations.

This view, however, ignores the history of Kerala and caste development in this region. Before the influx of Hindus in 1000 AD women enjoyed a certain amount of sexual freedom in what is present day Kerala. Sanskrit speaking people entered the regions and many settled into communities of Brahmins, called gamma. It was at this time that the Brahmins and Hindu religion asserted considerable influence over the character of the region (Menon 1979:47). It is likely that the practices of the Nayars stem from indigenous traditions with an origin that pre-dates the arrival of the Brahmins into Kerala. The strict orthodoxy and primogeniture of the Nambootiri may have developed in this region due to the matrilineal practices of many castes groups. The tali tying ceremony and sambhadham marriage is not an outgrowth of Hindu systems, for the roots of this system pre-dated the arrival of Brahmins into the region.

Yalman draws parallels between a Universal Hindu Pollution Concept and the tali tying ceremonies of the Nayar (1963:26). While his structural approach, provides insights into the cultural meanings of such ceremonies, Yalman emphasizes only one particular aspect of these rituals. In doing so, he reduces the multi-faceted meaning and manifestations of sexuality into a simple cultural construction relating primarily to the caste system and orthodox Hindu beliefs. Linking many cultural practices of Kerala to Hindu religious beliefs is problematic in Kerala due to the diversity of religions present in this region. Christianity is an important religion of the region, and yet Christian women observe pollution restriction in much the same way as those with Hindu affiliation. The purity/ pollution dichotomy is present not only within Hindu castes of the region, but also in the Christian communities (Dempsey 2001:69). In this way, sexuality and menstruation taboos cannot simply be construed as a Hindu phenomenon, but a more pervasive cultural construction. Conversely, if the purity/ pollution dichotomy is universal in South Asian ideology, why did these rituals take place only in Kerala among certain castes?

These rituals are not simply ritual manifestations of a pan-Indian beliefs and ideology, but provide important insight into the way in which sexuality is constructed and ritualized in a manner specific to the Nayars of Kerala. Also demonstrated are cultural attitudes and opinions the sexual nature of the female gender.

The tali tying ceremony employs three main groups of symbols during the ritual: objects used by a married women for adornment symbolizing a change of status, symbols of household prosperity and items linked with sexuality (Moore 1988:258). The importance of these symbols implies a correlation between the married state of the girl,

household prosperity and sexuality. While, the other rituals focus on the girl as an individual, it is the relationship of the female to the prosperity of the household which is emphasized during this ritual. Bhagavati figured prominently in the celebration of the tali. She was the deity most commonly associated with the Nayer taravad or extended household, as household prosperity is linked with the presence of the Goddess (Moore 1988:260). During the ceremony, the tali is carried to Bhagavati's temple, ritual acts are performed to bring Bhagavati to the taravad, and the girl is linked to objects which represent the goddess. The association of the girl with Bhagavati illustrates the relationship between the girl and household prosperity. The importance and presence of the goddess at the tali tying ritual emphasizes the importance of the girl to the continuation of household prosperity (Moore 1988:260). The ritual is once again linked with household prosperity in its elaborate nature. The tali rite is an occasion to show off the wealth and prestige of the household. The ritual is not only performed for the benefit of the girl, but also has the socio-economic function of demonstrating the economic power of the household (Moore 1988:263). It is not only the prosperity of the girl that is sought during this ritual, but her prosperity is linked to the prosperity of the household as a whole.

While there is a discernable link between prosperity, and the tali tying ceremony the importance of sexuality within this ritual has yet to be established. The ceremony certainly has sexual overtones embodied within the ritual defloration and marriage of the girl. What was yet to be distinguished is the link between the girl's sexuality and prosperity. Symbols of sexuality are employed such as an arrow, the tool of the god of love and a coconut flower. Also, the marriage ceremony is associated with

the start of the agricultural calendar thereby creating a link between the ceremony and fertility (Moore 1998:258). The collusion of these symbols links the sexuality and fertility of the girl to the prosperity of the household. In light of this symbolic connection, the primary function of this ceremony is not so much to alleviate the threat of pollution through sexual contact, but to emphasize the importance of the girl's sexuality and fertility to the social status of the taravad. Caste status is not a static conditions but is constantly negotiated through a variety of mechanisms. One such mechanism is the hypergamous marriage in Kerala. This marriage arrangement allows women of the Nayer caste to marry men of a higher caste, thereby increasing their taravad and caste status (Dirks 2001:51). The hypergamous marriage to a Brahman is not a means to lessen the fear associated with the sexuality of the girl, but more likely a demonstration of her ability to increase the status of the taravad, through hypergamous unions and the bearing of children. The Nayars construct female sexuality in the tali ceremony not as something that is threatening to the household, but as a source of power and increase.

Another important ceremony for women in the Nayer caste was the tirandukalyanam ceremony, or the first menstruation ceremony. The purpose of this ceremony as an informant told Moore was to "let it be known that the girl is mature, so that good proposals will come (1998:263)." This ceremony gives more overt emphasis on the sexualized nature of the girl and well as stressing protection. The protection motif is most prominent during menstruation, when the girl is secluded in the house and measures are taken to ward off possession. The girl is initiated as a sexual being on the fourth-day during a ritual bath. During this ritual, vulgar songs relating to sexual intercourse are sung before the girl and her kinswomen (Gough 1955:70).

This ritual also has a more communal meaning for the Nayars. During this ritual a reversal occurs in which the women are given the portion of the household typically held by men, and women are permitted to eat before men at a feast. This reversal also takes place at birthday celebrations and is designed to give prominence and importance to the birthday person. In this situation, however, the celebration esteems not an individual but the female gender as a whole (Moore 1998:264). Femaleness is celebrated and the solidarity of women is affirmed through participation in this ritual.

It is significant that women are given prominence during the celebration of a ritual that marks a girl as a sexualized being thereby creating another ritual correlation between female sexuality and female status. It is through the recognition of a woman's sexuality, and its subsequent importance to the household that women are afforded a place of esteem and the female gender is celebrated. Women's fertility and sexuality are a source of power for women in the Nayar caste, therefore, it follows that they would be given a special position during a ritual which initiates a woman as a sexual and fertile person. It is this power and importance that is recognized during the puberty ritual of the Nayars. The onset of the menstrual cycle is not simply a polluting but also an empowering event. It is a time of celebration, not only for the initiate but also for all women.

Accompanied by the importance of sexuality in this ritual, is vulnerability and the need for protection. This shows that while sexual initiation is a time for celebration, there is an element of fear within accompanying this ritual. While a woman's sexuality is a source of power, with increased power comes an increased capacity for destruction, therefore, during her first menstrual period it follows that the initiate has the

capacity to harm herself as well as her household. Another meaning of this ritual is its position as a rite of passage ritual. During her menstrual period the girl is changing her status from to a woman able to engage in sexual relations. Until she takes the ritual bath she is outside the social order. She is not a child, but neither is she fully a sexualized woman. The girl inhabits a liminal area during this time and is therefore vulnerable to spirit possession and needs to be protected. The need for seclusion is not simply a fear of newly acquired procreative ability, but also the fear of a gray area which stands outside the definable social order.

A third important ritual is the marriage ritual or the sambadham which results in a union between the bride and the groom. This ritual is much less elaborate than the other two rituals. This relationship can occur between Nayers or between a Nayer woman and a man of the Brahman caste. While Brahman men can enter into relationships with Nayer women, women cannot form unions with a lower caste. These unions are rarely permanent and women are afforded a certain amount of autonomy in their choice of partners. These relationships can result from a mutual sense of attraction or through family arrangements which establish suitably matched partners. Traditionally, women continue to live in their natal taravad, and children of the relationship belonged to the taravad of the mother. Through the establishment of sambadham relationships with higher caste partners, women have the ability to increase the status of their household. The symbolism of the sambadham ritual emphasizes pure eroticism rather than its connection to fertility and emergence as with the previous two rituals. In the sambadham ritual, sexuality is related to hospitality as the household accepts an outsider (Moore 1998:70). Female sexuality is therefore extremely important to the household for it

ensures that the lineage will continue as well as connects the taravad to other powerful and influential families.

The marriage practices of the Nambootiri Brahmans as well as the marriage practices in other areas of India vary a great deal from those of the Nayer in their treatment of female sexuality. Placing these rituals in a pan-Indian context ignores the obvious discrepancies in the construction of sexuality and the position of women with regards to sexual unions and control of their bodies.

Women in the Nambootiri Brahman caste of Kerala experience different marriage traditions and possess different sexual meanings in association with these traditions. Only the eldest son of the Brahmans is permitted to marry, and he must marry another Brahman. This rule creates an excess of marriageable women, but few men eligible for marriage. Due to this rule large dowries are expected of the bride's family in order to secure a good marriage. It is considered quite bad to have many unmarried women in the house past the age of puberty for fear of their sexuality, but marriage is difficult and expensive to secure (Goldberg and Menchner 1967: 98) Due to these marriage practices daughters become more of a burden upon the economic resources of the household than a source of power and social status. Little good comes from the sexuality of Brahman women, and therefore it is something to be repressed and strictly controlled. If a woman who is not married has sexual liaisons with a man, or worse with a lower caste man, this has negative repercussions on the entire household. For this reason, women are given little autonomy and are strictly confined to the women's quarters of the household. The need for a significant dowry means that many women were never married and spent a lifetime as isolated virgins (Goldberg and Menchner

1967:99). Younger sons of the Nambootiri are permitted to form sambadham unions with Nayar women, because these women did not claim membership and resources of the household (Goldberg and Menchner 1967:100). These relationships also served to form alliances with strong Nayar households.

The marriage patterns of the Nambootiri produce different attitudes regarding the women's sexuality. A daughter is not a source of power, but an economic burden upon the resources of the family. Her sexuality has the potential of creating disaster for the family, with little chance of bringing benefit to the family, therefore it is something to be controlled and repressed. Conversely, although the Nayar women have the capacity to bring trouble to the household through frustrated sexuality, but they can also use their sexual nature to form important alliances, have children, and increase the status and prosperity of the household. The Nambootiri are believed to be descendants of the first Sanskrit speaking peoples to inhabit Kerala, therefore, their customs exhibit less connection to more ancient Keralan traditions.

Central and Northern India traditions form marriage patterns that more closely resemble the Nambootiri Brahmans than the Nayars of Kerala. Unlike the Nambootiri, however, all sons and daughters typically marry. While all sons are permitted to marry, hypergamous relationships as performed in Kerala are not permissible within other South Asian traditions, so daughters can rarely increase the status of her natal family. In Central and Northern India, a large dowry must be paid to the groom's family as compensation for the extra burden of another mouth. Marriages are arranged by families, with little chance of a marriage arrangement based upon mutual affection, as is permitted for the Nayar. A woman's sexuality autonomy is strictly limited, for she does not choose her

marriage partner. After marriage, high caste Brahman women and other high caste women are placed in “purdah” or seclusion which limits not only their sexual autonomy, but also their personal autonomy (Wadley 1994:53).

The marriage ceremony does not take place in three separate rituals, but is performed all at once. Instead of connecting the girl’s sexuality to the home, through the acceptance of a male outsider into the taravad, Northern traditions emphasize the girl’s membership into a new family (Moore 1985:528). Upon arrival at her new home the girl is tied to the groom, and then placed on a mat in the middle of the courtyard, where the female kin of the groom lift her veil and judge the girl’s appearance (Wadley 1994:58). Such traditions emphasize the groom’s family and their control and ownership of the bride as opposed to rituals of the Nayar which venerate the bride.

The girl’s ability to engage in sexual relations is regulated by the husband’s mother in law. She can keep a new bride and groom apart, and not allow them to sleep together thereby controlling the relationship (Lamb 2000:73). While Nayar women remain relatively free with regard to their sexual relations, as they are permitted to choose their partners and their behavior is not so strictly regulated, the same does not hold true for other regions of India. Their sexual autonomy is strictly regulated through familial marriage arrangements, purdah restrictions, and the dictates of their mother-in-law. The large dowry requirement insures that instead of being a means for the family to achieve a higher status and form important family links, daughters are perceived as a financial burden to their natal family rather than a benefit.

Matriliny

It is well known that many castes of Kerala are matrilineal, in that they trace descent through the mother's line as opposed to the father. This stands in contrast to the Nambootiri Brahmans of Kerala as well as the strict patriarchy and patriliney of Northern and Central India. Matrilineal systems and matrilineal systems in particular generally have a positive affect upon the status of women. In matrilineal systems, daughters are necessary to maintain the family lineage; therefore daughters and women are an important part of the household. This contrasts with the strict patriliney and patrilocality of other regions. Daughters are only a temporary member of their natal household, and upon marriage they join the groom's family. This means that they are never fully integrated into either household. They are considered visitors and alien in the home of their groom, but they are also no longer a member of the natal family. This relationship diminishes the voice that women have and the chance of exerting their own autonomy (Dube 1996:177). Along with the favorable position of women in matrilineal societies in South Asia comes an increased sexual autonomy. The sexuality of women is less regulated by men and the interests of the male householders in matrilineal societies than in patriliney. Female sexuality poses less of a threat to matrilineal systems with more relaxed marriage bonds than a strict patriliney in which female sexual indiscretions can threaten the stability of the lineage (Dube 1996:178).

Food and Sexuality

Throughout South Asia, people's relationship with food is continuously used as a metaphor for sexual meanings. However, the meanings about sexuality that are

constructed are different in Kerala than in other regions of India. In the Christian fishing village of Marianad, men and women eat together as an important statement of equality. During a domestic dispute, the worst threat that a husband can direct toward his wife is refusal to eat with her. In Northern India, a husband will not eat with his wives for fear of being polluted by a mixing of fluids. The wife is expected to consume the leftovers of the husband. In Marianad, men and women eat off of the same plate and do not harbor fears about food pollution. Such variations in eating practices correspond to variations in how the sexual act is viewed and interpreted in Marianad as opposed to other regions of Kerala (Busby 236:1999). Men and women are viewed as being of one body, each an oppositely gendered part of a whole. Men and women are believed to be complimentary aspects of a larger whole body. Although men are viewed as possessing greater sexual desire than women, the sexual union is a union of merger and equal exchange between men and women. If the sexual act is viewed as an equal relationship and pollutions does not result from this equal exchange, then a wife cannot pollute a husband through an exchange of fluids during intercourse. The higher status of men is not expressed through the sexual act or through eating separately during the dinner hours in the fishing village of Kerala. The closeness of husband and wife, shown through their sharing of food and sex is expressed through the notion that they are “one body” (oru sariam) (Busby 230:1999).

Food as a sexual metaphor exists strongly in other regions of Indian. Food is considered to be permeated with the substances of those who have cooked handled and eaten them. Therefore people are very careful about whose food they eat and whose substances they digest. Women eat men’s leftovers, but men would never touch the food

of women (Lamb 2000:33-34). The sexual identity of women is constructed in part through her relationship to food as well as intercourse. Women are thought to possess a greater digestive capacity than men, resulting in their ability to digest more food as well as more sexual activity than men. Intercourse is not perceived as an equal exchange but as women absorbing or digesting the fluids of the man. Because an exchange of fluids does not occur during the sexual act, exchanging fluids during meals could be seen as problematic for the man, but not the woman who “digests” semen during intercourse.

There is a strong connection between food and sexual meanings, as such the relationships of men and women to food correlates to views of the relationship of men and women during intercourse. In Marianod Kerala intercourse is perceived as a means of equal exchange and merger into one body, similarly there is not an eating hierarchy between men and women. Husbands and wives eat the same food as an expression of their equal and complimentary nature. This stands in contrast to the Northern Indian view of food in which a man can never consume food that contains the substances of his wife, for this would be dangerous and polluting. Similarly during intercourse, there is not an exchange of bodily substance, but women digest the substance from the man, creating an unequal sexual relationship as well as an unequal relationship in eating patterns.

Expressions of Sexuality in Folklore

According to Ann Gold “folk performances instill as well as articulate cultural values (Gold 1991:104)”. Through hearing and understanding the oral folklore of South Asia it is possible to make assumptions regarding the cultural values of the society. Such performances teach listeners the “right” way to behave, lessons which they internalize

into their cultural schema. Similarly, through their construction and presentation these oral epics also reflect important values of the people. While there is a generic version of the tale, an important facet of oral folklore lies in the emphasis and the nuances of the performance. The Ramayana is an oral epic that is performed throughout India exhibiting a certain amount of regional variation. This epic is performed as a shadow puppet theater in hundreds of goddess temples in Kerala. The women in the performance are presented differently in Kerala than in other versions of the story.

Rama in the Keralese performance is not the epitome of male virtue, but has human qualities which make him susceptible to evil. In the story, Rama's brother Laskmama accidentally kills an innocent raksasa. Surpanadkha, the raksasa's mother, goes looking for her son and finds him dead. In the traditional creation of the story, she is portrayed as a danger ready to strike out against the innocent Rama. However, in the puppet theater she is portrayed as an unfortunate victim of Rama (Blackburn 1991:386). Supanadkha in the Keralese Theater is portrayed as a demon devotee of the goddess Lakshmi, not an evil incarnate. When she spies Rama, Lakshmi transforms her into a beautiful human woman, and Rama lusts for her. In the Keralese version, Rama, instead of laughing at the woman, is attracted by her beauty. Her beauty and sexuality give her power to use against the God. Despite his might and virtue, he is temporarily dissuaded from his purpose by the sight of a beautiful woman.

In a later verse, Supanadkha defends her sexuality and feelings of lust. When Rama condemns her as shameless, instead of being insulted she rises to her own defense against him. She says that she is driven by the God Kama, and to not fulfill her desire would bring pain. Love and desire is not evil but a neutral force. Love and lust are

considered necessary and should not be eliminated. They should be moderated but not denied. Sexuality in this sense is not perceived as something threatening and shameful, but as an important life force. The Keralese performance departs from other tales of the Ramayana in that it is not the demon's sexuality that threatens Rama, but Rama's own vulnerability that make him susceptible to her arguments. She is not a evil force, but a neutral one, and it is Rama's own moral fallibility which causes his attraction to her, not her bad character (Blackburn 1991:390).

This tale shows us that sexuality and lust are not viewed as a subversive element in Keralese literature, but as a natural and neutral force. While lust and sexuality of women in excess is a bad thing, in moderation it is part of life's balance. This stands in contrast to other versions of the epic in which lust is a quality of demons which is designed to subvert Rama from his purpose, and is a feeling that ought to be repressed. The contrast in the portrayal of lust and sexuality in these two epics reflect different cultural patterns regarding the acceptability of lust and sexuality. In the Keralese version female sexuality is acceptable and a necessary part of life whereas, in Northern epic performances it is dangerous and ought to be repressed.

Conclusion

Gender constructions in India are not uniform, but show vast regional variation. Academic work which does not consider the regional differences based upon the unique history, geography and cultural patterns of the region, creates inaccurate conceptions of gender within the nation of India. The region of Kerala exhibits different patterns of gender meaning and constructions from the Hindu regions of the north. The history of

the region is Dravidian, therefore many beliefs regarding the status of women are derived from eras previous to the influx of Sanskrit culture into the region. Marriage rituals in Kerala show a positive symbolic link between household prosperity and female sexuality. Similarly these rituals are designed to elevate the female gender rather than subordinate them to their male counter-parts. Matrilineal, and Matrilocal patterns provide women with a greater amount of control of their circumstances and autonomy than in more northern reaches of the nation.

Eating practices in portions of Kerala embody values about the relationship between men and women. Male/ female sexual relationships are regarded as relationships of exchange which places women on a more equal footing with men, as opposed to northern India in which the sexual act is not a relationship of exchange, but of women absorbing male substance. Such conceptions of sexuality are also manifested as variations in eating practices throughout the different regions of India. Similarly folklore, like the epic Ramayana, is told throughout India. The telling of the story, however, embodies the different values of the regions of India. In the Keralese version of the Ramayana, women and sexuality are constructed in a much more positive manner than in the more northern reaches of the nation. The status of women and their relationship to sexuality has developed differently in Kerala creating a different experience for women of this region, than other Indian regions.

Kerala is currently undergoing the process of Sanskritization, and is increasingly subscribing to Hindu goals. Similarly economic changes have decreased the importance of the taravad and increased the growth of nuclear households as the economic unit. These changes alter the position of women within Keralese society. Sanskritization places

women in a position more in accordance with the prevailing system of Northern India, and the growth of the nuclear family undermines the position of women within the taravad. Despite these changes women in Kerala, continue to have a higher literacy rate and life expectancy than elsewhere in India (Saradomi 1996:147). The meaning of gender and the position of women continues to vary from that of Northern and Central India.

In order to create a true picture of how sexuality becomes integrated into the meaning of gender within Kerala, intensive fieldwork should be undertaken in this region. Such fieldwork should not stem from pre-existing theories regarding and notions about gender and sexuality in other regions of India, but should treat Kerala as a separate entity with its own unique history and gender meanings. As such studies of gender in Kerala should not attempt to fit its unique character into a ready made framework by emphasizing only the similarities between gender in Kerala and other regions of India, but should take into account the wide ranging differences.

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