

**Traditions in transformation: Gender bias among the Nairs of Kerala**

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**Traditions in transformation: Gender bias among the Nairs of Kerala**

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### **ABSTRACT**

*Our study examines whether gender bias (parents' systematic preference for male children) arises in a society previously considered gender-egalitarian in this regard. We analyze how the rise of male-centric kinship, family, and marriage systems, along with social and economic developments that prioritize the productive roles of males over those of females, influence rising gender bias. We examine these questions by a qualitative study among the Nair caste of Kerala state in Southern India. Our research documents the association between transformation of key societal traditions in Kerala society, (the move away from matriliney, the continued strength of patriarchy, and the lack of female occupational chances; despite the spread of education) with the rise of gender bias in this society that was hitherto egalitarian in this regard. We document emergence of substantial verbal gender bias, and limited use of prenatal sex selection technologies to actualize this bias, in the Nair community.*

## **Traditions in transformation: Gender bias among the Nairs of Kerala**

Gender bias, parents' systematic preference for male children, leads them to deter the birth and survival of unwanted girl children. India, China, and South Korea, with varying development philosophies and standards of living, all exhibit persistent gender bias. If the underlying reasons for preferring sons continue, then socio-economic development only provides additional methods for eliminating daughters. Age-old methods include infanticide, abandonment or selective neglect; lately, newer reproductive technologies (NRTs) including modern means of contraception and prenatal diagnoses followed by sex-selective abortion have emerged. In East Asia (China and South Korea) NRTs have largely replaced the older methods and girls who are born are more wanted and tend to have more normal survival ratios vs. boys (Goodkind, 1996). Various sub-regions of India however show either older methods of removing unwanted girls after birth; or NRTs removing them prior to birth (Das Gupta and Bhat, 1997); or both trends: 'double jeopardy' for girls (Sudha and Rajan, 1999). Consequently, gender bias has been linked to millions of 'missing women' (Sen, 1990), and the 2001 Indian census showed that the already abnormal sex ratio dipped to 933 females per 1000 males.

Thus, examining gender bias is a significant line of enquiry. It remains unclear why gender bias persists or even spreads during social change that includes the increase of education, economic opportunities, and other factors expected to better women's societal position. Moreover, how do changes in kinship, family, and marriage systems, along with wider social and economic development, influence rising gender bias in a society previously considered gender-egalitarian in this regard? We examine these questions among the Nair caste of Kerala state in Southern India.

### ***Socio-economic development and gender bias***

"Gender and Development" perspectives argue that while conventional socio-economic development may improve the overall socio-economic profile of a nation, substantial inequalities emerge unless specific efforts are made to anticipate and prevent them. In particular, gender inequality at the family / household level is often an unintended consequence (e.g. review in Razavi and Miller, 1995). This perspective also underscores that gender inequality and gender bias are not linearly associated with poverty. In India, richer regions (e.g. Punjab) are often areas of severe gender bias. Though still battling persistent poverty and inequality, India has made considerable socio-economic progress. It is the world's largest democracy, the seventh largest industrial power, and a global presence in several major economic sectors. India had a UN Human Development Index score (based on life expectancy, education, and income level) of 0.57 in 2002, placing it at the middle level of development: a score nearer to 1.0 indicates higher development. However, India's Gender Development Index score (which adjusts the Human Development Index for gender disparity) is 0.54 (UNDP, 2004). That is, Indian women have benefited only just over half the extent men have from development, even for the most basic human capabilities. Including female empowerment, (participation in political and economic decision making, or freedom from violence) reveals even wider gaps.

These gender gaps reveal parents' strategies about which child to invest in for education, occupation, and life chances, based on child's gender and perceived role in the family and society (reviewed in Sudha and Rajan 2003). "In the Indian patriarchal ideology, women are regarded more as a highly flexible resource of the household rather than fully-fledged members of it"

(Banerjee 1998:261). Girls' schooling, occupation, and thus income, are curtailed to reflect their role as carriers of identity and tradition (Khanna, 2001), and supporters and homemakers in marital families, not as productive members and status-enhancers of parental families (a role their brothers fulfill). Thus, in the historically exogamous patrilineal cultures of North India, girls' life chances are much lower and more gender-unequal, compared to those in the (until recently) less exogamous and more bilateral kinship systems of South India; and gender bias is also more evident among the former vs the latter. The role of kinship and family systems in influencing gender bias is thus highlighted. Conventional socio-economic development does not reduce this basic intra-familial gender dynamic.

Studies of gender bias in the context of social change in India also highlight other factors. Women's participation in paid work is particularly effective in ameliorating gender bias. However, the role of female education is mixed. Women's education leads to higher female agency and lower gender bias, which seems obvious (Dreze, 1997; Murthi et al. 1996). But smaller regional studies suggest that in regimes of patriliney, exogamy, dowry, decreasing fertility, and limited economic opportunities, women with some schooling may discriminate more efficiently against daughters (Das Gupta, 1987; Clark and Shreeniwas, 1994). Conventional socio-economic modernization (shown by urbanization, male education, male employment) does not protect daughters from gender bias (Murthi et al, 1996). Cultural, economic, and historical factors thus work together to initiate, perpetuate, and intensify son preference; female education alone is insufficient to raise women's societal position enough to overcome these factors and reduce gender bias.

Transformations in kinship systems in the context of social change have been less studied for their impact on gender bias. It had been argued that Northern India, characterized by mostly exogamous, patrilineal systems revealed greater female disadvantages, in contrast to Southern India which has more endogamous and bilateral systems and more favorable female outcomes (Dyson and Moore, 1986). However, this broad characterization has been critiqued as overlooking within-region differences in kinship organization and female outcomes. Specifically, recent changes in kinship systems and direct examination of how these changes relate to female equity is needed, particularly in Southern India (Rahman and Rao, 2004); which our study addresses.

### ***Socio-economic changes in Kerala and the preconditions of gender bias***

In Southwestern India, where Kerala state is located, several major social groups including the Nairs<sup>1</sup> had a historical tradition of matrilineal descent and inheritance and matrilocal residence. Kerala is also lauded, almost mythologized, for achieving high literacy and life expectancy, and low fertility and mortality, at a comparatively low level of economic development (Dreze and Sen, 1998; Ghai, 2000; Raj; 1998). Kerala is also noted for high status of women, measured by near-complete female literacy, and 'normal' population, birth, and death sex ratios, in contrast to the rest of India. It is widely believed that Kerala's superior development has occurred largely because of, and without any erosion of, high women's status; which in turn is credited to the matrilineal / matrilocal kinship history, linked to Kerala girls'

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<sup>1</sup> Nairs were formerly the 'dominant caste' of Kerala in economic, social and political power. The community comprises several subcastes who earlier emphasized divisions among themselves including marriage and commensal practices. Since the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century these subgroups began to coalesce politically and socially into the larger Nair caste entity (Jeffery 1976).

access to education, lack of female seclusion, and absence of the view that daughters are family liabilities.

Women under matriliney had a comparatively high status vs. under patriliney (Saradmoni 1999, D. Renjini, 1998). First, women's strong, inalienable rights in their natal *tharavadu* (matrilineal / matrilineal household) ensured lifelong security and shelter for old women, young girls, etc. In this polyandrous system, remarriage of widows and divorcees was permitted, and women had considerable rights to terminate unsatisfactory marital relationships. In contrast, among patrilineal families (e.g. in North India), women are symbolically cut off from their natal families after marriage and discouraged from returning even when needing shelter; and are strictly regulated in divorce, widowhood, and remarriage. Second, female veiling or seclusion was near-absent, enabling modern Kerala girls' easier access to schooling. Elsewhere, concerns about girls' sexual purity and need for early marriage promote female seclusion and curtail girls' education. Third, the dowry custom is absent in matrilineal inheritance. Dowry given at marriage creates and buttresses the bride-giver's family's inferior status: though they provide lavish gifts, they are precluded from social / ritual equality with the bride-receiver. Fourth, matrilineal descent highlights the female line, defining daughters as key members of the household. Though women did not usually have high personal autonomy in matriliney, as substantial control over property rights, marriage arrangements, even day-to-day life rested with the *karanavar* (the senior male of the matrilineal household), the birth of a daughter was never a disappointment, and there was no structural basis to consider daughters as liabilities. Thus, a shift away from matriliney can have profound negative implications for women's familial and societal position.

One of the most fundamental changes in Kerala has been the legal and social shift away from matrilineal / matrilineal kinship toward male-centric systems, as communities (including Nairs) strategized their entry into modern political, economic, and social conditions over the late 19th and early 20th century. This shift arose from a joint impetus from British administrators (most of whom viewed matrilineal arrangement as irregular and immoral) and Nair men who perceived advantages in gaining control over property, descent, and inheritance, as traditional military occupations declined; and were disturbed by outsiders' negative views of matriliney and of "sexual looseness" of polyandrous Nair women. The process took decades of legislative changes and public debate. While some Nair women pointed out benefits of matriliney, most seemed remarkably silent on this issue, at least in the public arena (Jeffery, 1992; Saradmoni, 1999; Kodoth, 2001)<sup>2</sup>.

Other social changes in Kerala reveal the emergence of conditions associated with gender bias elsewhere. Though impressive in its achievements, the Kerala Model of development has not fully included women, tribals and lower castes (Deshpande, 2001; Omvedt, 1998; Saradmoni, 1994), and has produced marked gender disparities in poverty and access to resources. Unemployment rates are high for men and women (Pandey, ND; Gumber, 2000), and female unemployment is growing (Gulati et al, 1997). High literacy and matrilineal traditions have not led to adequate political participation of Kerala women (Erwer, 1999; Jeffrey 1992);

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<sup>2</sup> Shifts in marriage, residence and inheritance practices among Nairs are not new and also occurred in pre-modern eras in line with political and economic shifts. These included features of patrilineal inheritance, links between a man, and his wife and children who resided in their maternal *tharavadu* (matrilineal / matrilineal household); and neolocal residence of husband and wife. However, these variations occurred within a wider matrilineal framework and view of matriliney as acceptable and normative (Arunima 1996).

promoted female empowerment; stemmed social conservatism, violence against women, or the spread of dowry. Few studies examine these processes (Saradmoni, 1999; Renjini, 1998). Billing (1992) noted a shift toward “groom price” due to declining fertility and resulting changes in the supply of marriageable men vs. women, but speculated that anti-female practices were not likely to arise. However Rajan et al (2000) suggest that gender bias is emerging in Kerala and stress that almost no research exists on this topic, a critical gap we address.

That socio-economic and cultural changes in Kerala could ever lead to emerging gender bias has rarely been considered, as the literature rather assumes that gender bias elsewhere in India will wither away. Social changes linked with modernization are seen as axiomatically reducing inequalities rooted in “traditional” social divisions, such as gender or caste. The ways in which socio-economic historical and changes interact with cultural shifts and strategies to strengthen the relevance of “traditional” societal divisions has been less investigated for gender bias (Murphy, 2004). Thus, Kerala appears an almost ideal setting to examine whether changes in kinship, marriage, and family structures during socio-economic development lead to the emergence of gender bias.

### **Hypothesis**

Our research examines whether these socio-economic transformations in Kerala: the shift from women-centered kinship systems to male-centric ones in the context of socio-economic development and female unemployment, relate to the rise of attitudes and practices indicative of gender bias. We are guided by theories arguing that women’s status diminishes when social organization separates the spheres of women and men; socioeconomic change enhances productive roles of men but not women (Blumberg, 1984); and kinship organization is male-centric. We hypothesize that socio-economic changes that enhance the productive roles of men more than women, and the rise of male-centered kinship and systems and dowry custom where matrilineal / matrilocal systems used to exist, will be associated with greater gender bias, expressed verbally or through active sex selection of children through use of NRT’s.

### **Method**

We gathered data during 2002-2003 in the vicinity of Thrissur city, an important commercial and religious center of Northern Kerala with significant Nair representation, having a population of about 2.98 million according to the 2001 Census of India. We interviewed 215 individuals representing 3 generations among Nair families, and several key informants. We gathered qualitative data via ethnographic rapid assessment methods (Scrimshaw and Gleason, 1992) conducted by a team of trained investigators. Basic household / individual demographic and socioeconomic data were collected via a structured survey, but the substantive information comes from in-depth interviews shaped by a topic guide. The research team comprised three men and three women (to facilitate gender matching of interviewer and respondent) in addition to the principal investigators. All interviewers were fluent in Malayalam (the local language) and English<sup>3</sup>.

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<sup>3</sup> Interview documents were drafted in English and translated into Malayalam. Appropriate translations for specific terminologies were discussed for conceptual accuracy and intelligibility to respondents. Interviews were conducted in a mix of Malayalam and English depending on the participant’s preference. Most middle / upper class Indians are multi-lingual (in English and regional Indian languages) and switch among languages in a conversation. Interviews were transcribed and translated into English by the research staff, who stayed close to the spirit of the original language(s), thus the transcripts, and the excerpts quoted here, are often in ‘Indian English’.

The length and numbers of interviews were determined by information needs and interview dynamics. Data were reviewed periodically by the principal investigators, emergent themes highlighted, and interview guides revised accordingly. The principal investigators and interviewers stayed in close communication throughout to monitor interview experiences, emergent themes, data quality and analysis; and enable all team members to participate in the research process. This also promoted inter-interviewer consistency and reliability. Data were analyzed with the NuDist software program.

Respondents were recruited via introductions compiled by the research staff augmented by snowball techniques; to include men and women in three emically constructed age groups (older: age 60 plus, midlife: 40 to 59, and younger adults: 18 to 39), across class strata. In each household we interviewed the first adult available and willing to participate. In some households more than one adult was present and interviewed. There were no cases of refusal. The following topics were addressed:

General household characteristics; marriage practices in each generation; inheritance issues by gender; men's and women's economic and household activities and related ideologies; men's and women's relation to and control over property; male and female education and gender role attitudes; ideal family size and sex composition; knowledge, attitudes, and use of NRTs.

We also interviewed key informants: Nair community leaders; researchers familiar with this community; OB/GYNs, radiologists; lab technicians, and traditional and folk medical practitioners, to probe the existence and use of NRTs for sex selection from the provider's perspective. Current laws forbid informing parents about the fetus' sex during prenatal scans. Thus our research team was investigating very sensitive, private, and illegal practices, and used great care to avoid offense and yet elicit candid answers. Though prenatal sex determination is illegal, research has documented that unethical practitioners still provide these services in many parts of India.

## **Findings**

Our results are presented in a "numbers and narrative" format, interweaving statistical information (from published sources, household information, reproductive histories) and qualitative data (from interviews). We describe the social, economic, and demographic background of Kerala and place the information on households, reproduction, and in-depth interviews in this context.

### ***Socioeconomic and demographic description of Kerala state***

The second wave of the National Family Health Survey (NFHS-2), a benchmark all-India study on reproductive behavior and related health issues, was conducted in 1998-99. The report for Kerala state covering 2834 households with 2884 ever-married women, exemplifies descriptions of Kerala's social, health, and demographic status in the literature, as the following quotation shows (IIPS and Macro International 2001):

"Kerala state is also renowned ... for having .. below replacement level of fertility consequent upon a very high rate of contraceptive use among married couples ... about 41% in 1998. ... The 1996-98 TFR ... is at around 1.9 ... The sex ratio of the population (number of females per 1000 males) is 1058 in 1991, noted for

always being the highest in the country and consistently female dominant (in contrast to other areas of India).

Life expectancy at birth in Kerala state was projected in 1996-2001 as 71 years for males and 76 years for females; much higher than the rest of India, and comparable to more developed regions. ...

Also outstanding is the high rate of literacy in Kerala, in stark contrast not only to the rest of India but to much of the developing world. Among the population age 7 and above, the literacy rate is 91% overall, 94% among males and 88% among females (contrasted to 65%, 76% and 54% respectively for all-India)...school attendance among younger ages [shows] the rates for ages 6-14 are around 97% for both sexes, suggesting that literacy rates will rise even more in the future.

The remarkable feature of Kerala state is that these high indicators of social development have been achieved at a relatively low level of economic development. Kerala remains predominantly agricultural ... 25% of the population was below the poverty line, lower than for India as a whole. 1998-99 unemployment rates were highest in Kerala state, especially among women (75% among women) compared to India as a whole (39% among women). (NFHS-2 Kerala Report pp 1-3).”

### ***Household and participants' profiles:***

Table 1 details the number, sex, and age group of the 215 individual respondents (not including key informants), who belong to 179 households, classified into three socio-economic strata (Table 2). A “standard of living index” was created similar to that in the National Family Health Survey 1998-99 (NFHS-2), for Kerala. Household assets (land, consumer goods, income, other assets etc.) were cumulated, an index created, and households were assigned strata based on levels of asset ownership.

(Table 1 about here)

(Table 2 about here)

In line with Kerala's profile, very few (less than 2.5%) reported having no schooling, with few sex differences in percent attaining different levels. Greater male than female employment is seen. Women are more in typically “female” occupations: 45% report being a housewife, with greater proportion among older women. Another 21% are students. Only about 16% are employed full time for pay, another 2% work part time, and 5% are retired. In contrast, 51% of the men are employed full time, 4% part time, 12% retired and 23% students. Most employed women are teachers, college lecturers, librarians, white-collar workers, and nurses. A few are coolies or domestic servants. Men had a wider range of occupations including professions (lawyer, engineer, government officer), skilled trades (goldsmith, mechanic), white collar (clerk) or manual (office peon, driver, construction worker and coolies), and retirees from professions.

Table 3 is presented solely to describe responses on reproductive history. Birth, death, and sex ratio statistics are very sensitive to adequate sample size; thus our small study will not represent the true population-level picture, which is best derived from large numbers collected at state or national levels. However, our data suggest that groups with high and low standard of living contrast to those of middle socioeconomic status, with lower fertility, and more masculine sex ratios of birth and child survival.

(Table 3 about here)

Table 4 describes the use of modern contraception and prenatal care by socio-economic group and by age. As typical for India; methods other than sterilization are rarely mentioned and thus not reported. Those of lower socio-economic status have a higher percent sterilized, though receiving prenatal care does not differ much by class (due to the high availability of medical facilities and high literacy Kerala). Younger women are more likely to have had prenatal care, and those in midlife more likely to be sterilized compared to older women (among whom family planning was less common) and younger ones (who may not have completed childbearing).

(Table 4 about here)

Prenatal care included weight and blood tests, inoculations, vitamin / iron tablets, and prenatal scans. About 50% of those who received prenatal care underwent a routine ultrasound scan that checks fetal development and position; that can also reveal fetal sex. By law, practitioners are barred from revealing the fetus' sex, and almost all reported that they would not comply with patients' requests for this information (PDT Act, 1994). Some respondents who underwent ultrasounds wanted to know the sex for reasons not related to sex selection (e.g. curiosity), despite the law. One respondent said "*if the doctor knows you well, they will tell you*". About 1% reported receiving amniocentesis, permitted only when specific risk factors for birth defects exist.

### ***Findings on our hypothesis***

To test our hypothesis, we examined changes in marriage and descent practices across generations, participants' views on productive and reproductive roles of men and women, and on the importance of sons and daughters, and knowledge and attitudes regarding sex selection techniques.

#### *Changes in marriage, descent and family organization*

Changes in marriage, descent, and family are critical transformations with potential to influence the position of women in the family, and gender bias. Our findings show broad approval of patrilineal / patrilocal systems among all generations; the rise of neolocal families or joint residence of married brothers with their wives (the mirror opposite of matrilineality); a trend for seniors to live with sons vs daughters (when they cannot live independently); and increasing lavishness of wedding expenses (borne by the bride's family) along with payment of "dowry" or "gifts" of jewelry, cash, household items etc. placed at the disposal of her in-laws; in addition to women's inheritance share.

Current living arrangements of most respondents reflected neolocal or patrilocal residence. Some older respondents had memories of matrilineality, in contrast to younger ones who had no personal experience of or sometimes had never heard of *marumakkathayam* (the Malayalam name for the matrilineal system). A 45-year-old woman of middle socio-economic status, living with her husband, parents in law, and unmarried daughter, and whose elder daughters had gone to their husbands' houses after marriage (a patri-viri-local family), said that she and her husband had both grown up in matrilineal households,

*"I think Marumakkathayam was very good, because the family will have high earnings. If some are poor, they will get good food and shelter. But now ..., in the nuclear system, we will not get any support from any one of our families. We have to find our own food and shelter. Suppose my husband or children are sick, I will have trouble ... But in the*

*Tharavadu, we were staying with sisters, cousins etc., and they will help us very much. In Marumakkathayam, joint family system was very nice and interesting. You know, lot of persons will be there for looking after the family matters and also in the kitchen to help us. We will cook lots of foods; rice, vegetables; payasam etc. Food was not at all a problem there."*

Contrasted to this description of extended family security, older men and younger persons of both sexes felt that nuclear patrilineal systems promoted closer familial bonds. An older man said, *"In the old system, women were dominant. That was not good, things are better now"*. According to a midlife man, *"At that time there was not much bond or connection between fathers and children. Now it is more natural that children live with both father and mother and the parents take care of their children"*.

Older respondents lived independently as long as possible. Most stated that it would be best for seniors to live with married sons, though a few said that daughters took better care of parents. Co-residence with sons was common among widows. Older respondents recalled that elderly women typically used to live with daughters and grandchildren, but this was less common now if sons were available.

Another reason for son-preference in much of Asia is that sons carry on the family name, a role fulfilled by daughters in matriliney. Earlier, the matrilineal naming rule usually comprised the *tharavadu* (matrilineal household) name, followed by the person's given name. With modernization and kinship change however, the father's name has gained prominence. A 52-year-old woman of prosperous family said, *"We value daughters because they carry on our lineage and name. But nowadays, we all have to fill out forms for everything, such as school certificates, passport, etc. and we have to write according to the modern system: first our own name, and then father's name."* After marriage, women's names change to include the husband's name which previously had never been the case. Another naming convention is to use the name of the caste or sub-caste as "surname": e.g. Nair, Menon, Pillai, etc.

Among the most striking changes has been the shift in marriage customs away from former simplicity and equivalent payments between bride givers and bride takers, toward lavish expenditure mostly borne by the bride's family<sup>4</sup>. For e.g., a 98-year-old upper socioeconomic group woman living with her married son and daughter in law said,

*"In those days, after the family arranged the marriage, a few people only would come from that side, only the groom and one or two people with him. It would be considered shameful if a lot of people came from their side to eat at the bride's house. The actual wedding was very simple. A brass lamp was placed in the center of the hall, and a small ceremony conducted with the family elders present. Even their clothes were quite simple. Then there would be just a small feast."*

Contrast this with the account by a 45-year-old woman of middle socio-economic status, *"Wedding expenses are borne by the girls' family. Main categories of expenses are: marriage celebration, banquet, marriage hall, ornaments for the bride, etc. For a 'decent'<sup>5</sup> marriage, we*

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<sup>4</sup> This description refers more to the simple sambandham alliances rather than to the "tali-tying" pre-pubertal ceremony for girls that was typically much more lavish. The sambandham alliances transformed into modern marriage among Nairs (Jeffrey, 1992).

<sup>5</sup> 'Decent marriage' is the modern Indian English code word for a desirable style of marriage celebration, typically involving high expenditure, conspicuous consumption, and dowry payments.

*are inviting a lot of people .. Otherwise people will say 'oh that marriage took place without anybody'. Minimum 2 payasam [a type of sweet dish] should be there... people are giving 24 types of curries.*" This view was widely echoed among the respondents, and young, unmarried persons' accounts of desirable type and scale of marriage expenditures paralleled these descriptions.

The next crucial shift is the move to the dowry custom, and the distinction between dowry and female inheritance<sup>6</sup>. With Kerala land reforms and dismantling of matrilineal *tharavadus* ancestral property was divided equally among sons and daughters. Daughters are now also given substantial dowries at marriage, comprising jewelry, cash, household goods etc., which pass to the control of the in-laws. Dowries are seen as distinct from, and in addition to, female inheritance and expenditures on girls' education.

Most respondents disapproved of dowry, and were divided in reports of the extent to which it was demanded by the groom's side or pressure exerted on the bride's family to pay. Some said that dowry was not significant among Thrissur area Nairs, but was found more toward Southern Kerala. Others said that they did not ask or pay dowry, but gave gifts to the bride according to their capacity. While fixing a match for a daughter they would seek a groom of comparable socio-economic status to keep dowry issues in check. If pressures rose, they would not proceed with the match. On the other hand, the groom's family would also investigate the bride's family's ability to pay dowry, and if not satisfied, would drop the alliance. Notably, many who disapproved of dowry or said that dowry had neither been given nor taken in their families nonetheless elaborated that 'gifts' had been given to daughters as; *"no marriage can take place without gold."*

Significant evidence of the penetration of dowry emerged. A 71-year-old middle socioeconomic group woman said she didn't know when Nairs started asking for dowry, *"But dowry is now very common. People may not ask directly but they say the groom's brother got so much gold and cash etc. My neighbor got 50 sovereigns of gold [one sovereign = 24 gm of gold] and Rs. 50,000....we should give some gold to our daughter according to our financial status... Inheritance share is separate from dowry."* She heard that some families face dowry pressures, but she did not ask dowry for her sons nor gave any to her daughters, *"only gold"*. A 22-year-old woman seeking work as an accountant said, *"There are cases where inheritance share is not given if dowry is paid. But some women get dowry and inheritance share also...Groom's family will determine the amount."* A 48-year-old male clerk said, *"Dowry has an important role in our community... even if it is not demanded we should give something to our daughters. Nobody calls it 'dowry'. But no marriage can take place without gold. Everybody will expect something according to the status of the groom. The advantage is that the amount will be an asset to the couple in future. For poor people it is a burden to raise the money."* Unemployed or handicapped men also reportedly asked dowry so that they could start a small business.

Thus, dowry is viewed as the asset contribution women bring to a marital alliance; while men contribute through their employment and family status. That is, husbands establish familial

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<sup>6</sup> In India, dowry interpreted as groomprice ("dahej" or "varadakshina"; gifts given to the groom and family at marriage, barred by law) can be distinguished from bridewealth ("streedhan"; gifts given to the bride at marriage, that remain her property, permissible under law). In practice it is difficult to distinguish between these two, though in divorce the law permits women to claim back bridewealth. In patrilineal India, dowry is seen as pre-mortem inheritance that the bride receives at marriage, often in lieu of her share of immovable property (though laws guarantee daughters their share of property; enforcement is difficult).

socio-economic identity, and wives function as auxiliaries. This was underscored by the mixed views on whether dowry “discounts” were given to educated / working women. Most respondents felt that working women would not be expected to provide dowry; nor would dowry be asked in “love marriages”. However, about 25% asserted that employed women would not get any dowry discount. A 48-year-old male white collar worker said, *“Working / educated women also should be given complement [another word for dowry]. There is no discount”*. A young unmarried man of lower economic status said, *“Highly educated women will select highly qualified men. Then high dowry has to be given.”* A 58-year-old working woman of high socio-economic status echoed: *“I think she will not get any discount; she may have to give more. Because if she is highly educated, then she can only marry an educated man ... and she has to pay high dowry. That is happening in all communities including Nairs.”*

We explored the possibility of individual agency as avenues out of marital constraints. Respondents underscored the strict role of marriage and kinship rules in linking and shaping family and personal life. Marriages are typically arranged by parents or family elders, considering socioeconomic and astrological compatibility and hypergamy in caste, education, age, etc. Even in “love” marriages, the couple usually negotiates family approval, and choice tends to fall within broad bounds of religion, class, and caste. Love marriages, though more common than the past, are still infrequent. Respondents cautioned about the dangers of marrying out of caste to evade dowry. A 33-year-old man of lower socioeconomic status with two daughters said, *“Nairs will not encourage girls to marry from another community under any circumstances... They will not allow that girl back in the house. They may think of her as dead.”* A young, unmarried, middle socio-economic group woman said, *“I want to encourage women to remain single if they cannot find a partner willing to marry without dowry. I have no objection in finding a husband in some other community. But finding [one] from our community is preferred because intercaste marriage will create problems. The Nair girl would be isolated [from] her family. One of my friends is facing [this].”* A 42-year-old woman of high socio-economic status, who had married outside the community, said *“If anything happens I will be completely alone. I will not get any support from my family”*. Even in the younger age group, there appeared very little flexibility in marriage choices. A key informant said *“Most marriages are arranged by the family because youngsters are not ready to take risk.”*

Almost every respondent considered the idea of a woman marrying a man younger than herself (to widen her choices) as unthinkable. Remaining single for either sex was admitted as a theoretical possibility, but seen as a very undesirable life situation. In India, marriage is considered almost compulsory for men and women (except for renunciates) as a Hindu Samskara (life cycle event) and as a status which confers social adulthood (e.g. unmarried men and women are usually referred to as “boy” and “girl”). Unmarried persons, especially women, are typically viewed with suspicion.

In sum, male-centric kinship systems marked by greater marriage payments on the bride’s side, now typify this community. Lavish weddings make a social statement. The dowry custom is substantial, though with less evidence of extreme pressure as in other groups. Lower socio-economic groups find dowry important to advance the groom’s family status but also more burdensome. Prosperous families are more able to negotiate or afford dowry. Dowry mostly functions as groomprice, passing to the control of the in-laws. Due to tight family control of marriage and conformity to marital rules, there is little scope to evade dowry pressure through

alternate marriage arrangements. Dowry is received by women in addition to inheritance and expenditures on education.

*Male and female roles in education, occupation, and family:*

We examine attitudes toward men's and women's education, participation in paid work, and work in the household domain. In line with attitudes documented in Kerala historically, respondents encouraged high education for both sons and daughters because the value of schooling had long been recognized among all socioeconomic strata. Very few older women described that their schooling was limited to enable marriage.

Male and female respondents had equally high aspirations for sons' as for daughters' schooling. The main limiting factor was financial difficulty. A midlife coolie woman reported stopping her daughter's education after high school due to money constraints. Some lower socioeconomic group respondents thought that in that situation sons' schooling may get priority over that of daughters, but most stated that all children should be educated as much as their desire and ability allowed. Professional education was encouraged for both sexes. This is in marked contrast to many other areas of India where boys' education is explicitly prioritized over girls', for reasons including the need for girls' early marriage and boys' occupational advancement.

Historically, women in Kerala were encouraged to seek paid employment at higher rates than in other regions of India. However, gender differences regarding division of labor between men and women emerged, with the notion that some occupations were more suited for men or for women. These views diverged by class. Among upper socio-economic groups, all valued high status professional occupations for both sexes; though women would be expected to withdraw from paid work if family needs arose. Within the home, though it was acceptable for men to help in housework, the common view was that *"men should focus on the financial aspect in bringing up children, and women should focus on all other things"*.

Lower down the socioeconomic scale, domestic work and child care were seen as more suited to women. Men and women in coolie work felt that this job was physically harder for women, and not a desirable choice for either sex, only taken up if nothing else was available. Occupations such as driver, mechanic, and factory workers who operated machinery were seen as less physically safe for women (due to hours, work conditions, etc.) and more appropriate for men. However, less mechanized factory work related to food production, fish processing, coir, etc. were seen as suitable for women.

The theme of safety re-emerged to explain some occupational restrictions for women, particularly in night shift work. Many respondents said that women should be free to take up such jobs as paid work was of great value for all. However, they also cited physical safety and family responsibilities as reasons for women to avoid night shifts. In Kerala as elsewhere in India, crime rates are high, including offenses against women. However, the theme of safety also reflects a broader concern about preserving younger, unmarried women's reputation for chastity. A young, unmarried, middle socio-economic group woman said that education and work are encouraged among Nair men and women both, *"but men are allowed to take up night shifts and to move to a far away place to take up jobs.. [and] not discouraged from higher education to take up family responsibilities. In my family, parents won't allow me to move to a far away place to take up a job, because ... we have to mingle with other people, so parents are not interested in that"*. A middle socioeconomic group midlife man said he encouraged his daughter to become a teacher as in an office job she would have to *"mingle with others."*

Opinions on household work also reflected a gendered view of division of labor: 55% of respondents felt that men could “help” in housework if women were busy. But housework was primarily seen as women’s sphere, and earning activities as men’s sphere, and it was not men’s duty to share housework even if wives worked outside the home. A retired college lecturer (male) said, *“While men can share all household activities, women are the primary home makers, as she is the one who can manage household activities efficiently.”* This view recurred among men and women of different age and class groups. A 22-year-old woman said, *“Yes, men can share housework activities, but some kitchen works are not suitable for them.”* A 42 year old middle socio-economic group woman said, *“It’s good if women work outside for pay. It will be helpful for husbands, especially as education costs are rising these days....But she will not be able to give care to her children if they are young. They have to be put into a baby crèche.”* A young man of lower socio-economic status with two daughters and home-maker wife said he would not allow his wife to work outside because looking after children was most important. An older middle socio-economic group woman said that nowadays women needed to work because families required more than one income. If one person needed to stay home, it had better be the wife because *“it is shameful for a husband to live on his wife’s earnings.”* An upper socio-economic group retiree said *“According to our culture, it is considered substandard if woman is working outside and man is sitting in the home.”*

Working class families preferred to withdraw women from the paid work force when finances permitted, in line with their views of male and female household roles, as vividly illustrated by a midlife coolie woman. She approved in general of women working for pay outside the house, but would not want her daughter-in-law to do so, as *“The girl that we brought to our house must stay at home. The reason is that if men don’t work for a day, they have to live with their wife’s high attitude.”* She perceived that in the past both men and women participated in agricultural work, but *“Now men work in other jobs and women concentrate on housework”*. In short, in a patrilocal joint family, the entering daughter in law should focus on the household domain so as to maintain the appropriate gender balance of roles and relationships.

As Nair society has moved away from matriliney toward patrilineal systems, there has emerged a clear model of family and household where men establish the family socio-economic status and identity and function as providers. Women focus on home-making and family responsibilities, even if educated and working. These findings fit with Renjini’s (1998) research showing that increasing ‘housewifization’ of Nair women has accompanied the shift to patrilineal nuclear family organization. Though education is highly valued for both men and women of all socioeconomic strata, this alone does not ensure equitable male and female roles in work or household spheres.

#### *Preference for male children*

We now examine whether gender bias has arisen in this community due to the social changes which enhanced the productive roles of men more than women and changes in marriage systems described above. We examine both verbal expressions of gender bias and actual use of NRTs for sex selection.

Though only sons, nephews, or other male kin can perform funeral ceremonies for parents, a striking feature of Nair society is the absence of sex differences in rituals or ceremonies connected with the birth of a child, either in nature or scale of celebrations. Moreover, in the Malayalam language, no traditional proverbs or sayings reflect the preference for a son vs a

daughter, in stark contrast to parts of India where son-preference is societally ingrained. In the latter areas, common sayings reflect the high value that boys have for parents, and that girls will drain parental resources and ultimately belong to their marital families. A social scientist key informant said, *“In the Thrissur area we had a saying: our language is ‘penn Malayalam’; meaning, women are so respected that even the language belongs to them.”* Thus, if in this setting participants verbally express preference for sons, it represents a highly significant shift toward gender bias.

Most respondents across sex, age, and class groups said at first that daughters and sons are welcomed in Nair families, citing times when daughters were seen as the core members of the household who continued the family line. Most preferred balanced families: a son and a daughter. However, 74% of respondents felt it was more difficult to bring up girls vs. boys, due to worry about daughters’ safety, marriage expenditures, and that sons could earn and contribute to the household more than daughters did. Thus, upon further conversation, verbal expressions indicating gender bias emerged, especially among middle and lower class groups (though also present in the upper stratum).

An older woman of the middle socioeconomic group said, *“Most families I know prefer to have a son. My daughter-in-law’s mother is sad because [the couple] do not have a son.”* A midlife middle socio-economic status woman was more blunt, *“Most Nair families prefer sons. If they have two sons they are happy. But if it is two daughters, then they are sad.”* Another woman of similar age and background said: *“Nair people also prefer sons, because now daughters have to stay at their husband’s home.”* A key informant summed up the situation in a very telling manner: *“In every community now, including Nairs, there is preference for sons. Frankly the parents say to their young daughters that they have to go to another house and they have to be given dowry.”*

A lower socioeconomic group woman aged 52 said she preferred sons and grandsons. She loved her daughter and granddaughter, but was praying for a boy, as a second granddaughter would be difficult to bring up because her son (the baby’s father) did not have a steady job. A midlife housewife from the lower stratum said, *“Now, you know, we can’t accept more females. That will be more expensive. So, first two girls everybody will accept. Third, nobody can accept. So there might be a chance to abort the third delivery if they know the sex. All communities are same, including Nairs.”*

However, few Kerala families have more than two children nowadays, as there is wide use of modern contraception to limit family size, to meet the challenges and expenses of raising children in modern society. Though there still seems a significant unmet need for family planning in Kerala, statistics indicate little relation of uptake of family planning to son-preference (reviewed in IIPS and Macro International, 2001).

Thus, we examine respondents’ knowledge and attitudes regarding NRTs aimed at prenatal sex selection. Almost all respondents had heard of “prenatal scans” (mainly ultrasound, a few were aware of amniocentesis). Most strongly disapproved of finding out the sex of the baby prior to birth, and condemned sex-selective abortion. Many said that they had heard of other communities (e.g. in Tamil Nadu, or non-Nairs in Kerala) taking up these practices, but not Nairs.

Again however, nuances emerged upon deeper conversations. A midlife woman of lower socio-economic status condemned female feticide but nonetheless said, *“It is better not to come*

*to know the sex of the baby during pregnancy, as if it is a girl, the mother will have to face trouble from the in-laws.”* A 23-year-old upper socioeconomic status man reported, *“My relative’s neighbor underwent abortion as soon as they found out that the baby is a girl. It was their second pregnancy. First baby was a girl. They could not afford a second girl. They belong to low-income group. They had done it from Thrissur Medical College. I think everybody can do this if we give more money to doctors or nurses. Though abortion charge is high people would do it by fearing dowry.”* A midlife lower socio-economic group woman said, *“No medical practitioner will tell the sex of the baby during pregnancy because it is illegal. But if the doctor is very close to you, [or] if you have enough money to pay a private doctor, they will surely tell you.”* A male upper socio-economic group retiree said, *“Female feticide is done in Thrissur Nursing Home and also in some other clinics...The cost of abortion can be Rs. 1500. Both high-income and low-income groups practice female feticide.”* A male computer science student age 19 said, *“I have heard that female feticide is practiced here. But I don’t know any individual case. If people want to abort they can do it. I support it.”*

All medical practitioners interviewed for this study reported high professional compliance with laws forbidding revealing the fetus’ sex. They were proud of the wide adherence to medical rules and ethics in Kerala, and stated that the Indian Medical Association has strongly opposed female feticide. Despite this a gynecologist in a major local hospital said: *“I have no direct experience of female feticide ... and I have not heard of such cases from my colleagues. But there is always a preference for boys. Some women are disappointed when they deliver a girl. They are not happy even if that is her first delivery.”* A gynecologist in an infertility clinic reported:

*“Many people come to find the sex of the baby .... Parents are eager to know ... and I am not against [this]... If they have two or three girls they definitely come for scanning and terminate that pregnancy if it also a girl. Some doctors are ready to do this and these practices are increasing in number. Now parents are unhappy when they come to know their second child is also a girl. Most commonly if the third child is also a girl they terminate... I am also directing some people to some doctors. They do these things for money. Both private and government doctors...but I can’t reveal the name of the hospitals.”*

A retired health supervisor reported: *“As I was a health supervisor, I know female feticide is practiced here. In every community, including Nairs, some people having one daughter scan the next pregnancy, and if they find out if it is a female, surely get depressed. But many won’t go for feticide because they believe it is a sin. Female feticide is practiced in every hospital including the Government hospital.”*

Ayurvedic and traditional medical practitioners were also interviewed. An Ayurvedic doctor mentioned medicines that could be prescribed prior to conception to ensure a male fetus. A traditional practitioner stated that while some families may be curious about the fetus’ sex, he was not aware of any prejudice against girl children or sex-selective abortion in his area. During the study the research team observed several new maternity clinics, radiology facilities etc. in the Thrissur area. These indicate the spread of the privatized modern medical sector in Kerala (as in most of urban India) and suggest that motivated families seeking a sex selection facility may be able to find one.

## **Limitations**

The limitations of our study include the challenges of addressing this extremely sensitive topic; and the very private nature of decision making on this point; very difficult to uncover during the research process. Strenuous efforts were made to meet these challenges: our interview team comprised men and women to communicate with male and female respondents respectively; and specific rapport-building and interview techniques were developed. Second, our research focused mostly on community members. Greater inclusion of medical practitioners in the public, private, formal, informal, and traditional sectors would provide additional documentation of the supply side factors in NRTs for prenatal sex selection. Third, our research focused on one time point for people's actions and aspirations. We did not follow respondents periodically to observe their choices and strategies while faced with life situations for sons, daughters and themselves. However, despite these limitations, our study is a unique contribution toward an under-researched area: documenting gender bias and examining processes contributing to its growth among a culture usually lauded for high women's status.

## **Conclusion and Discussion**

We had hypothesized that the shift to a male-centric kinship system, accompanied by enhanced productive roles of men but not women, would be linked with the rise of gender bias in a society where this form of gender inequality did not previously exist. Our findings support our argument, especially in the rise of substantial verbal gender bias, and limited indications of the use of NRTs for prenatal sex selection to actualize gender bias. This is a very notable shift in a society where historically, the birth of daughters was welcomed and celebrated (Jeffrey, 1992).

The significance of our findings is two-fold. First, we document the rise of socio-economic preconditions of gender bias in a culture assumed to be immune to such retrograde developments. Nair society had previously been studied to examine changes in kinship systems and the status of women, but not to examine how these changes linked with the rise of gender bias. Our study makes this unique contribution to the literature on gender bias, particularly highlighting the role of male-centric kinship systems.

Second, our study contributes to the literature on the factors influencing the status of women. Women's status is known to be multidimensional, and different aspects of women's position do not necessarily go hand in hand (reviewed in Kabeer, 1999). Our study further demonstrates how education of women, a widely advocated policy prescription to address a variety of social dilemmas, is necessary but not sufficient to raise the value of women in a patriarchal setting, where housewifization of women is common and educated women need to pay higher dowries. To overcome patriarchy, female employment opportunities are important along with re-assessment of familial gender roles. Though employed women may be seen as auxiliary contributors in families, research shows how women's economic participation, even at low wages, radically transforms women's value in the household, reduces familial gender inequality, and challenges patriarchy in South Asia (Ahmed and Bould, 2004).

The broader question arises as to why gender bias found such fruitful soil in Kerala, particularly during modernization and positive developments such as widespread education. Our research adds further to the "gender and development" perspective, that socio-economic development alone will not reduce social inequalities unless they are specifically addressed. From a historical perspective, the transformation away from matriliney was based on a community strategy (spearheaded by Nair men) to advance within a wider Indian (and British rule) society

that was patrilineal and patriarchal. Patriarchy had historically characterized Nair society, though matriliney mitigated its worst effects on women. The historical division of male and female spheres continued during modernization and combined with the shift to patriliney, transformed into the modern version where males (fathers and sons) acquired the roles of family provider and status enhancer for parents, and women (mothers and daughters) the role of homemaker and auxiliary for in-laws. The dowry custom became an inevitable corollary.

No single component of this process can be singled out as the root of gender bias, e.g., it is not the shift to dowry alone that makes daughters a liability for parents. The entire set of transformations in kinship, economy and gender roles interlink to devalue daughters. Modernization in India has not stemmed reliance on kinship networks for economic survival and status attainment. In fact, use of kinship networks has remained the most effective strategy to advance in modernizing India. Patrilineal kinship networks, operating in a patriarchal setting, makes male dominance of the occupational sphere and female specialization in the domestic arena almost inevitable, and makes daughters expensive for parents and auxiliaries for in-laws. Dowry is a symptom of this situation rather than a cause. Similar analyses have been advanced for the extreme levels of gender bias among other groups of India, e.g. the Jats in peri-urban Delhi, (Khanna, 1997). Our interviews revealed that many Nairs perceived it was difficult to find jobs and establish themselves because as a “forward caste” they were not beneficiaries of any affirmative action programs, and did not feel that community organizations (e.g. the Nair Service Society, or NSS) was fully effective in advocating for them. Thus, their reliance on familial strategies was intensified.

In this regard our findings extend those of Srinivasan and Lee (2004), who found a mixed effect of modernization on Bihar women’s attitudes to dowry; especially that younger women were not more disapproving. We also found that the younger generation’s attitudes were not more progressive or flexible than those of their seniors. We argue that gender-blind modernization in India cannot be expected to overthrow patriarchal society, and dowry forms part of gendered familial strategies to advance in this society. Thus, the relationship between modernization, women’s status, and dowry needs to be revisited in this light, and younger people cannot automatically be expected to be more progressive under these circumstances.

While our data do not indicate open, large-scale use of NRTs for sex selection as in other areas of India, many respondents and medical practitioners did suggest that covert sex determination may be occurring and growing in scope. As technology further develops, methods of pre-conception sex selection (viewed as ethically less problematic) may be adopted. Currently, such methods were not widely known or available in Kerala.

Will gender bias strengthen or diminish in Kerala? Memories of matriliney, Nair pride in their culture, and a legally compliant cadre of medical practitioners have (so far) prevented the wide use of NRTs for prenatal sex selection in Kerala. These factors may change. Medical technology may develop less morally problematic methods for sex selection, thus intensifying active (along with verbal) gender bias. On the other hand, expansion of economic opportunities may couple with high education to raise female worth. The efforts of researchers, planners, and activists can promote the latter trend, which alone can stem the demand for sex selection technologies. Complacency on the grounds of high female education and good socio-demographic achievements in Kerala cannot be afforded; recognizing and discussing of the potential for gender bias will strengthen a socio-cultural climate promoting female value.

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Table 1: age-sex distribution of individual participants

<i>Age Group</i>	<i>Sex</i>		<i>Total</i>
	Male	Female	
18 – 39	36	43	79
40 – 59	26	51	77
Above 60	30	29	59
Total	92	123	215

Table 2: standard of living classification of households

<b>Standard of Living Index</b>	<b>Frequency</b>	<b>Percent</b>	<b>Cumulative Percent</b>
Low SLI (0-14)	47	26.3	26.3
Medium SLI (15-20)	70	39.1	65.4
High SLI (21+)	62	34.6	100.0
Total households	179	100.0	

Table 3: sex ratios by class groupings

	M/F sex ratio among CEB*	M/F sex ratio among children surviving	Average CEB
Low SLI	1.13	1.04	2.04
Medium SLI	0.91	0.85	2.16
High SLI	1.34	1.30	2.0
Total	1.10	0.68	2.07

\* CEB = children ever born

Table 4: Contraceptive use and prenatal care; by class stratum and by age group

	% sterilized	% received prenatal care
Low SLI	60%	74%
Medium SLI	45%	68%
High SLI	21%	73%
Age 18-39	29%	85%
Age 40-59	53%	77%
Age 60+	52%	60%