

# Chapter I

## Introduction

The meaning of masculinity is neither transhistorical nor culturally universal; it is not carried on the Y chromosome, nor is it somehow a function of testosterone. Rather, the meanings of manhood vary from culture to culture and within any one culture over time.

Michael Kimmel and Amy Aronson, Introduction to *Men and Masculinities: A Social, Cultural, and Historical Encyclopaedia (Volume I: A–J)*, 2004

In general, men are treated as genderless and only their public personae are taken into account, overlooking their experience of gender (Kimmel & Messner, 2010). Masculinity Studies contests the “genderlessness” of men and argues that “men are also ‘gendered’” and this gendering process of transforming the “biological males into socially interacting men” is of significant interest to the field of study (Kimmel & Messner, 2010, p. 12). In this respect, Masculinity Studies examines how men are made and how they make themselves in contemporary and historic periods in particular societies. Studies on men and masculinities deal with how masculinity is organized, how social institutions sustain it, and how its meanings keep evolving and changing. As a field inspired by feminism, Masculinity Studies perceives that to understand gendered inequality, it is necessary to understand the operational structures of patriarchy. It interrogates the various ways in which men are privileged and “the cost of those privileges and the ways in which not all

men are granted equal access to them” (Kimmel & Bridges, 2011, p. 2). The label “masculine” contains “multiple identities, behaviours, and meanings” and is not a universal category (Kimmel & Bridges, 2011, p. 1). Thus, “masculinities” in the plural is preferred over the singular form of the term to account for the diversities within the category. This suggests that masculinity “varies *historically*” (what is thought of as masculine changes over time), “varies *cross-culturally*” (conceptualizations of masculinity are culturally specific), “varies *intra-psychically*” (what it means to be a man changes over the course of one’s life) and “varies *contextually*” [even within a given society and time period, masculinity can mean different things to different people] (Kimmel & Bridges, 2011, p. 2). It is this plurality of gendered experiences that necessitates masculinities to be studied, considering their regional specificities and intersections, which inform it at a particular point of time in history. This thesis is such an attempt to understand the configurations of masculinities in contemporary Kerala through a discursive study of select events.

The thesis attempts to study men and masculinities in contemporary Kerala, specifically from 2010 to the present. The study is centred on the debates and discourses around three select events, which it argues revealed the fractures in the existing heteropatriarchal consensus regarding gender regimes in contemporary Kerala, South India. The three events— 1) The Supreme Court of India verdict in 2018 allowing women of all ages to enter the Sabarimala Temple in Kerala, 2) the publication of the first gay autobiography in Malayalam by Kishor Kumar titled *Randu Purushanmar Chumbikkumbol: Malayali Gayude Athmakathayum Ezhuthukalum* (When Two Men Kiss: An Autobiography and Writings of a Malayali Gay) in 2017, and 3) the emergence

of “New Generation” cinema in Malayalam—provide the axis and open up the context for the study. The study argues that hegemonic/normative ideals regarding men and masculinities are undergoing changes/tensions in the public domain and representative realms in contemporary Kerala. An “event” in cultural theory perceives a break/rupture in the otherwise seamless continuity of everyday life. The events selected thus act as discursive sites that help to read the tensions in normative conceptions of masculinity and what it means to be a desirable man in the present. The study considers masculinities (whether it is hegemonic/dominant or subordinate or marginal) not as static, an already available category on which certain factors act and create tension but as fluid, an ever-evolving category that can be understood only within a larger gender order. The attempt of the thesis, in this respect, is to reveal the tensions in what it means to be a man in contemporary Kerala discursively.

## **II**

### **Theoretical Framework**

The thesis is largely a project in Cultural Studies and is specifically located in the field of Masculinity Studies, a sub-field within Gender Studies. The theoretical and methodological assumptions of Cultural Studies and Gender Studies provide the larger framework of the thesis. As theory often overlaps with methods in research in humanities (Barry, 2002; Culler, 1997; Eagleton, 2008), it is imperative to begin the thesis by detailing the theoretical structure which informs it. This section elaborates on the theories

and methods from Cultural Studies, Gender Studies and Masculinity Studies that are used in this work.

## **Placing the Thesis within Cultural Studies**

From the initial stages of this PhD work, the aim was to study the changes in masculinities in contemporary Kerala, but how to do such a work was a difficult question, both methodologically and pragmatically. Being a researcher trained in literary studies, the initial inclination was to stick only to literary and film texts. However, as the research advanced, there was a realisation that to understand the complexity of socio-cultural phenomena which can inform the changes in masculinities, it is necessary to move out of the familiar confines of textual analysis. There are multiple factors which influence power relations among masculinities, and they in turn cause changes/tensions in existing gender regimes. Moreover, this happens at the intersection of questions of law, religion, caste, sexuality, family, and representation among others, which demands further probing. The intersectionality necessitates studying diverse primary materials ranging from literary and film texts to court orders, archival materials and new media contents<sup>1</sup>. The research questions raised by the project focus on how cultural practices help to understand the operations of power in gender configurations at a historical conjuncture in

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<sup>1</sup> This dissertation primarily utilizes materials in Malayalam. Translations from Malayalam to English are done by the researcher unless otherwise specified.

a specific region. In this context, the interdisciplinary framework of Cultural Studies is particularly suited for studying diverse texts/materials.

Another significant challenge was to organise the diverse materials collected as part of the research, all of which inform about men and masculinities in contemporary Kerala but in different ways. The research observed the 2010s as a significant period, notable for events that challenged existing gender regimes in Kerala in multiple ways, including the Queer Pride March (2010), Kiss of Love Protest (2014), “Happy to Bleed” (2015), the formation of Women in Cinema Collective (2017), Sabarimala Women’s Entry Protests (2018) among others (which are elaborated later in this chapter). It was also noticed that these events could serve as ruptures, revealing the fissures in hegemonic masculine structures and heteropatriarchal consensus regarding gender order in the region. While there are several such events which are significant during the period, the thesis focuses on three events which it considers can help to delineate the multiple masculine positions which challenge hegemonic masculinities or their representations, that simultaneously pose tensions in the larger heteropatriarchal consensus regarding gender regimes in contemporary Kerala. The Supreme Court verdict (2018) on Sabarimala is visibly a major event which has initiated a remarkable change in the existing narratives of gender and progress in the region, unavoidably making it necessary to study the same. The choice to look at cinema and literature through two events, notably the emergence of “New Generation” cinema in Malayalam in the 2010s and the publication of the first Malayalam autobiography *Randu Purushanmar Chumbikkumbol: Malayali Gayude Athmakathayum Ezhuthukalum* (When Two Men Kiss: An Autobiography and Writings of a Malayali Gay, 2017) by a gay man, was informed by

the theoretical understanding of the importance to analyse “representations” as a critical site to understand gender and also subjectively due to the research training in literary studies.

The decision to base the study on select events as axis demands defining the significance of events within Cultural Studies/Cultural Theory. An “event” in cultural theory perceives a break/rupture in what otherwise seems like “the unremarkable continuity of everyday life” (Rice et al., 2022, p. 2). The three events selected thus provide fissures that can make visible the changes or give an analytical apparatus that can enlighten the tensions in masculinity in contemporary times. “Events” have been of considerable interest to historians, as Christophe Prochasson (2015) remarks on these as “bright lights in the stream of time” (p. 141). However, events are also studied by many scholars to understand the social transitions of a given society. Robin Wagner-Pacifici (2017), who has researched in this area extensively, notes how events shape our everyday lives. She identifies that temporality has a “mutually constitutive relationship” with events and argues that events “emerge and punctuate lived experience” (Pacifici, 2017, p. 7). Another prominent feature she attributes to the events is that they take shape: “Executive orders, letters, trials, handshakes, newspaper articles, photographs, and paintings are simultaneously the concrete material and the formal hosts for the relay of actions and codifications that get identified as events. Events live in and through these forms” (Pacifici, 2017, p. 10-11). By demonstrating that the events are “continuously on the move” (Pacifici, 2017, p. 155), she underscores the significance of events by pointing out that “the existential provisionality of events does not mean that they are therefore insignificant, unimportant, or without consequence” (Pacifici, 2017, p. 155). It is with

this understanding of events as a critical juncture to study changes in social phenomena, especially concerning gender regimes, that the research advances.

As an interdisciplinary field of enquiry, Cultural Studies examines cultural practices from the point of view of their interrelation with and within relations of power, which operate through structures of ideology, institutions, class, caste, gender, sexuality, and others. The interdisciplinary approach of Cultural Studies to examining cultural representations, including texts, images, films, and other cultural practices, aids the study in decoding the multiple power structures that inform the operation of masculinities in contemporary Kerala. Inspired by feminism and race theory (Hall, 1996), Cultural Studies understands culture “both as a way of life—encompassing ideas, attitudes, languages, practices, institutions and structures of power—and a whole range of cultural practices: artistic forms, texts, canons, architecture, mass-produced commodities and so forth” (Grossberg et al., 1992, p. 5). Cultural Studies offers me the flexibility to frame the methods according to the questions asked. It also aids the researchers in drawing from whatever “fields that are necessary to produce the knowledge” and “has no distinct methodology, no unique statistical, ethnomethodological or textual analysis to call its own” (Grossberg et al., 1992, p. 2). Stuart Hall describes the methodology of cultural studies as a “bricolage” and its goal as “to enable people to understand what [was/is] going on, and especially to provide ways of thinking, strategies for survival, and resources for resistance” (Hall, 1990, p. 22). Moreover, “the choice of research practices depends upon the questions that are asked and the questions depend on their context” and is “pragmatic, strategic and self-reflective” (Grossberg et al., 1992, p. 2).

In that sense, discourse analysis, especially in a Foucauldian framework, provides the larger analytical approach of the thesis, as it accounts for power as a major axis while interpreting the primary materials. Power, for Michel Foucault, is never an oppressive structure in the conventional sense but is rather relational (Foucault, 1978). According to Foucault (1978), power is immanent, and all social relations are relations of power, whether in the family, state, or any other social institution. Foucauldian Discourse Analysis, in that sense, reveals or discerns the power structures that inform everyday practices, cultural products/artefacts and/or smaller and larger societal events at a particular historical conjuncture. Power for Foucault is “omnipresent, productive (not just destructive), circulatory, diffused, enacted, discursive, embedded in discourse, knowledge and regimes of truth, constituting (the subject), embodies and consensual, rather than coercive” (Khan & MacEachen, 2021, p. 5). Besides acknowledging alternative modes of knowledge, Foucauldian Discourse Analysis also aids qualitative researchers “to look for difference, absence and local contexts rather than for similarity, presence and universal contexts” (Khan & MacEachen, 2021, p. 2). The discursive approach is also influential in the study of masculinities globally (for instance, in the works of Petersen [1998], Wetherell, and Edley [1999]). Such works suggest that “men are not permanently committed to a particular pattern of masculinity” (Connell, 2005, p. 18-19) but “rather they make situationally specific choices from (the) cultural repertoire of masculine behaviour” (Connell, 2005, p. 19). Thus, the selected texts are placed within the larger discourses that produced them and are read mostly through textual analysis, especially deconstructive reading and visual cultural analysis. The subject position of the researcher also needs self-reflexive attention in a Cultural Studies project. My subject position as an

upper caste heterosexual man from Kerala was carefully accounted for while doing the research, especially while engaging with questions at the intersection of marginality and gender. At the same time, my own experience as a privileged man from Kerala and the later critical distancing I gained to look back at my journey of “growing up as a man” and the present, through training in Cultural Studies and Gender Studies led me to this project and informs it.

### **Gender as Performative: The Post-structural Understanding**

The discipline of Masculinity Studies has been significantly influenced by the post-structural understanding of gender, especially of Judith Butler. By unsettling the biological determinism in understanding gender identities, Butler reconfigured the studies of gender in significantly newer directions. While elaborating on their theory of gender performativity in *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity* (1990), Butler argues that gender is the “repeated stylisation of the body, a set of repeated acts within a highly rigid regulatory frame that congeal over time to produce the appearance of substance, of a natural sort of being” (p. 45). They note that gendered behaviour (masculinity/femininity) is not as natural as it appears to be. Instead, it is performatively constituted and imposed upon by normative heterosexuality. Gender also has to be repeatedly performed in a given historical situation—“the body becomes its gender through a series of acts which are renewed, revised, and consolidated through time” (Butler, 1988, p. 523):

In this sense, gender is in no way a stable identity or locus of agency from which various acts proceed; rather, it is an identity tenuously constituted in time, an identity instituted through a stylised repetition of acts. Further, gender is instituted through the stylisation of the body and, hence, must be understood as the mundane way in which bodily gestures, movements, and enactments of various kinds constitute the illusion of an abiding gendered self (Butler, 1988, p. 519).

Employing what Foucault (1978) calls a “regulatory ideal”, Butler (1993) also argues that sexual difference is “never simply a function of material differences” (p. 11). Instead, sex is “part of a regulatory practice that produces the bodies it governs, that is, whose regulatory force is made clear as a kind of productive power, the power to produce— demarcate, circulate, differentiate— the bodies it controls” (Butler, 1993, p. 11-12). The thesis is premised upon this understanding of gender and sexuality. Understanding men and masculinities in Kerala also necessitates considering different historical contexts. For instance, the study of masculinities during the formation of the modern engendered families in Kerala in the 20<sup>th</sup> century significantly varies with that of the study of masculinities after liberalisation. It is more complex in contemporary Kerala, wherein the structures of heteropatriarchy are further unsettled by marginalised categories within men, including Dalit men, gay men, transmen, and others. Masculinities, thus, are understood to be very fluid and as undergoing significant transformations in any given period.

## **Men and Masculinities: Theories and Debates**

The academic scholarship from the West has significantly influenced studies on masculinities in India. The early studies on men and masculinities were mainly from Western contexts, and these have now developed into a significant field of enquiry within Gender Studies. This section of the thesis engages with the major theoretical debates within the study of men and masculinities from the Western context, which significantly influenced this current study.

Inspired by the feminist formulation of gender, Masculinity Studies scholars also perceive men as gendered beings wherein men are considered “not born” but instead “are made” (Kimmel & Aronson, 2004, p. 23). Men also construct “their masculinity within a social and historical context” (Kimmel & Aronson, 2004, p. 23) and masculinity is “neither transhistorical nor culturally universal” (Kimmel & Aronson, 2004, p. 23). It is not “carried on (the) Y chromosome nor is somehow a function of testosterone” (Kimmel & Aronson, 2004, p. 23). Though this field of study is termed “Men’s Studies”, it is not merely a corollary to “Women’s Studies”. Instead, this is derived from the feminist works on gender, and scholars like Michael Kimmel and Amy Aronson (2004) describe this field as the study of “Men and Masculinities” to avoid this confusion, wherein men are the “corporal beings” and the masculinities are “the ideologies and attitudes that are associated with those corporal beings” (Kimmel & Aronson, 2004, p. 16). The conception of men as gendered beings derives from the post-modern understanding of gender, which scholars like Butler significantly influenced.

The thesis also employs R. W. Connell's idea of hegemonic masculinity in order to understand the relations between masculinities in the state. Hegemonic masculinity is the "most honoured way of being a man", and "it requires all other men to position themselves in relation to it, and it ideologically legitimates the global subordination of women to men" (Connell & Messerschmidt, 2005, p. 832). The most important feature of hegemonic masculinity in contemporary times is that it is heterosexual and is connected to the institution of marriage (Connell, 1987, p. 186); it is also homophobic, institutionalised and racially exclusionary (L. C. Ross, 2000; Sanday, 1990). Hegemonic masculinity has evolved as the basis of the study of masculinities across cultures, including in the South Asian context. Scholars like Demetrakis Z. Demetriou (2001), on the other hand, note that masculine power in contemporary times is exercised by taking the "bits and pieces" (p. 350) from alternative cultures (like gay culture), leading to a "new hybrid configuration of gender practice that enable them to reproduce their dominance over women" (p. 351) in historically new ways. Extending his criticism on this seemingly non-problematic version of masculinity in contemporary times in many societies, Demetriou (2001) also argues that there are two forms of hegemony, internal and external, in the consideration of gender in the present times. External hegemony suggests the domination of a set of men over women, while internal hegemony refers to the domination of a group of men over other men. He further introduces the concept of "hegemonic masculine bloc", which is a "form of masculinity that is capable of reproducing patriarchy (and) is in a constant process of negotiation, translation, hybridisation, and reconfiguration" (Demetriou, 2001, p. 355).

In the context of such growing criticism of hegemonic masculinity, Connell (2005) reiterates that hegemonic masculinity is still relevant in the study of masculinities in any given context. They add that hegemonic masculinity is not “a fixed character type, always and everywhere the same” (Connell, 2005, p. 76) and propose different patterns of masculinity in the contemporary gender order namely 1) Hegemonic 2) Complicit 3) Subordinate and 4) Marginalised. Hegemonic masculinity is “the configuration of gender practice which embodies the currently accepted answer to the problem of the legitimacy of patriarchy, which guarantees (or is taken to guarantee) the dominant position of men and the subordination of women” (Connell, 2005, p. 77). On the other hand, complicit masculinities take the advantage of patriarchal dividend “without the tensions or risks of being the front-line troops of patriarchy” (Connell, 2005, p. 79). Taking into account the case of gay men in the hierarchical relations of masculinities, Connell (2005) argues that “there are specific gender relations of dominance and subordination between groups of men” (p. 78). Gay men are “symbolically expelled from hegemonic masculinity” and are “easily assimilated to femininity” (Connell, 2005, p. 78). Marginalised masculinities are formed through the interaction of gender with the structures like class and race. It marginalises masculinities from the mainstream, and this marginalisation “is always relative to the authorisation of the hegemonic masculinity of the dominant groups” (Connell, 2005, p. 80-81). These classifications provide an axis for understanding the multiple forms of masculinities in a given context. They further argue that the “most visible bearers of hegemonic masculinity” need not always be the more powerful people but “hegemony is likely to be established only if there is some correspondence between cultural ideal and institutional power, collective if not individual” (Connell, 2005, p. 77).

Connell and Messerschmidt (2005) note that “cultural consent, discursive centrality, institutionalism and the marginalisation or delegitimisation of alternatives” (p. 846) are often the features of hegemonic masculinity in any cultural context. In a non-Western context like India, the study of masculinities poses different questions, and masculinities have to be studied vis-a-vis the specificities of the region and contingencies of the time. For instance, marginalised masculinities are constituted due to race and class in the Western context. In the Indian context, it is mainly the caste and class that marginalises masculinities.

### **Men as Gendered Beings: Developments in the Studies on Men and Masculinities and the Crisis Tendencies**

The genderlessness of men is one of the significant concerns that the scholars of Masculinity Studies have historically engaged with. They are also concerned with the organisation of masculinities and how social institutions interact with building and sustaining masculinity. They also examine the interaction of masculinities in a given social context (Kimmel, 2006). Kimmel (2006) notes that manhood is socially constructed and is not “static nor timeless” (p. 120). By underscoring that it is detached from the biological male, he notes that it is “created in our culture” (Kimmel, 2006, p. 120). Pierre Bourdieu (2001) observes that masculinity can also be acquired. According to him, men are also under the fear of being excluded from the world of men.

Judith Halberstam (1998) formulates the notion of female masculinity, disputing the natural connection drawn between biological male and masculinity. Moreover,

masculinity is now understood in a broader perspective without fixed categories as “the combined influence of feminism and the gay movement has exploded the conception of a uniform masculinity” (Beynon, 2002, p. 1). This contestation of the unified category of masculinity in the 1980s further unravelled the power relations that work within the category. Connell’s idea of “hegemonic masculinity” has evolved into a significant framework for understanding the relations of power within masculinities. Judith Gardiner (2002) notes that hegemonic masculinity is also neither monolithic nor static but is “the confluence of multiple processes and relationships with variable results for differing individuals, groups, institutions, and societies”. She further notes,

Although dominant or hegemonic forms of masculinity work constantly to maintain an appearance of permanence, stability, and naturalness, the numerous masculinities in every society are contingent, fluid, socially and historically constructed, changeable and constantly changing, variously institutionalised, and recreated through media representations and individual and collective performances (Gardiner, 2002, p. 12).

In comparison, emphasised femininity necessitates that women conform to men’s needs and desires and is “linked with the private realm of the home and the bedroom” (Connell, 1987, p. 187). The concept of hegemonic masculinity is influential in the study of patriarchy across cultures and has many other applications, including in crime studies, education and others (Jewkes et al., 2015; Kennedy & Russell, 2021).

Connell (1995) notes that there has been an “intensification of crisis tendencies in the gender order “in recent years that resulted “in a major loss of legitimacy for

patriarchy, and different groups of men are now negotiating this loss in very different ways” (p. 201-202). Several studies attempt to account for these changes. In his critique of hegemonic masculinity, Demetriou (2001) introduces the concept of “hegemonic masculine bloc”, which is a “form of masculinity that is capable of reproducing patriarchy (and) is in a constant process of negotiation, translation, hybridisation, and reconfiguration” (p. 355). The term “hybrid masculinity” has also been increasingly used, and it refers to the selective incorporation of identities of both marginalised-subordinated masculinities and femininities (Bridges & Pascoe, 2014; Demetriou, 2001). Hybrid masculinity was also accounted for in studying masculinities in different socio-political contexts (Arxer, 2011; Messner, 2007). Eric Anderson (2007) puts forward the idea of “inclusive masculinity”, which is “a more encompassing form of masculinity” and is “predicated in the social inclusion of those traditionally marginalised by hegemonic masculinity” (p. 606). Along with his formulation of “inclusive masculinity”, Anderson (along with MacCormack [2018]) elaborate on the idea of homo hysteria, which is “the fear of being socially perceived as gay” (p. 2). Understanding homo hysteria is cardinal to comprehend social changes as it identifies the conditions under which homophobia regulates men’s behaviours (E. Anderson & McCormack, 2018). The study of masculinities has become more diverse now that different terms are used to capture the changes in masculinities globally. This includes soft-boiled masculinity (Heath, 2003), flexible and strategic masculinities (Batnitzky et al., 2009), cool masculinities (Jackson & Dempster, 2009), chameleon masculinities (Ward, 2015), caring masculinities (Hunter et al., 2017) and others. The above discussion of masculinities also suggests the non-ontological nature of gender identities while revealing their performative nature.

The idea of “crisis of masculinity” has been a most sought-after field of study in Western academia since the 1960s. This is discussed mainly in collaboration with the rise of feminist and gay liberation movements in the West. Jennifer Lomen (1995) notes that these movements exposed “the mechanisms of patriarchal power, offering both an explicit and implicit critique of patriarchy [or hegemonic masculinity]” (p. 61). She adds that along with these movements, “the impact of social, political and economic change, the rise of the mass media and the declining physical and emotional health of men, allegedly prompted a serious contemporary crisis of masculinity among white, middle-class, heterosexual men in western societies” (Lemon, 1995. p. 61). Joseph H. Pleck (1981) analyses the issue of crisis in terms of male sex roles. He notes that with a series of changes (including social, political and economic factors) in society, the male sex role has undergone a strain, and thereby, many myths concerning masculinity are now obsolete (Pleck, 1981, p. 152-153). On the other hand, Myron Brenton (1966) refers to the patriarchal hangover where men are still “trapped by the beliefs and value systems of the past” (p. 39) and are “juggling the forms of the present against the substance of the past” (p. 39). He also notes that certain men are in a “masculinity trap” and “are forced to behave in stereotyped ways that have little relevance in contemporary times.” (Brenton, 1966. p. 39).

However, there are varied opinions within academia regarding the crisis of masculinity. Some scholars argue that, to a great extent, the “crisis” is created by the media, and men continue to enjoy power on many fronts (Lemon, 1992). Segal (1990) notes that the media has created an image of the “New man”, a changed figure who shares feelings and emotions readily and, at the same time, is less aggressive and

competitive. Rober Hoenke (1990) adds that such representations often turn out to be a negotiated hegemonic masculinity, which confirms with the dominant masculinity and also privileges heterosexualism. Sey Chassler (1989) argues that gender equality movements have brought considerable changes in women's lives, but they could not significantly change the positions of men. My understanding of the crisis of masculinity in this thesis embraces these nuances.

### **Critical Enquiries on Men and Masculinities: The Indian Context**

The studies on men and masculinities in India have a comparatively recent history. It has evolved into a significant academic field of enquiry within Gender Studies only in the 2000s. However, there are works that refer to men and masculinities in the Indian context since the 1980s. This section gives an overview of major scholarship on men and masculinities from India.

As mentioned, the discipline of Masculinity Studies rose to prominence in India in the 2000s. Besides organising some conferences, a series of academic works were also produced during this time (F. Osella & Osella, 2003; Radhakrishnan, 2006; Srivastava, 2001, 2004b, 2004a). This academic engagement with masculinities nationally also influenced the interest towards this new field of knowledge in Kerala (Radhakrishnan, 2006). The important works that refer to masculinity before this period were primarily based on the area of colonialism. Ashish Nandy (1983) studies colonialism as the exercise of the masculine over the feminine. He argues that colonialism worked in the

larger premise of the superiority of manliness (*Purusatva*) over womanliness (*Naritva*) and womanliness over femininity in man (*Klibatva*). Gandhi challenged this order, and Nandy (1983) argues that for Gandhi, “manliness and womanliness are equal, but the ability to transcend the man-woman dichotomy is superior to both” (p. 53), and for him, “the essence of femininity is superior to that of masculinity, which in turn is better than cowardice [*Kapurusatva*]” (p.53). Mrinalini Sinha (1995) notes that power was exercised during colonialism through “multiple axis”, which is “among or within the colonisers and the colonised as well as between colonisers and colonised” (p. 1). Critiquing the fixed categories while understanding colonialism, Sinha (1995) argues that there is a consistent need “to define and redefine the coloniser and the colonised” (p. 1). By analysing the two differently positioned elites, the “manly English man” and the “effeminate Bengali”, she argues that the power relations during the late 19<sup>th</sup> century can be understood through the lens of colonial masculinity, which “open up fresh possibilities by providing the basis to reconsider the relationship between anti-colonial and feminist politics” (Sinha, 1995, p. 181). Sudhir Kakar’s work (1989) on Indian sexuality is also significant for engaging with the idea of masculinities. Though it is criticised for perceiving sexualities in fixed categories, this work is significant for inculcating diverse cultural materials for an analysis of sexuality in India. Like Nandy, his works refer to Mahatma Gandhi, who experimented with sexuality in different forms, including extending it to the domains of his political activism. Kakar’s work is seminal in pointing out the crucial relationship between celibacy and masculinity in the Indian context. Kakar’s work also suggests that semen loss anxiety is deep in the perceptions of masculinity in India, and such studies

have extended to more dimensions later in the backdrop of rising Hindu nationalism, sports and others (Alter, 1992; Srivastava, 2001, 2004a).

Partha Chatterjee's work (1989) is influential in studying masculinity and colonial Indian history. Chatterjee traces the reordering of social life during this period, showing an analogous relationship between material/spiritual vs masculine/feminine. He adds how the nationalist discourse insisted that "no matter what the changes in the external conditions of life for women, they must not lose their essentially spiritual (i.e. feminine) virtues" (Chatterjee, 1989, p. 243). This redefining of the social roles during the mid-19<sup>th</sup> century was influential in the subsequent years, as he notes that the "new woman" during the time was subjected to a "new patriarchy" (Chatterjee, 1989, p. 244). M. S. S. Pandian's works (1995), especially in the context of South India, also point to this crucial link of the "masculine" with the "public".

Sanjay Srivastava's works are also critical in studying masculinities in India. In the study of men and masculinities in a culturally complex society like India, he warns not to categorise masculinity and patriarchy as synonymous with oppression. He notes that patriarchy is "a system of social organisation which is fundamentally organised around the idea of men's superiority to women" wherein "those who may not approximate to the male ideal (such as homosexual men) still stand to benefit from the privileges attached to being men" (Srivastava, 2014, p. 28). Srivastava (2014) further adds that "patriarchy makes men superior, whereas masculinity is the process of producing superior men", and this "making" and "producing" are fundamental to the study of masculinities in India as "they imply the historical and social nature of gender

identities” (p. 28). In India, the study of patriarchy has to be also done in private as well as public spheres where women are oppressed. Rohit K. Dasgupta and K. Moti Gokulsing (2014) note this shift that happened in India: “patriarchy in India as in the rest of the world has seen a shift from its private nature, where women have been oppressed by their husbands, fathers and other male members of their family, to public patriarchy where they are collectively subordinated by a society led by men” (p.7). They also elaborate on the problems of the studies on patriarchy in India. It is more often that studies on patriarchy view women as victims and men as the cause of all problems. Dasgupta and Gokulsing (2014) emphasise that it is not only women but men also face problems of patriarchy, “the patriarchy that systematically subjugates women also subjugates men who do not conform to the class/caste and sexual subjectivity of the mainstream” (p. 8). This shows that different factors have to be accounted for in the studies on men in India, including caste, religion, sexual identities, and others. It is also essential to look at how public and private institutions act as mediums to perpetrate the hegemonic version of masculinity, which oppresses not only women but also subaltern men.

There is also a series of works on the representation of men and women within the Hindutva nationalist framework (Banerjee, 2005; Kinnvall, 2019; A. Roy, 2006) and also the gendering of the nation wherein the “national territory” is often represented as a “vulnerable woman” that has to be protected by the “male subject citizen” (Ramaswamy, 2001, p. 109). The othering of Muslim masculinities within this framework has also been studied exhaustively (Amin, 2005; Anand, 2007). The economic liberalisation in the 1990s left the Indian market exposed to global capital and consumerism, which further influenced the lives of citizens significantly. Ritty Lukose (2005 & 2009) observes that

the gendered subjectivities during this era were shaped by their constant interaction with the logic of the market, which drew definitive notions of femininity and masculinity. Shannon Philip (2022) studies the “precariousness of young men’s attempts to be ‘modern’ in the face of great inequality and uncertainty in ‘new’ India” (p. 8). In his studies on the middle class and masculinity in India, Michiel Baas (2020) shows how young men build muscular bodies for upward social mobility. The studies on the Dalit men’s negotiations with upper caste masculinities following the increased opportunities post-liberalisation and the implications these have on Dalit and upper caste women are also significant (Anandhi et al., 2002).

## **Indian Men and the Narrative of Crisis**

The narrative of the “crisis” of masculinity in the Indian context has to be understood along with several other developments nationally (Chowdhry, 2005; Kulkarni, 2014). This is partially influenced by the rise of women on different fronts. The 2000s have seen several significant achievements by women<sup>2</sup> that received national and international attention. Many marginalised groups have also been demanding equal representation in

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<sup>2</sup> Notable among these achievements in India include a woman (Pratibha Patil) becoming the President of India for the first time in the country’s history (2012). Meira Kumar also became the first woman Speaker of Lok Sabha in 2009. Sonia Gandhi’s powerful presence in national politics as the Chairperson of UPA also has to be accounted for in this context. Besides achievements in politics, women also gained achievements in various fields like sports (Karnam Malleswary, Mary Com and others), literature (Arundhati Roy, Kiran Desai, Anita Nair and others) and others.

the socio-political spheres of India (Dasgupta & Gokulsing, 2014). This was also when the Indian Parliament and the Supreme Court of India passed many major landmark judgments supporting gender equality (Sooraj et al., 2023a).

The era also witnessed a rise in the number of violent crimes by men, especially against women and marginal communities (Desai, 2016). The gang rape of a paramedical student in Delhi in 2012 was one such notorious event that got considerable media attention nationally and globally (Atluri, 2013). The Feminist and Dalit scholarships also prompted a re-examination of the existing patriarchal structure of the Indian society that marginalised both women and subaltern male groups. The emerging interest in Ambedkar and the implementation of the Mandal Commission also influenced such studies, which further highlighted the need for understanding the whole problem of patriarchy at the intersection of caste and gender (Devika, 2012; Rege, 1998; Tharu & Niranjana, 1994). About the large-scale participation of women during the time of Mandal Commission agitation, Susie Tharu and Tejaswini Niranjana (1994) note that this movement resulted in the “masculinisation of the lower castes”, where “all the women are upper caste and all the lower castes are men” (p. 99). This also furthered a deeper understanding of the problems within patriarchy, which marginalised not only women but also men of subaltern positions. Many studies also reveal that upper caste Hindu men enjoy hegemonic positions in Indian society (Chakravarty, 1993). Arpita Chakraborty (2019) notes that the hegemonic masculinity in the Indian context has to be analysed at the intersection of religion and caste. She argues that “Brahmanical hegemonic masculinity maintains dominance through exercising symbolic violence over marginalised masculinities of homosexual men, lower caste men, and women” (Chakraborty, 2019, p.

41). Thus, there is a growing realisation that it is not just patriarchy but the Brahminical patriarchy that governs and controls the gender and social relations in India.

The insecurities of men nationally led to a rapid rise of men's movements and the formation of men's organisations across India post 1990s. *Purush Hakka Sanrakshan Samiti* in Maharashtra, Men's Welfare Trust in Delhi, National Coalition for Men in Calcutta and others are some organisations and NGOs working in this field<sup>3</sup>. They protested against the existing anti-dowry laws and worked to address the problems faced by husbands (Riti, 2003) in marriage and men in general<sup>4</sup>. There were several proposals against which these organisations fought, arguing that they were jeopardising the institution of marriage. Notable among them was the central government's plan to give salaries to homemakers ("Homemakers to Get Salaries According to New Govt Proposal," 2012), and in another case, the proposed "Marriage Laws (Amendment) Bill (2010)". During the General Election of 2014, the National Coalition for Men in Kolkata developed a "*Men-ifesto*" asking the government to push for a faster resolution of men's

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<sup>3</sup> The decade also saw intensifying activities of men's associations (including AKMA [All Kerala Mens Association], MRF [Men's Rights Foundation], PaSS [Purushavakasa Samrakshana Samithi] and others) in Kerala.

<sup>4</sup> See the website of "Men Welfare Trust", their scopes and aims <http://www.menwelfare.in/home/about-us/>. In another interesting case, an organization named "Save Family Foundation" filed a case against the advertisement where a woman was seen beating her husband because their bed was made of plywood. One of its organizers has reportedly said, "there a big hue and cry if a wife is hurt by her husband, but a blind eye is turned when there's a public display of a wife hitting her husband." See <https://www.dnaindia.com/india/report-men-s-groups-want-offensive-ad-off-air-1190494>

problems in India<sup>5</sup>. On the other hand, organisations like Save Indian Family Foundation aim to protect the Indian family and the rights of men. They have also introduced a mobile application and a telephone helpline for men who are in distress (“Helpline for Men Launched,” 2014). In raising awareness about men’s rights, Vaastav, a Mumbai-based NGO, created a Men’s Rights calendar, “Malendar”, where they celebrate Husband Appreciation Day, Men’s Day, Boys’ Day, and others.

All these show that there has been an increasing tension concerning the position of men within the family and in public life in India. Ratna Kapur (2012) notes that this is part of a larger problem of patriarchy that cannot accommodate women’s achievement in different spheres. Radhika Govinda (2020) notes that this “crisis of masculinity” forms the masculinity for many men. This crisis is partially fuelled by globalisation and its resultant effects on gender:

Everywhere around the world, globalisation is a deeply gendered process. As some areas are incorporated ... others become marginalised; as some are pulled into market economics, others are pushed out ... Millions of women from the developing world are now partially integrated into a shadow realm of service jobs (Kimmel, 2006, p. 219).

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<sup>5</sup> One of the interesting proposals of “*Men-ifesto*” is introducing Men’s courses in universities along with gender studies courses. See <https://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/Home/Lok-Sabha-Elections-2014/News/Mens-rights-activists-put-condition-for-their-vote/articleshow/33194416.cms>

India has also undergone such a change, where globalisation has offered greater mobility across sections, especially to women and men from marginalised sections. This has furthered the tensions in the predominantly (upper caste) male-occupied spaces. At the same time, the homogenisation of men as a single category is also problematic. Srivastava (2012) notes in his studies on gender-based violence in India that gender-power relationships govern the public spheres in India. He points out that the “dominant masculinity... stands in a relationship not just to femininity but *also to those ways of being male* that are seen to deviate from the ideal” (Srivastava, 2012, p. 1). This, he adds, is “manufactured out of discourses on sexual orientation (heteronormativity), class, race, conjugality, the ‘protective’ function of males and women as recipients of protection, and the place of emotions in the lives of men and women” (Srivastava, 2012, p. 1). This framework (akin to the idea of hegemonic masculinity of R. W. Connell) can be a better means to look into the problems both women and subaltern men face in the Indian context.

These studies on masculinities from Indian contexts reflect the need to account for the region’s specificities. It also shows that the theories from the West cannot be applied as such in studying masculinities in a culturally complex society like India. This cultural heterogeneity, however, also offers enormous possibilities for researchers on men and masculinities. The present thesis focuses on the study of masculinities from the South Indian state of Kerala, a region which has been of greater interest to researchers of gender across the globe since the 1970s. However, most of such scholarships were primarily based on women, and there has been a lesser focus on men, to which my current study contributes. The existing research on masculinities in Kerala will be discussed in the next

section, which particularly places the thesis within existing works in the area of Gender Studies while simultaneously locating the research gap.

### **III**

## **Contextualising the Region: Studies on Gender based on Kerala**

This section provides a literature review of studies on gender based on the region of Kerala. The existing research works on gender can be classified mainly under two major headings: one based on the Kerala Model of Development and the centrality of women's question within it, and the second is historical studies which trace the formation of modern gender relations against the backdrop of the advent of modernity.

### **Gender and the Kerala Model of Development**

Achievements in the human development indicators made Kerala gain global recognition in the 1970s and 80s. Popularly known as the “Kerala Model of Development”, the state became a topic of interest for developmental economists worldwide. This is evident from the Nobel-winning economist Amartya Sen's (along with Jean Drèze, 1997) observation about Kerala:

The average levels of literacy, life expectancy, infant mortality, etc. in India are enormously adverse compared with China, and yet in all these respects, Kerala does significantly better than China ... Kerala despite its

low-income level has achieved more than even some of the most admired high-growth economies such as South Korea (p. 7-8).

Kerala has achieved significant progress in demography, education, health, and other indicators while having a low per capita income (Rajan & Sreerupa, 2007). Scholars point out several reasons that contributed to this development. Sharmila Sreekumar (2009) majorly attributes it to four crucial factors, including 1) monarchies that initiated several socio-economic developments,<sup>6</sup> 2) the role played by Christian missionaries in the reform of education and health sectors, 3) social reform movements against caste oppression and for access to education and 4) mobilisation and the grassroots level work by the Left-leaning organisations (p.73).

The progress of women is considered one of the significant achievements of the Kerala Model. Women achieved considerable progress in different development indicators, including literacy, fertility rate, infant mortality rate, and others over the years. Robin Jeffrey (1992) remarks that Kerala women are seen as being “superior to the status of the larger category of women” (p. 4) and the patriarchy of Kerala “rests upon the agency of the “Kerala Model Woman” – the better educated, more healthy, less fertile, new elite woman” (Devika & Sukumar, 2006, p. 4472). However, the ordinary women

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<sup>6</sup> Jeffrey (1987) notes about the contribution of Travancore rulers in spreading education: “Travancore aimed to create a regulated system of vernacular, primary education-well-constructed buildings, regular hours, centralized curricula, travelling inspectors, standard examinations, and, perhaps most important of all, printed text- books...They also highlight the importance of the cultural base on which Kerala’s impressive literacy statistics later rose” (p. 150).

who head these success stories are often upper-class, upper caste subjects (Sreekumar, 2009). Such a homogenisation of the category of “woman” has its own problems as it strategically conceals the differences within such a group. It “ignores the differences in power, resources and interests among women”, and these “generalisations made in the name of the Malayali women pretend that the conditions of this iconic woman are the conditions of all women in Kerala” (Sreekumar, 2009, p. 10-12). K. R. Kavya Krishna (2014) notes that a part of this problem lies in the way gender has been historically studied in Kerala,

The reason for this partly lies in the shared methodological assumptions dominant in the social science, which is dominated by a form of economism and quantitative analysis which can be termed “developmentalist” in that they subscribe to the usual narratives of “social development” of Malayali society... it has in fact failed in achieving the well-being of women where the statistical data is the sole evaluative criterion exclude the possibility of accounting for the subjective and experiential dimensions of gender (p. 29).

The 1980s saw the rise of different feminist critiques challenging this account of “progress”. The development model of Kerala was criticised for concealing the problems faced by women and other marginalised groups in the state. Jenny Rowena and Christy Carmel (2006) note that the notion of Kerala as always progressive in comparison to other states is often used “to undercut and initiate most discussions on caste and gender” (p. 7). This neglect of gender and caste questions has multidimensional effects and has

unravelling more complex problems in Kerala society, especially after the 1990s. This rising criticism of the Kerala model is significant in the history of the state as Sharmila Sreekumar (2009) notes the “utopic self-construction of Kerala co-exists with the more dystopic visions” (p. 82). The opening up of the Indian market as a result of economic liberalisation brought in more visible changes and even the role of the government has been redefined in several ways. The new media technologies continue to influence people’s lives on many fronts. It has also led to “anxious debates about the changing norms of femininity and masculinity and the need to protect the Kerala Woman from corrupting influences” (Mokkil, 2010, p. 8).

The 1990s were marked by many significant developments in Kerala with regard to gender. Besides the active intervention of feminists who problematised the notion of Kerala as an ideal location for women, the political organisation of other marginalised groups like lesbians, sex workers, and so on also influenced the gender regimes of Kerala during the time. Following several cases of notorious sex scandals, the newspapers, magazines, and channels were directly or indirectly involved in women’s issues in Kerala. The frequent interventions of judicial and quasi-judicial bodies in these cases also played their part in sustaining the debates on gender in the public sphere (Radhakrishnan, 2006). These series of events unsettled the idea of Kerala as a region historically known for women’s progress. However, the official documents released by the ruling governments continue to portray Kerala as an ideal place for women compared to other states in India.

The late 1990s saw many marginalised groups within women as well as sexual minorities marking their presence in Kerala, which further unsettled the dominant models of femininity and masculinity. One of the foremost of such events was the organisation of sex workers. Furthermore, Nalini Jameela, a sex worker, published her autobiography *Oru Laingika Thozhilaliyude Aathmakadha* (The Autobiography of a Sex Worker) in 2005, narrating the unique experiences of a sex worker in Kerala<sup>7</sup>. This development, where a sex worker took on the status of author claiming political subjectivity and recognition to her profession, further unsettled the pretensions of sexual morality that prevailed within discourses of Kerala modernity and paved the way for public discussions on questions of sexuality. An organisation of sex workers called *Jwalamukhi* also became active, intervening in the socio-political milieu of Kerala. This challenged the existing frameworks within which women's movements in Kerala were understood and studied and necessitated a more inclusive arrangement. The growing visibility of sexual minorities—lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and others further complicated the existing binaries of men/women. *Sahayatrika*, started in 2002 in Thiruvananthapuram, became the first queer organisation in Kerala. The early 2000s also saw Dalits organising on many fronts, mainly through the land rights movements in Chengara and Kurichi. Dalit women also played their part in many of these struggles. There were also protests in other parts of Kerala, like the one led by the women's wing of Kerala Dalit Federation in

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<sup>7</sup> In one of the recent books of Nalini Jameela titled *Ente Aanungal* (My Men, 2018), she narrates her experience as a sex worker with different men. This book also shows how the category of “man” accounts for a vast difference in Kerala. She also notes that Kerala continues to remain stigmatic to the discussion of sex in comparison to neighbouring states like Karnataka.

Ashram Guest House, and the resistance by Chitrlekha, the Dalit auto driver in North Kerala (Raj, 2013). Dalit women have been organised in recent years, and the era has also seen interventions by influential Dalit feminists like Rekha Raj.

## **Advent of Modernity and the Configuration of Modern Gender Relations**

The status of women is central to the narrative of Kerala as a model state in India. It has its traces even before the official formation of the state in 1957. Women's rights were central to many social reform movements in Kerala in the 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> centuries. For example, women of (mostly) lower castes were not allowed to cover the upper part of their body in the erstwhile Travancore princely state, and finally, the revolt led by women of the Channar caste led to acquiring the right to cover their upper bodies (Santhosh, 2020). Besides granting women the right to cover their upper bodies, Travancore also became the first princely state in India to give free primary education to women. There were also movements within certain castes to improve the general condition of women (Velayudhan, 1991). However, these interactions with the modernist reforms occurred in tandem with the demarcation of the role of men and women through definitive gender boundaries (Devika, 2006a), and the state also played its part in furthering these gender-specific roles<sup>8</sup>. J. Devika and Mini Sukumar (2006) note,

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<sup>8</sup> The formation of modern heteropatriarchal family in Kerala is discussed in detail in the Chapter II.

Neither the attempted politicisation of the category of “women” by the first-generation feminists, nor the leftist mobilisation of working-class women in trade unions seriously challenged modern gender ideology. It is, therefore, hardly surprising that the dominant construction of womanhood in Kerala has been wholly agreeable to state interventions in the name of social welfare and the general good, while remaining mostly inimical to any radical politicisation (p. 4471-4472).

Ratheesh Radhakrishnan (2006) argues that the reform movements in the early twentieth century placed the question of women at the forefront of their negotiation with modernity and demarcated the notion of sexual difference, which influenced the later history of Kerala. In this framework, women embody qualities including “nurturing, patience and kindness” while simultaneously performing domestic duties and taking “vocations like teaching and nursing which were seen as an extension of their domestic duties” (Radhakrishnan, 2006, p. 13). On the other hand, men are connected to the “public life” and the “binaries such as cultural/material or emotional/rational were mobilised in populating the binary woman/man” (Radhakrishnan, 2006, p. 13).

The post-independence period witnessed significant transformations in Kerala’s socio-political milieu. A significant development during this time was the active intervention of the communist parties and the circulation of Marxist ideologies. Kerala also attracted global attention for being the first state to elect a communist party democratically, and E. M. S. Namboothirippad, a communist leader, was elected as the state’s chief minister in 1957. However, the strengthening of the communist parties in

Kerala has had other important ramifications. The focus on class and the marginalisation of the questions of gender and caste is one such major development (Devika, 2010a). The Left has a considerable influence on Kerala society. Though there is an active presence of other major political parties like Congress, many developmental narratives of the 1970s attribute the massive developmental and social growth to the legacy of the Left (Mokkil, 2019).

The formation of the modern public sphere through print influences diverse spheres, including gender relations. The role of the print in shaping the public sphere is underscored by several scholars, including Jürgen Habermas and Benedict Anderson. Habermas (1989) observes that the press is the “public sphere’s preeminent institution” (p. 181), while Anderson (1983) notes that without print, sentiments and practices of nationhood cannot grow (p. 47). Kerala also has a great legacy of print. The constitution of Kerala’s public was largely influenced by the rise in the number of literary works and newspapers in the twentieth century. Govindan Parayil (2000) observes that Kerala has the largest per-capita newspaper and magazine circulation in India, and it has a thriving literary and film culture. Jeffrey notes that Kerala has been “India’s most newspaper-consuming state over the past 200 years” (Jeffrey, 2009, p. 465). From 2,46,000 copies a day in 1957 (with a penetration of 16 dailies for every 1000 people), it grew to 688,000 per day, with circulation and penetration growing substantially in the next decade. With over 3 million copies sold a day in 2001, Jeffrey observes that “the social turbulence of the twentieth century happened in a ‘public sphere’, which was made possible partly because of the spread of print, publishing, and newspapers” (Jeffrey, 2009, p. 479-485).

Such an influence of print media has certain other effects, and the most notable among them is its role in standardising the Malayalam language and democratising the reading practice. This is highlighted by scholars like E. V. Ramakrishnan (2000). Ramakrishnan (2000) argues that print engendered the democratisation of reading, especially in reaching to more people from diverse backgrounds (p. 486-494). This role of the print medium in making Kerala a political unit is pivotal. Radhakrishnan (2006) observes, “Print in Kerala at once made possible a spatially organised public and a narratively constituted one” (p. 68). The growth of libraries and reading rooms across Kerala also accompanied the growth of the publishing industry. In his studies of rural libraries of the state, K. S. Ranjith (2004) finds that from 1955 to 1975, the number of libraries under the Kerala State Library Council rose from 1747 to 4280. Dilip Menon (1994) notes that the culture of reading rooms started before independence and is considered a significant source of information dissemination and social gathering,

The growing number of schools and the rise in literacy found expression in the number of reading rooms that were established both in the countryside and in the towns. Each caste, in its attempts to organise associations, built reading rooms alongside their own temples to allow their caste fellows access to both knowledge and God (p. 145).

These reading rooms were not just places for people to read but many of them were later turned into clubs, theatre clubs, associations, and others. They became spaces for promoting several cultural activities, such as performing dramas, conducting political

discussions, and others. M. Bavakutty (1982) remarks that the “peculiar feature of these public libraries which cannot perhaps be seen anywhere else is that they are functioning as cultural centres of the community at large” (p. 254). It has to be noted that alongside print, theatre and cinema also played a major role in shaping the public in Kerala. Dramas of the early 20<sup>th</sup> century, mainly by dramatists like V.T. Bhattathirippad, Lalithambika Antharjanam, Thoppil Bhasi, and others, played a considerable role in women’s movements and other caste reform movements. These plays “had a strong ideology that stood in favour of gender equity and initiated a cross-fertilisation of theatre literature and social restructuring” (Divya, 2017, p. 217). Dramas including V. T. Bhattathirippad’s *Adukkalayil Ninnun Arangathekku* (From the Kitchen to the Scene of Action, 1929), M. R. Bhattathirippad’s *Marakudaykullile Mahanarakam* (The Hell Behind the Umbrella, 1930), Thoppil Bhasi’s *Ningalenne Communistakki* (You Made Me a Communist, 1952) and others belong to this category. Some early Malayalam films also played their part by focusing on social issues through the genre of social realism (J. Joseph, 2013).

Along with the reading rooms, spaces like tea shops also played their role in shaping the Kerala public. Menon notes that tea shops caused people to join together regardless of caste (Menon, 1994, p. 147). The discussions in such spaces were often political, which helped significantly in forming a social consciousness among the people of the region. Visitors to the tea shops included people from all walks of life, and this emerged as a cosmopolitan social space that transcended caste and religion (Harikrishnan, 2020b, 2022).

While diverse factors played their role in shaping the public sphere of Kerala, this thesis also attempts to investigate the problems in the constitution of such spaces in Kerala, especially in relation to gender. S. Harikrishnan notes that “the establishment of libraries and reading rooms ushered in a new space in the modern public sphere that eventually shaped (mostly male) mini-publics” (Harikrishnan, 2020a, p. 91). Thus, the public sphere in Kerala also has to be understood as a predominantly male-dominated space, with women and other subaltern groups occupying a marginalised position. One of the notable studies in this direction was done by Devika (2013) with regard to Malayalam literature. She denotes the dominance of men in Malayalam literary circles by using the term “homoaesthetic circles”. According to her, this is the “informal but hierarchical intellectual-cultural networks of literary communication in which (almost exclusively) male critics, authors, readers, publishers and others participate” (Devika, 2013, p. 7-11). She notes that this is part of reformist patriarchy, which configured the women’s liberation project of Malayali Modernity (Devika, 2013). Thus, it is crucial to understand the public sphere of Kerala as predominantly patriarchal, where women and subaltern masculinities are marginalised. Studies on social events and cultural mediums like cinema, literature, and others point to this fundamental feature of the Kerala public sphere.

### **Finding the Research Gap: Existing works in Masculinity Studies in the Context of Kerala**

It is to be noted that the research on gender in Kerala has been mainly confined to studies on women, and there is less enquiry with regard to men in Kerala, especially regarding

the heterogeneity within the category of men. The primary question to be addressed is whether all men in Kerala enjoy equal power. It is in this context that I explore the notion of masculinity and its plurality in my project. There are very few studies concerning this aspect of masculinities in Kerala and my thesis attempts to fill this void in the studies on gender in Kerala. The thesis examines how certain masculinities are marginalised while some others are hegemonised in Kerala. A study of masculinities is also crucial because a more nuanced understanding of masculinities is needed to discern the problems women<sup>9</sup>, as well as marginalised communities, face in Kerala.

Different developments influenced the studies on men in Kerala after 1990. With the expansion of feminist movements, the rise of LGBTQI+ communities and also due to several other socio-economic causes, a perceived crisis is apparent among men in Kerala (Radhakrishnan, 2006). There is a growing perception that, in a society like Kerala, there are crises/challenges to men in many spheres influenced by the socio-economic developments after liberalisation and also due to the rise of gender equality movements (C. Osella & Osella, 2006; Pillai, 2013; Radhakrishnan, 2006). However, this cannot be easily concluded as the complete break of patriarchal power in Kerala's domestic and public spheres. Ratheesh Radhakrishnan's "Masculinity and the Structuring of the Public Domain in Kerala: A History of the Contemporary" (2006), one of the significant studies on masculinities in Kerala, looks at how the public domain in Kerala is constituted in

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<sup>9</sup> For example, Kerala ranks top in the violence against women. Nearly 14000 cases of crime against women were registered in 2018. The state's history of the development of Dalit and tribal groups is also not on par with many other states in India. There are several reports about the grim situation of tribals, especially in areas like Attappadi in the Palakkad district of Kerala.

relation to masculinity. He argues that the discourse of masculinity is cardinal in understanding the modernity in Kerala. Examining the sexual harassment case of P. E. Usha<sup>10</sup>, he notes that several discourses of masculinity “co-exist in producing a larger discourse of masculinity” (Radhakrishnan, 2006, p. 299) in Kerala. By critiquing the way hegemonic and non-hegemonic masculinities are considered “stable and unchanging” (p. 301) in the state, he argues that masculinity and several “identity markers” (like class, caste and sexual orientation) are constituted at the “moment of their performance” (p. 301). Caroline and Filippo Osellas’ works are also significant in studies on the masculinities of the region. According to them, the compulsory heterosexuality garnered mainly through the institution of marriage is still a prevalent feature of society and through which the “valorisation of the male earning and the repudiation or ambivalence about female earning” (C. Osella & Osella, 2006, p. 1) is perpetuated. They further note that the 20<sup>th</sup> century is noted for the establishment of a “new hegemonic ideal family” with the “man of substance- the man with financial resources, earning power, a network of dependents and crucially a wife and children” (C. Osella & Osella, 2006, p. 23) at its centre. They underscore that the delinking of sexuality from gendering is nearly impossible in the Kerala context. Nivedita Menon (2005) also points out that the “normalisation of heterosexuality” is at the core of patriarchy and the “heterosexual patriarchal family is key to maintaining both nation and community” (p. 39).

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<sup>10</sup> P. E. Usha, an employee of the University of Calicut, was sexually harassed in a moving bus by Ramesan, a contractual employee of the Regional Engineering College on 29 December 1999. This event received much media attention during the time.

As discussed in the previous section, Kerala witnessed significant transformations on the social and political fronts in the 1990s. The intensification of feminist activities and political organisation of marginalised communities like Dalits, sex workers, lesbians, and others posed a challenge to the patriarchal heterosexual masculinities (Devika & Sukumar, 2006; Raj, 2013). They challenged the hetero-patriarchal order, simultaneously revealing the systemic marginalisation of the women and subaltern communities of Kerala society. Besides this, the globalisation-induced consumption and the more active engagement of women and other minorities in the public sphere intensified men's anxieties during this period (C. Osella & Osella, 2006). However, the heterosexual family as a social institution continued to play a significant role while the patriarchal male faced new challenges. The falling fertility rate in Kerala and the transition to small families were also accompanied by a considerable focus on children's welfare (Devika, 2002). Liberalisation induced consumption regimes and the increased expense on children, mainly due to the rapid spread of private education, have raised various challenges to families and patriarchal masculinities in Kerala since 1990. It is also amidst such important transitions that studies on men and masculinities received increasing attention.

### **Study of Men and Masculinities in Kerala: The Beginnings and Later Developments in the Scholarship**

Predominantly studied within the domains of women and gender studies, masculinity began to be studied actively in the 2000s in Kerala. Radhakrishnan (2006) elaborates on the earlier history of the study of masculinities in Kerala. He notes that the workshop organised by an NGO called Centre for Social Education (between 2003-05) and the

publication of *Aankuttikalkkoru Kaipusthakam* (A Handbook for Boys) by Sakhi Women's Resource Centre based in Thiruvananthapuram in 2005 were significant in the history of studies on masculinity in Kerala. *Pachakuthira*, a monthly magazine in Malayalam under the aegis of DC Books, also published a special issue on masculinity in 2004. The issue, one of the earliest major academic interventions concerning masculinity, included articles on films, matriliney, and allied areas. *Malayala Manorama* also came up with its annual publication, *Sreeman*, primarily targeting the men in Kerala. Masculinity was gradually gaining ground within academia and outside of it during this period as Radhakrishnan (2006) notes, "masculinity has come to be recognised as a metaphor to discuss a variety of issues from the aggressive foreign policy of the United States in relation to Iraq, to the jokes around the new political party which calls itself DIC [K]" (p. 21).

It is interesting to note that several of the academic works in the earlier phases were based on films. Muraleedharan Tharayil (2005) does a historical study of male desires in Malayalam films. In the larger backdrop of queer theories, he notes the evolution of the male body as an "object of visual pleasure and desire" (p. 87) in Malayalam films in the 1970s with the arrival of Kamal Haasan and later Jayan. This further reached a significant stage in the 1990s with the frequent portrayal of the "physical intimacy of two males" by replacing the heterosexual figures (Tharayil, 2005, p. 89). Rowena (2002) studies the marginality of subaltern male bodies in the "laughter" films of Malayalam. She argues that "laughter films" also served the purpose of re-masculinising Malayalam cinema and culture, which was in a state of crisis in the post-80s. This was done by "reasserting hegemonic masculinities and by circulating normative

aggressive masculine values onto the cultural scene, which crucially targeted non-hegemonic men, and which also directed their collective desires towards the upper caste self” (Rowena, 2002, p. 2). K. Gopinathan (2004) and C. S. Venkiteswaran (2004) study the dimensions of masculinity in the notable male stars in Malayalam. Their works highlight the inseparable link between masculinity and stardom in Malayalam cinema, which developed significantly in the 1990s, especially following the popularity of the feudal-upper caste characters of Mammooty and Mohanlal. Osellas’ (2004) study on the stardom of Mohanlal and Mammooty and their influence on young men in Kerala is also a notable work in this regard. They note that Malayali fans (or *payyans*) “take and exchange the characteristics” of the film heroes played by these actors “reproducing and newly fashioning over each generation and with each shift in masculine style what it means to be a Malayali man, negotiating the demands of modernity and finding a way to move through the various arenas—family, work, leisure—around him” (C. Osella & Osella, 2004, p. 258).

There were also attempts to study masculinity against the larger backdrop of the developments in Kerala in the last century. Devika (2002) studies how men rose to prominence within families in the 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> centuries, along with the formation of the modern family in Kerala. Terming these developments as “domestication”, she notes that this period saw individuals focusing more on their immediate families, which also solidified the modern gender relations leading to the evolution of the domestic domain “as responsible father/householder or mother/homemaker, engaged primarily in the individualising of their children” (Devika, 2002, p. 58). Praveena Kodoth (2001, 2004a, 2004b) examines fatherhood in the matrilineal system, practised mainly by the Nair

community in earlier centuries. By studying the reforms in matriliney in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century, she argues that the “father as a distinct masculine identity was premised on the reconstitution of norms of female sexuality and male conjugal responsibility, within a framework of closely wrought patriarchal marriage” (Kodoth, 2004a, p. 4).

The 2010s was a major turning point in the study of masculinities as heteropatriarchal masculinity faced challenges from diverse spheres during this time. The rise of the queer movement in Kerala challenged the binaries of male/female, which revealed the complexities of gender and sexual identities (Tharayil, 2014). The political organisation of queer masculinities, including the gay, transman, and others, further challenged the dominant heteropatriarchal masculinity (Sooraj & Krishna, 2024). There is also a rising criticism of the question of caste within the framework of the progressive movements, which confined Dalits to governmental categories and the historical role of the Left in the rise of modern patriarchy in Kerala is also highlighted (Devika, 2010a). The problems of the women’s welfare schemes in Kerala were also studied actively. While assuring income to a large section of women in Kerala, these schemes confined women to the limits of the conjugal home (Devika & Thampi, 2007). Similarly, there are also studies on the role of migration to the Gulf countries in consolidating patriarchy in modern Kerala in the 1970s (Zachariah & Rajan, 2002).

The 2010s witnessed various protests led by women, which also unsettled heteropatriarchy in several ways (Devika, 2021; Kamath & Ramanathan, 2017; P. Menon, 2020). The Sabarimala women’s entry protest was one of the major landmark events wherein not only women but also Dalit masculinities challenged the caste

patriarchy in Kerala (Kumari, 2019). However, the rise of movements like “Ready to Wait”, wherein the women of privileged origins came in support of caste patriarchy, unravelled the problems in women’s welfare in Kerala. In this trans-national protest, mostly held online, these women argued against the menstruating age women’s entry into Sabarimala, claiming that they were ready to wait till they attained the age of 50 to undertake a pilgrimage to Sabarimala (Devika, 2020). Holly M. Hapke (2013) notes the increasing “social tensions” in Kerala with the economic and cultural changes that resulted in “increased violence and attempts to reassert traditional values” (p. 24). Devika (2019) argues that patriarchy in contemporary Kerala is “shaped by pre-existing forms and practices and through a complex intertwining of local, national and global processes”. Devika (2018) also observes that Masculinity Studies is emerging as a major field of enquiry within academia in contemporary Kerala. She notes,

The question of men “doing” feminism seems to be as passé in Kerala as it is in the Anglo-American context, but that does not mean that embodied men have no role to play. The growth of Masculinity Studies as a field in Malayalam, and the rejection of gender and sexual binaries, open new, non-hierarchical possibilities. They reject the reformist project, but continue to point to feminism as an important resource and ally in men’s struggle against pervasive masculinisms that oppress men as well (Devika, 2018, p. 118).

The film as a medium continues to be a site for studies on masculinity in Kerala. The cinematic representation of masculinity and stardom has undergone a significant shift

with the advent of New Generation films in the 2010s (Kadavath, 2017; Manuel, 2012; Shaji, 2020). Actors like Fahadh Faasil represent a shift in the portrayal of masculinity and stardom in Malayalam, and he gained national and international attention through the representation of vulnerable male characters (Sooraj et al., 2023b). Venkiteswaran (2013) argues that the shift in representation— “the erosion of masculinity and obsession with castration”—in these films is also in tandem with the uncertainties in the political economy influenced by the speculative global economy that challenges the dominance of men within the family and outside. Though the representation of masculinity in the films of Mohanlal and Mammooty has undergone a shift, especially after the arrival of “New Generation” films in Malayalam, their stardom and masculinity continue to attract academic and critical interest (S. Gopinath, 2021; Karinkurayil, 2017; Pillai, 2020a). The attack on a famous female actress in Kochi and the subsequent formation of the Women in Cinema Collective (WCC) placed the star and male hegemony in the Malayalam film industry under greater scrutiny (Mannil, 2020; T. S. Nair, 2017). The formation of WCC following the attack was a significant moment not only in the history of films but also that of the state of Kerala, as Bindu Menon Mannil (2020) notes that WCC “moves across the porous boundaries of a new social movement, workers collective and an autonomous women’s group” (p. 191). A. C. Sreehari (2014) studies the problems in the representation of the hegemonic common man image that is perpetuated through films. By closely studying the popular art films in Malayalam, he underscores the multiplicity in the conception of man in Kerala. There are also studies on the representation of subaltern masculinities, including Dalits in Malayalam cinema (Johny, 2019a; S. K. Parayil, 2014). The rise of Dalit male actors, including Kalabhavan Mani, Vinayakan, and others, has

also been studied (Edachira, 2022; Venkiteswaran, 2016). Venkiteswaran (2016) notes that the rise of Kalabhavan Mani is an uncommon phenomenon in the cinematic world of Malayalam, dominated by upper caste ethos.

There are also other significant studies concerning masculinity in Kerala in recent times. Yacob Thomas's works are notable among these. Besides a series of articles on masculinity and films, his works also deal with the historical representation of masculinity in Malayalam literature, the first of such kind of work in Malayalam (Y. Thomas, 2011b, 2019, 2022). Veena Mani and Mathangi Krishnamurthy (2021) study the relationship between the regional football culture and masculinities in the Malabar region of Kerala. Muhammadali P. Kasim's (2021) works on Mappila masculinities are also significant in this context. There are also studies on queer masculinities (K. Kumar, 2023; A. Kuriakose, 2018) and men's engagement in classical dance forms of Kerala (Banerjee, 2021; Krishna, 2016). Malayalam magazines have also come up with issues with an academic focus on masculinities, a recent example being *Sanghaditha* (a magazine published by the Anveshi, a women's organisation in Kerala), which published an issue on masculinity in August 2019.

## IV

### **Contextualising the Thesis: Tensions in the Heteropatriarchal Gender Regimes in Kerala, 2010 and After**

While there were significant changes in the gender regimes in Kerala in the 1990s, the thesis argues that this reached a crucial stage in the late 2000s. By placing this study

within the framework of the developments in the 2010s, it is argued that the discourses around heteropatriarchal masculinity are now structured around its challenges. However, the current study also considers this moment as a conjuncture as many other developments during the period reconfigure patriarchal masculinity in multiple forms, marginalising the question of women and other subaltern groups. Here, I attempt to trace some of the major events in the last decade that marked this period as significant in the history of gender in Kerala. Amongst them, an important one was the rise of queer groups in Kerala. The increasing visibility of queer communities in Kerala challenged the rigid gender binaries in the state and necessitated an inclusive gender order.

A notable event in the history of queer movements in Kerala was the initiation of the “Queer Pride March” in 2010. Besides the annual queer pride marches that have been held every year, the decade also saw the formation of several queer organisations. This included Queerala, Queerhythm, GAMA (Gay Malayali Association), and others. Alternative governments also introduced queer-friendly legislations and policies (Kurian & Manoj, 2021). This includes the establishment of transgender schools in Kochi, support for undergoing free sex reassignment surgeries, a gender park in Kozhikode, and so on. Kerala also became the first state in India to implement a state policy for transgenders in 2015 (Department of Social Justice, 2015). More groups within the LGBTQI+ community also came out actively during this period, and many formed their own organisations, which include Gay Malayali Association (GAMA, 2021), Malayali

Transmen Association (MATA, 2019), and others.<sup>11</sup> The queer communities in Kerala also started becoming sensitive to the complexity of caste and religion, which further marginalised many of them.

There were also many protests against the heteropatriarchal control of women's sexuality in Kerala, which further revealed the complex problems women and other minorities face in Kerala. The Kiss of Love (2014) was the most notable of such events. Organised against the rampant moral policing cases in the state, the protesters publicly kissed and hugged each other. Movements like the Kiss of Love (2014) uncovered the inherent problems in Kerala's social milieu as Devika (2021) notes, "the emphasis on touch in Kiss Protests—the insistence on its heterogeneity, the refusal of the idea that all loving touch must be asexual in public—is a clear defiance of the naturalised gender regime (which reinforces secularised caste) at the core of Kerala's experience of modernity" (p. 140). Following the Kiss of Love, several such protests were organised in Kerala, including the "Hurray Menses" (*Aarrpo Aarthavam*, 2019), "Happy to Bleed" (2015), and others.

The protest led by women workers in Kannan Devan Hills Plantation in Munnar (2015), which led to the formation of the Pembilai Orumai Thottam Thozhilali Union, was also a critical juncture in the contemporary history of Kerala. This massive women-only protest was a landmark moment in Kerala's history for challenging not only the powerful management of the tea plantation but also for not allowing male-dominated

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<sup>11</sup> A detailed discussion is done in the Chapter 4

party unions (including the dominant Left unions) to cooperate with the protest. This event was marked as a “precursor for a ‘new unionism’ in India” (Kamath & Ramanathan, 2017, p. 11). The protest of a group of nuns in 2018 accusing a Bishop of the Catholic church of sexual harassment is another notable event during the decade. It challenged the claims of asexuality and the moral supremacy of the religious structures of the state. Women were also actively engaged in environmental protests during the period (Binoy, 2014).

The Malayalam film industry also underwent major transitions in the 2010s. Besides rising resentments against the star and male domination within the industry, the period also saw the formation of the Women in Cinema Collective (WCC, 2017). This organisation for women working in the Malayalam film industry was formed following an attack against a noted female actress in Kochi. WCC actively campaigned for a safe and professional workplace for women in the Malayalam film industry and challenged the current order, which is “illiberal, antiwomen, and collusive...guided by highly informal, personalised, and arbitrary arrangements that are intricately intertwined with dubious channels of capital mobilisation and deployment” (Nair, 2017, p. 15). There have also been significant shifts in terms of the content in Malayalam cinema with the coming of “New Generation” films in Malayalam in the 2010s. The stardom, masculinity and heroism in Malayalam cinema have also undergone major transformations during the era (Kadavath, 2017; Manuel, 2012).

Sabarimala Women’s entry protest was another influential event that marked this decade, affecting the socio-political lives of Malayalis in significant ways. The violent

protest against the menstruating age women's entry into Sabarimala pointed to persistent modes of subjugation of women in contemporary Kerala at the intersections of caste and religion (S. Thomas, 2019). The intervention of Dalit groups like the Mala Araya and the Pulaya communities further problematised the whole issue around Sabarimala, revealing the caste patriarchal control on the public and private lives in Kerala. It is to be noted that Sabarimala also provided a context for an active political organisation of several marginalised groups, including women, Dalits, and others. This series of events following the Supreme Court verdict led to the entry of two women—Bindu Ammini and Kanaka Durga—into Sabarimala temple on 2<sup>nd</sup> January 2019, a significant moment in the history of contemporary Kerala. The women's entry into Sabarimala was also the culmination of decades long legal disputes around Sabarimala. When the alternative governments failed to grant the right of a large section of women to undertake the pilgrimage in Sabarimala, the Supreme Court's intervention granted it, pointing out that menstruation is a biological process and cannot be a ground for discrimination against women (*Indian Young Lawyers Association vs The State of Kerala* on 28 September, 2018, Civil Original Jurisdiction Writ Petition [Civil] No. 373 of 2006, 2018). Besides Sabarimala, several other legal interventions also considerably influenced the gender regimes in Kerala in the 2010s, creating tensions in the heteropatriarchal order of the state. This includes removing sections in the Indian Penal Code that criminalised homosexuality (Section 377) and adultery (Section 497), banning the Triple Talaq (instant divorce practised in Islam), and others. The Kerala High Court ruling that marital rape is a ground for divorce is another significant intervention during the time (“*Marital Rape a Valid Ground for Divorce: Kerala HC,*” 2021).

Another major factor that played a role in shaping the contemporary Kerala public is the rise of internet media. The growth of the internet and the rapid leap in the number of mobile users in the last decades also impacted this trend. Social media platforms like X (formerly Twitter), Facebook, Instagram, and others, as well as messenger platforms like WhatsApp, significantly influence the political fabric of contemporary Kerala. The influence of such platforms is now dominant to the extent that it can modify the policies of the government and other major stakeholders. In his book *Political Internet: State and Politics in The Age of Social Media* (2017), Biju P. R. notes the role of the internet and internet media in shaping the present politics, which is crucial in the context of Kerala:

Everything is in internet – economy, culture, history, geography and sensory perception. Nothing is free from its reach ... Switching to mobile phones is not just how we communicate with each other; it is also how politically engaging are we ... young people often identify it with a new cultural metaphor. People think they were born to use it and speak through it. They would feel alienated if they are not able to use it. Using social media means digital citizenship, just like an electoral identity card in a constitutional democracy (p. 4-123).

Several major protests in Kerala, including the Kiss of Love (2014) and Sabarimala women's entry (2018), saw active interventions through internet based media platforms, including social media. While Kerala remains predominantly patriarchal, there are stronger reactions through social media against moral policing, police vigilantism, and

government oppression especially voiced by subaltern groups like women, queer communities and similar groups.

While these developments challenged the heteropatriarchy in Kerala on multiple levels, the era also saw its reinstation in several other ways. Though feminist and women's associations supported the Supreme Court verdict allowing menstruating age women's entry into Sabarimala, Kerala witnessed violent protests by several religious and caste groups against the apex court verdict. This also included the attacks on activists and feminists who supported the women's entry into Sabarimala. Kanaka Durga and Bindu Ammini, who were the first women to enter the Sabarimala temple after the verdict, were attacked on several occasions. There were also several attacks on queer communities during the last decade, and the frequent suicides of queer individuals remain a persistent problem in the community (Tharayil, 2014).

Certain events in the last decade also brought to the forefront the persistent issues regarding caste and gender in Kerala. The mob lynching of Madhu (2018), a tribal man in Attappadi, was one such event marking the marginality of subaltern men in contemporary Kerala. Though Kerala is acclaimed for its achievements in human development, the deprived conditions of tribal communities in Kerala were again brought to the public debate with the case of Madhu. The killing of Kevin, a Dalit Christian man (2018), for marrying an upper-class Christian woman also revealed the continuing caste tensions in Kerala society across all religious denominations. Noting this as an instance of "honour killing", the High Court of Kerala gave double life sentences to the murderers, including Neenu's brother ("Kevin's Murder is 'Honour' Killing, Says Kerala Court," 2019). The

killing of Madhu and Kevin reveals the problems faced by men from marginalised communities in Kerala, who are oppressed due to their caste identities. On the other hand, women across caste and religious denominations continue to face problems in the heteropatriarchal order in their domestic and public lives. Increasing cases of dowry deaths (which include the cases of Vismaya<sup>12</sup> and Uthra<sup>13</sup> that received nation wide attention), including those of highly educated women, reveal the persisting problems women face in a heteropatriarchal society like Kerala. These events also reveal the problems of the modern caste gender order in Kerala perpetuated mainly through institutions like family and marriage.

There were also instances in Kerala in the 2010s where women challenged the foundations of heteropatriarchal familial power, intersecting with questions of religion. Two such cases are of Hadiya (formerly a Hindu woman named Akhila Asokan) and Anupama Chandran. In the first case, the Supreme Court of India affirmed Hadiya's decision to choose another religion and to marry a Muslim man of her choice under Article 21 of the Indian constitution (M. Menon, 2021; Rajagopal, 2021). In the second case, an unmarried couple, Anupama Chandran and Ajit Kumar, claimed the right to their one-year-old male child through the court of law. The infant was forcefully taken away from the mother to protect the family's "honour" and sent for adoption by Anupama's

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<sup>12</sup> For more details visit <https://www.thenewsminute.com/kerala/kiran-drove-vismaya-suicide-over-car-he-got-dowry-timeline-his-atrocities-164284>

<sup>13</sup> In this case, Uthra was killed by snake bite inflicted by her husband. For details visit <https://www.thehindu.com/news/national/kerala/uthara-murder-case-man-who-killed-his-wife-with-cobra-gets-double-life-sentence-17-years-prison/article36979583.ece>

parents as the father of the child belonged to another caste/religion. Besides unsettling the patriarchal control of women's sexuality, this case also informs the newer ways the institution of family and its patriarchal control are being challenged and reinvented in Kerala. Heteropatriarchy operates through consensus regarding gender roles and attributes. When the consensus is questioned, tensions in the gender regimes arise. The thesis analyses precisely these tensions.

A closer analysis of these events shows that while the structures of caste heteropatriarchal power structures were challenged, they are being reinstated in other ways in Kerala. At these interstices, I place my project and through the select events, try to analyse the tensions in heteropatriarchy in the contemporary period. It is argued that the events selected for this project disrupt the monolithic categorisation of men in Kerala, which typically does not account for the marginality and diversity of masculinities in the region. It interrogates how certain masculinities in Kerala are hegemonic, having a domineering presence in the socio-cultural lives in contemporary Kerala and how it creates marginal masculinities. Linked to the privileged caste origins as well as with the heterosexual families, these men subjugate not only women but also subordinate masculinities. The thesis accounts for these complexities in the study of masculinities to unravel the systems of power that marginalise women and subaltern masculinities.

## **Chapterisation**

The first/current chapter gives an introduction to the thesis, elaborating on the theoretical and methodological approaches that informed this study. It also provides a detailed literature review of works on masculinities from the Western and Indian contexts and

specifically reviewed works in Gender Studies in the context of Kerala to locate the study within its regional specificity and to identify the research gap. This chapter also engages with the research questions this project addresses: Is there a fracture in the heteropatriarchal consensus regarding gender regimes in contemporary Kerala? If so, what are the socio-cultural factors that necessitated this change? What are the tensions in heteropatriarchy and heteropatriarchal families in contemporary Kerala as revealed by the select events? Do the select events reveal challenges to the hegemonic masculine order in the region? How does the increased representational visibility of marginalised and subordinate masculinities question the existing gender order in the region? The first chapter ends with the chapterisation of the thesis.

The second chapter of the thesis, titled “Male Householder, Caste Patriarchy and Family: Locating Masculinities in the Sabarimala Women’s Entry Protests (2018)”, is centred on the Supreme Court of India verdict (2018) allowing women of menstruating age to enter the Sabarimala Temple in Kerala. Entry of menstruating age women into a male homosocial pilgrimage space like Sabarimala, which is also studied as a symbol of heteropatriarchal welfare in Kerala, the chapter argues, has created a moment of crisis in the ostensible heteropatriarchal consensus regarding the existing gender order of the state. Positing the apex court verdict as a significant event that reconfigured the understanding of gender regimes in contemporary Kerala, it tracks the multiple discourses on masculinities after the verdict and their stance concerning patriarchal structures and institutions in Kerala. The first section of the chapter extends existing research work, specifically of Osellas (2003), which argues that the Sabarimala pilgrimage is a cultural/religious practice undertaken by men in relation to their role as a patriarchal male

holder for the welfare of the family. This existing argument is integrated into the study by historically tracing the Malayalam films centred on the Sabarimala pilgrimage to establish how this patriarchal role of men in Kerala changes during different historical periods. While it tracks films from the 1960s to the contemporary period, it marks the film *The Great Indian Kitchen* (2021), released after the Supreme Court verdict, as making a break or rupture in the role of the male householder in relation to the Sabarimala pilgrimage. The second section (through a review of existing works) further links this relationship between male householder/heteropatriarchal family welfare and homosocial male pilgrimage to Sabarimala to the question of the formation of modern engendered caste based conjugal families in the backdrop of social reform movements in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century Kerala. The first two sections connect the male householder, heteropatriarchal family and concerns of masculinity and its relation to the pilgrimage to provide a base for the third section, which examines the formation of multiple masculine positions regarding women's entry that emerged after the apex court verdict and the gender concerns that inform each position. It traces conservative, liberal and Dalit masculine positions regarding the issue and argues how Dalit masculinities' support of women's entry at the intersection of the questions of caste and gender is significant in the study of masculinities in Kerala. It establishes the necessity of a framework of intersectionality to understand gender configurations/tensions in contemporary Kerala/India. The chapter uses materials including films, archival documents, court orders, newspaper and magazine articles, public statements of different community leaders, and debates by diverse groups accessed through discussions on

television and online media sites like YouTube and social media, government orders, and literary texts for analysis.

The third chapter, “Undoing the Masculine Hero: ‘New Generation’ Films and Fahadh Faasil’s Stardom in Contemporary Malayalam Cinema”, studies Malayalam cinema, one of the most popular and influential sites of representations of masculinity. The chapter is premised on the emergence of the “New Generation cinema” in Malayalam in the 2010s, which the thesis argues featured the representation of alternative masculine expressions. Centring on Fahadh Faasil, his films, characters, and stardom, it traces the changes in representation and notions of masculinity, heroism and stardom with the coming in of “New Generation” cinema in Malayalam. Here, the study places Faasil as a significant representative of such transitions, who complicated the centrality of the male star in the film narrative, disrupting the earlier hegemonic models of heroic masculinity popularised mainly by the two superstars in Malayalam cinema—Mammootty and Mohanlal. These changes in the representation of masculinities in contemporary Malayalam cinema are also studied against the backdrop of other major developments in the Malayalam film industry in the 2010s, especially the resentments within the industry against male domination following the attack on a noted actress in Kochi and the eventual formation of Women in Cinema Collective (WCC), an organisation for women film workers. This chapter uses films, film magazines, online/offline media interviews, newspaper reports, and advertisements as primary materials.

The fourth chapter, “*When Two Men Kiss* (2017): Representations of Gay Masculinity in Contemporary Malayalam Literature and Cinema”, discusses the

increasing visibility of gay masculinity in the Malayali public sphere, especially in literature and films. The chapter is centred around the publication of the first gay autobiography in Malayalam by Kishor Kumar titled *Randu Purushanmar Chumbikkumbol: Oru Malayali Gayude Atmakadhayum Ezhuttukalum* (When Two Men Kiss: A Malayali Gay's Autobiography and Writings) in 2017. The first section of the chapter discusses how this text is a landmark in the history of gay activist movements in Kerala in challenging the heteropatriarchal family and the state. Elaborating on the literary representation of gay masculinities in Malayalam, the following section identifies the short story as a major genre that actively represents gay men in Malayalam literature and offers a detailed analysis of contemporary Malayalam literature which portrays gay characters. The last section analyses the enhanced representation of gay masculinities in Malayalam cinema in the 2010s. By tracing the representation of gay masculinities in Malayalam films, it is argued that *Ka Bodyscapes* (2016, directed by Jayan K. Cherian) is a significant film in representing the visual dynamics of the gay male body and homoeroticism on screen while troubling the heterosexual dynamics of the Malayalam film industry. Analysed against the backdrop of gender and sexuality-based activism in Kerala after the 2010s, the chapter argues that the increased representation of gay masculinities in the Malayalam public sphere disturbs the hegemonic masculinities and heteropatriarchal structure in Kerala in significant ways.

The fifth chapter is the "Conclusion", which sums up the important arguments of this thesis. It engages with the research questions raised by the project and provides insights into the limitations of the work and the future research possibilities this study opens up. A work in Humanities carried out with a Cultural Studies approach, this thesis

is an open-ended research resisting definitive/closed conclusions. It suggests ways to think about gender, specifically masculinities, in contemporary India within specific regional contexts.