

Masculinity at the Interface of Liberalised Development:

Reflections from an Urban Slum in Kerala, South India

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Research Unit on Local Self Governments (RULSG)

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2

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Thiruvananthapuram

**MASCULINITY AT THE INTERFACE OF LIBERALISED
DEVELOPMENT: REFLECTIONS FROM AN URBAN SLUM
IN KERALA, SOUTH INDIA**

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ABSTRACT

This article is a reflection on empirical data gathered in an ethnographic study of masculinity in a designated slum in urban Thiruvananthapuram, Kerala. This gestures towards possible new scholarly projects for those interested in gender, development, or otherwise critically analysing the well-being of those marginalised in Kerala. This paper seeks to draw attention to processes of gendering specifically located in a slum. I put into dialogue “Kerala-specific” cultural studies, with its emphasis on the state’s political history, and masculinities studies at the interface of a liberalising state. I used the *Kudumbashree* development programme as an entry point to discuss development in Kerala, the quotidian experiences of men in the slum and greater questions of value and ethics, all entangled with ideals of masculinity. Examining masculinity in Kulamnagar brings to light facets of development, while liberalisation informs new practices of embodying masculinity.

Keywords: bodies; development; gender; globalisation; liberalisation; Kerala; *Kudumbashree*; masculinity; micro-finance.

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Introduction

The focus of this paper is on masculinities in Kerala in the context of the development programme *Kudumbashree*. The study draws on qualitative data collection in Kulamnagar¹, an urban slum in Thiruvananthapuram. This is an attempt to discuss how liberalisation has changed the landscape of gender, class and development in Kerala. Masculinity, as it is discursively articulated using ideals of provisioning, are changing as large-scale economic reforms disrupt long-established forms of income generation in urban Kerala. I will begin this article with a frame for analysing masculinity in Kerala in relation to social and political changes in the region. I then contextualise this study with information about the field site. The context of the slum is further elaborated in terms of the history of women's mobilisation there, looking at issues women took up and how such histories can shed light on what I saw of *Kudumbashree* in Kulamnagar at the time of fieldwork. Analysis then comes in two sections. The first looks at the masculine ideal of the provider and its relationship to the development programme under consideration. The second examines men's relationship to *Kudumbashree* as labourers. For the purposes of this paper I underscore the boundaries of my findings, which I found coincidentally to be perhaps the most interesting points I raise, to provoke more research into the interlocking fields I draw on here.

Approaching Masculinity in Post-liberalisation Kerala

In order to approach masculinity in Kulamnagar, it is necessary to contextualise my reflections within the region's broader history of social and political projects prior to and following liberalisation of the national economy in the early-1990s. As large-scale shifts never result in wholesale attitudinal or practical shifts in the embodiment, performance or values associated with gender, I will highlight two important socio-political aspects of Kerala's 20th Century to make sense of the present: firstly, the reorganisation of family structure; and secondly, the gendered discourses produced among Kerala's political Left, articulations of masculinity I connect to ethnographic data I present here.

The period from late-19th-to-late-20th Century Kerala witnessed tremendous social and political shifts that resulted in shifts in discourses of masculinity. Given that formal political structures and discourse were paramount to the lives of those I spoke with, it seems necessary to trace masculinity as

1. Kulamnagar is a pseudonym, along with the names of all people and places.

it was produced in Left social reformation during this time and prior to liberalisation. Left social reformation in the mid-20th Century displaced the dominance of the matrilineal Nair male, the object of family planning reformation beginning in the early-19th Century (see Devika 2002), and yielded a new dominant masculinity which Radhakrishnan (2006) refers to as revolutionary masculinity. This masculinity was constructed through a variety of materials including films and autobiographies, and within this discourse of revolutionary masculinity is the foot soldier. The foot soldier of revolutionary masculinity is putatively casteless, although coded as lower-caste Ezhava (Radhakrishnan 2006, 162n21) and embodied in the common labourer.

The foot soldier of the official Left's revolutionary masculinity is a hardworking and self-sacrificing labourer, grounded in "[a] set of characteristics like courage, pride and an ability to survive through odds..." (Radhakrishnan 2006, 169–70) This is embodied in a strong yet not particularly muscular physique – attributable to his commitment to the proletariat's physically demanding labour. I have argued elsewhere that this is recognisable in the protagonist Pappu of Kesavadev's From the Gutter, wherein the lower-caste and rural Pappu migrates to an unnamed urban centre in Kerala where he eventually becomes a rickshaw puller, a task he assumes to pay exorbitant tuition fees for English-medium education for his adoptive daughter in the hopes of her upward mobility (see Aaberg 2016). I argue that an important aspect of Pappu's narrative is what Radhakrishnan articulates as the official Left's elevation of identity based on action, with reference to class, over identities inherited at birth (i.e. caste) (Radhakrishnan 2006, 147). So too is it important to note that within the discourse of revolutionary masculinity, women were taken in as *comrades* yet nevertheless were cast in supporting roles to the men who engaged in official political work. Discursive gains in class (and caste) visibility through 20th Century Leftist social reformation did not translate to a substantive reworking of gendered divisions of labour within official Left politics, witnessed in the perpetuation of the model of the conjugal family in which the man is the head of household. In fact, that the social authority and legitimacy associated with this brand of masculinity is grounded in labour becomes important for narratives wherein liberalisation, associated with weaker labour protections in the many strongly unionised (and masculinised) professions in Kerala such as auto-rickshaw driving and headloading (see Heller 1996), prompts men into a "crisis of masculinity," something I elaborate below.

Locating the Field: Context and Methodology

It is important to delineate some of the demographic aspects of the neighbourhood to contextualise articulations of gender and class there and to make clear differences and inequalities along these axes. Kulamnagar consists of about 1,332 households (Abraham and Devika 2014, 3). Devika's (2013, 9–11) oral history traces the formation of Kulamnagar to Travancore city's recruitment of low-caste Tamils for sanitation work in the 1930s, quickly followed by others engaged in low-status work such as leather tanning and butchery. Decades of demographic shifts have yielded a community that today is comprised of Kerala natives, yet the neighbourhood and its residents remain stigmatised within

Kerala society. The vast majority of residents are from low-castes or poor Muslim groups (Abraham and Devika 2014, 4). Roughly 63 percent of the settlement is Muslim (against Kerala's 25 percent total), 68 percent of the total population is Otherwise Backward Class (OBC) and 13 percent are Scheduled Castes/Scheduled Tribes (SC/ST) (Abraham and Devika 2014, 7–8). Only about twenty-percent of residents have completed education above higher secondary education, with total neighbourhood illiteracy at 13.2%, with women being disproportionately illiterate (*ibid*, 10). Many male residents participate in low-income work as construction workers, auto-rickshaw drivers, or sell various goods at the adjacent Koti Market. Employment is one area in which male generational changes become obvious, as some younger men are able to take advantage of increased opportunities to work in retail and the service economy for relatively fewer hours and better pay (*ibid*, 5), opportunities that contrast with other jobs mentioned (i.e. headloading), characterised as both physically demanding and highly politicised trades.

Whereas different opportunities and preferences for labour participation were available to men of different ages, women of all ages have much more restrictive access to the labour market compared to men. While women may face stigma for participating in labour outside the home in general, the forms of labour available in the immediately surrounding area are stigmatized in terms of class (i.e. low-status jobs in custodianship) or socially proscribed for being highly masculinised (i.e. auto-rickshaw driving). The result is that women engage in few forms of paid labour participation and the work they do engage in is mostly subsidiary, rarely full-time, and done from within the domestic space (or sometimes outside Kulamnagar, but not usually locally). This is interesting in light of the household makeup of Kulamnagar that indicates a majority of households to be women-headed, a phenomenon due to high rates of male out-migration and thus indicative of gendered disparities in social and economic mobility for slum residents (Abraham and Devika 2014, 14).

This paper is an attempt to give shape to these disparities in gender by analysing ethnographic data collected from around the neighbourhood and the local market. This paper is based on 22 semi-structure and open-ended interviews, 20 of which were men and two women, for which I was assisted by Rahman, a 21-year old resident from Kulamnagar who acted as interpreter. These interviews are coupled with experiences of loitering about the neighbourhood and the market and talking with men informally. I self-selected those who had connections to or vested interests in self-help groups (SHGs). Additionally, due to various issues of access (such as language, but also trust) I was primarily in contact with my interpreter Rahman's network of kin. Aside from religious affiliation, which mirrored the statistical make up of the neighbourhood at large, this meant I conversed primarily with those more similar to him and his family than different: those I saw as having greater access to social, political and economic capital; men and women who initiated and took leading roles in development initiatives like SHGs; those with strong ties to political parties; men educated above 10th standard; OBCs rather than SCs/STs; and men with relatively higher wages whose labour participation tended towards business ownership rather than acting as staff. I try to analyse how perceptions and experiences might be skewed due to these positionalities where relevant.

***Kudumbashree* in Context: Gender-based Development and Activism in Kulamnagar**

To provide a picture of *Kudumbashree* in Kulamnagar, it is important to historically situate the development programme in the neighbourhood. The *Kudumbashree* programme is massive and diverse, and so in this paper I have chosen to limit discussion of *Kudumbashree* to its micro-finance services and to the social activism *Kudumbashree* members engaged in locally (as opposed to regional or state-wide levels). The choice of the former stems from these services being the most recognisable aspect of *Kudumbashree* for the men I interviewed, a finding that can be attributed partly to the fact that across Kerala micro-credit "...has been gaining in importance and visibility within the [*Kudumbashree*] programme." (Devika and Thampi 2007, 35) I hope to point towards other reasons why this may have been the case in the analysis sections. The latter stems from the necessity to engage with the social activism that surrounded *Kudumbashree* and its members in Kulamnagar, as I seek to place in dialogue masculinity in Kulamnagar with the greater efforts towards social change in Kulamnagar.

I had the opportunity to meet with two prominent *Kudumbashree* leaders in Kulamnagar; one leader and self-help group organiser Aisha, 40, spoke of her entrance into activism in her early-20s when she started demonstrating to support education for Kulamnagar youth as well as participating in Communist Party of India (Marxist) (CPI(M)) activities. In fact, other women active in *Kudumbashree* had spoken of their entrance into activism beginning in their youth, often to support getting access to basic services in the slum as well as to fight against drug and *arrack* consumption. These narratives are supported by research in the same locality concerned with women's mobilisation and entrance into formal politics, finding that women in the slum, "...had benefitted from external attempts to organise and empower them (beginning with the Total Literacy Campaign in 1990)..." (Williams, Devika, and Aandahl 2015, 1127).

Much of Kulamnagar women's activism in the past and present, including that of the Total Literacy Campaign, has been deeply concerned with drug and alcohol consumption and, prior to it being banned by the Government of Kerala in the mid-1990s, the production of *arrack*. Oral history accounts of women residents in the locality point to the central theme of men's domestic violence, caused by men's heavy drinking in response to their work in physically demanding and socially stigmatised jobs such as sewer cleaning and butchery (Devika 2013, 46). Some of these narratives recall Kulamnagar's history through the latter-half of the 20th Century, an area viewed as an impoverished neighbourhood wherein men from outside the locality could go to find various denigrated products and services, notably cheap liquor in the form of *arrack*. Today, *Kudumbashree* leaders like those mentioned by Devika (2013), as well as Aisha, indicate that these women take credit for a certain level of reformation that led to the elevation of the locality's image in the city through their efforts to reduce and eliminate the use and trade of drugs and alcohol.

During my stay, however, *Kudumbashree*'s activities seemed to be limited to a handful of social activities as well as what Aisha referred to as "small" activities, namely micro-enterprise located in

domestic space, referring to a neighbour for whom she helped set up a home-based business selling *parippuvada* and other fried snacks. During our interview, Aisha had an impressive list of activities *Kudumbashree* had previously engaged in locally, such as establishing a hotline for women that served to mediate during outbreaks of domestic violence, bringing electricity to the locality and providing sanitation programmes – some of which were mentioned with esteem by men I interviewed. Throughout my visit *Kudumbashree* there seemed to be in a lull², with micro-credit its primary activity and the one form of activity with which men seemed to be the most familiar. It was this lull, and the fact that men associated *Kudumbashree* mostly with its micro-financial opportunities, that led me to focus on that aspect.

Although *Kudumbashree* women have been involved in various forms of social organising, at varying degrees associated with the development programme as well as the CPI(M), for the men I spoke with the prominent focus on *Kudumbashree* was with SHGs and their micro-credit services. These SHGs are characterised as groups formed of ten-to-twenty women from inside the neighbourhood that meet weekly to pool money through contributions of about Rs. 100 per weekly meeting, then used to take out a group loan through a *Kudumbashree* mediated linkage with Canara Bank. Tasks within the group form a hierarchy in positions. While leadership positions were often organically linked to the member who initiated the formation of a SHG through recruitment of kin, they were subject to change and fluctuate depending on different skills of members (i.e. accounting). SHGs in Kulamnagar, it was recounted to me, often became theatres for the staging of inequality based on varying levels of access to diverse forms of capital (social, economic, political). More obvious inequalities in resources (i.e. time for organising and attending weekly meetings) are compounded by differences in educational capital (i.e. relative skills in literacy and maths). Additionally, my experiences in Kulamnagar pointed to many SHGs having strong connections to the CPI(M). Thus while *Kudumbashree* may subscribe to political neutrality and inclusivity, it continues to benefit from its association with the CPI(M). Furthermore, many residents I spoke with considered participation in the programme to be tantamount to Party affiliation (see Williams et al. 2011).

The Provider Ideal in Context: The Slum, Liberalisation and SHGs

As I was interested in *Kudumbashree*, my initial research centred on household dynamics and the role of men within the household. Men described the masculine provider ideal anxiously as something many men in Kulamnagar strive for but few achieve. Community pressures to fulfil this role seemed more difficult to quell, as a changing social and economic landscape provided no guaranteed path toward manhood. Development literature has utilised the colloquial expression “crisis of masculinity”

2. It should be borne in mind that the opportunities for women to organise socially and political, and the meaning such organisation has, vary dramatically based on context and in relation to resources available to them. For example, Devika's (2014) work on Adimalathura takes account of the impact the Latin Catholic Church and broader activism concerning fish workers had for women's activism in the area.

to describe men's anxious reactions to large scale changes in the economy due to liberalisation (Chant 2001). This most salient aspect of the "crisis of masculinity" stems from the deregulation of labour markets that lead towards the weakening of job protections and diminished wages, effectively challenging the possibility for men to fulfil the role of breadwinner and thus lay claim to authority based on being the primary provider of household resources. This form of anxiety surfaced in interviews I had with older men in Kulamnagar. Here I seek to look at *Kudumbashree* as a form of welfare with the aim of mitigating general insecurity to place the two into dialogue.

The prospect of women generating income proved likely to provoke 'crisis' in the ideal masculine provider. While data (Abraham and Devika, 2014) show that it is not uncommon for households to have women generating income in some form, this may not be a favourable circumstance. Interviewees working in Koti Market spoke anxiously about their inability to be *sole* provider due to work insecurity, which they attributed to the influx of large retailers into Thiruvananthapuram since the 1990s. Without scholarly verification of these claims, we might still begin by following Vera-Sanso's (2001, 186-7) observations in a Tamil Nadu settlement where she found interviewees (men and women) stress the women's *need* to work given their economic destitution as a discursive tactic to minimise its threat to masculine authority grounded in economic provisioning.

Given the inability for a single income source to adequately provision for a household in Kulamnagar, preferences regarding how women generate income produced a hierarchy in prohibitions. Preferences centred on the level of domesticity, professionalism, and gender associated with the work. An interview with Salim, 29 and unmarried, turned towards discussing how he saw income being managed in his future marriage:

"If I had the chance, I wouldn't have my wife work. I would have her focus her energy on the family. I would make enough money to pay for everything. But that's not always possible, so if the need arises I'll give her the freedom to work. She can do anything like be a nurse or work at an office. If things are bad, she could work at a shop. What I can't allow is for her to just get a job at a shop just for time-pass. Some girls do that and it's not right for them. It's not right when they don't need the money to spend time away from the family."

It is not just that the necessity for women to work is made to excuse women transgressing prohibitions on entering the labour market. It is also the emphasis that functions to *permit* women to enter it. Here the prohibition is most relaxed in the case of feminised jobs associated with the relatively higher waged, thus higher class, positions of nurse and office clerk. The jobs involving the most exposure to the public (read: men) with low wages are the least desirable for women.

In what ways, then, are self-help groups as channels of household resources different, and why did Kulamnagar men view them as almost wholly permissible for women? My interview with Saji gave me initial insight into this question from a structural level. Saji was a 23 year old OBC Hindu,

enrolled as an undergraduate student at a local college and son of a *Kudumbashree* member. His views of politics and development were articulate and firm, which I attributed to his activism in the CPI(M)'s youth wing, Democratic Youth Federation of India (DYFI). He supported the work of *Kudumbashree* because he believed it promotes women working outside the domestic sphere, something he saw as necessary to change the pervasive "ego problems" men have in Kulamnagar. When I asked the same question leading this paragraph he said:

"Most women here get money from their husbands as allowance. To borrow from a SHG, she'll probably use her allowance. Then, when debt is collected she'll need to use money she gets from her husband to pay off the debt. The husband knows this, and knows she can't run with the money."

This was generally accepted by men and women alike. As a form of resource generation, micro-credit seemed to be considered vastly different than participation in the labour market. Here, Saji explains that micro-credit necessarily requires sources of capital within one's kinship network. The potential for power to be linked to generating resources through SHG micro-credit is structurally hampered by familial relations of debt. Micro-finance debt falls along pre-existing kinship networks of economic dependence and in this way does not necessarily emancipate the SHG member gaining access to credit but can potentially reinforce gendered norms of economic dependence.

Revolutionary Masculinity in Kulamnagar

For many of the older men, those of various age but generally above 35 years, who were married and responsible for many dependents, the body was a means to both discuss the hardships of their gruelling work while simultaneously invoking a system of values, a form of lower-class masculinity akin to revolutionary masculinity. Those working in the informal sector as headloaders and construction workers seemed to invoke the bodily hardship of their work the most often, playing a prominent role in the interviews I conducted. They betrayed a sense of exhaustion and poor health³, with informants exposing for me various wounds from their work not uncommon. One's ability to endure the physically demanding work causes the body to deplete rapidly, leading to a shorter lifetime longevity in the profession. Waite (2001) uses the term 'body capital' to describe the body as a necessary yet limited resource and argues that the relatively higher wages for Kerala's unionised headload workers come with health (and thus economic) consequences for one's well-being. The shoring up of the selfless male body, injured and tired from ceaseless work, at once conveys the very harsh conditions of the work available to Kulamnagar men, while at the same time provides evidence of fulfilling wider social obligations as economic provider for his network of kin.

3. I find it interesting that men never discussed poor working conditions (i.e. exposure to asbestos or other dangerous materials) in terms of individual *vulnerability*. Shifting away from discourse of the potential legitimating facets of such work to the vulnerability of lower-class men may provide a useful lens for further research in Kerala slums. This is taken up to some degree in Jackson's (2001) edited volume, *Men at Work*.

It was not just the immediate risks for the health of men from certain forms of labour, but the overall lack of protections during health and economic crises, I found alarming. In discussing men's relationship to *Kudumbashree*, men would reference their inability to work for various reasons and how *Kudumbashree* served as a safety net. One man's story proved instructive:

"I work in construction and was in a CPI(M)-affiliated union. I joined the union because I thought I would have protections. That wasn't the case when I was working on a roof and fell off. My head was badly hurt and I couldn't work for days. I needed to go to hospital but couldn't afford treatment. The union promised to cover expenses from job injuries, but they barely gave me any money at all. My wife had to take a *Kudumbashree* loan to cover medical expenses and the money I lost from not being able to work during sick leave."

Another recurrent theme was men describing *Kudumbashree* loans as a strategy for households who found themselves unable to lose even a day's wages without risking insecurity in basic resources like rice and gas for cooking. For some men, *Kudumbashree* was not only considered a favourable organisation but also a necessary one, stressing the need for having a woman in the household perennially in a *Kudumbashree* SHG to cover sick leave and other losses. This presents *Kudumbashree* as an organisation that functions beyond the potential to facilitate the provisioning of basic resources and employment for women, but also acts as a means to stymie the precarity wrought by men's insecure and fluctuating 'body capital'. *Kudumbashree* is immediately necessary but also indicative of the wider socio-economic consequences of a liberalising state that seeks to retract welfare benefits. And again, what I found disconcerting in these discussions was the neoliberal rationality of this system, essentially requiring a low-income labourer to possess the skills and resources necessary to participate in *Kudumbashree*. This is what (Report 2008, 86) refer to as 'responsibilization,' or "...the idea that recipients of welfare must be made 'responsible' citizens capable of prudent and productive use of welfare..." (ibid.) In this last case, his wife functioned as the responsible citizen who *mediates* welfare benefits. These early and unfinished ruminations warrant a re-evaluation of labour protections for Kerala's most socially and economically deprived. What are the consequences, for both Kulamnagar residents and Kerala state at large, when those men facing lack of labour protections from unions and the state must rely on this model of resource allocation, access to which is heavily stratified by class and caste?

Conclusion

In this article, I have brought together the fields of masculinities studies and development in the context of an urban slum in Kerala in hopes to shed light on both and to illustrate the importance of extending the gendering of development to men. Following the argument that traces of 20th Century revolutionary masculinity discourse remains relevant to men in contemporary Kerala, I attempted to highlight distinctions between men based on changing socio-political and economic realities. Kulamnagar men tended toward "crisis," in the sense that they conceived liberalisation to have brought uncertainty

to their informal work where there had previously been none. The crisis comes to the extent that the value of a man is held up against the masculine ideal defined by the breadwinner within a conjugal family. In the context of uncertainty, *Kudumbashree* provides a channel to neutralise resource deprivation attributed to poor working conditions, inadequate labour protections, and the shifting of costs for medical services away from the state and towards clients. Given that access to *Kudumbashree*'s financial services was stratified by class, it seems that the extent to which *Kudumbashree* can neutralise shifts in the labour market is restricted to those who can afford membership. All the more so, to the extent that *Kudumbashree* is said to stabilise the breadwinner role, that too is privy only to a few. What this paper hopes to highlight are the remaining gaps in research on masculinity and development, specifically in Kerala, not least of which concern the intra-class dynamics among men in low-income neighbourhoods, and the men who support *Kudumbashree* to varying degrees.

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