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Paper to be presented at the 18th European Conference on Modern South Asian Studies at Lund  
University, Sweden, July 6–9, 2004.

## Modernization and Effeminization in India:

### Kerala Cashew Workers since 1930

#### *Abstract*

The South Indian state of Kerala is well known for its progressive policy, high social indicators, and comparatively high women's status. Processes of modernization, however, have had an ambiguous impact on women there. This paper traces changes since the 1930s in gender relations among low-caste men and women in Kerala by examining processes of modernization in the organization of work, trade union activities, and ideologies regarding marriage and family life. Female cashew workers, who number something between 200,000 and 400,000, form the majority of the factory workers in the state. Most of them have been organized into trade unions since the 1940s or 50s. They are literate and throughout their history they have been very militant—if we measure militancy in terms of man-days lost due to strikes. They seem to contrast strongly with “Third World Women”, who are often portrayed as illiterate, ignorant, and tradition-bound victims. Although the female cashew workers of Kerala have obtained better absolute conditions at work and in society, the power

discrepancy between low-caste men and women has increased in favor of men because low-caste women are now seen as weaker and more dependent on men than in earlier decades.

“Modernization”, intensified capitalism, and various ideologies and discourses—whether emanating from the West or constructed locally—have increased the gap between masculinity and femininity. The concept *effeminization of women* is here introduced to denominate a process discernable at different levels in the productive and reproductive spheres that, in contrast to *feminization*, is qualitative, ideological, and discursive.

### *Introduction*

The cashew workers of Kerala are a group whose history and present situation are of relevance to scholars of the humanities and social science for several reasons. During the past six or seven decades, female cashew factory employees have constituted the largest single group of registered workers in Kerala. They have been organized in trade unions since the 1940s and often have been the most militant of all workers, as measured by man-days lost due to strikes. This makes these individuals contrast sharply with the stereotypical depiction of ‘Third World Women’ as powerless, illiterate victims.

The story of the cashew workers in Kerala has been described by some as a story of anti-capitalist struggle and success, and by others as a story of victimized women who suffer from ignorance and patriarchal oppression. Both these ways of writing history have their limitations for three reasons: a) only the productive sphere is analyzed; b) women’s own voices are not heard; and c) international influences are analyzed exclusively from a materialist and economic viewpoint. The research upon which this paper is based takes another point of departure. To a great extent it is based on interviews with female cashew workers. It analyzes the productive and

the reproductive spheres, and then attempts to view this local case study in terms of global history.

*Global history from a local perspective*

The writing of world history has often been dismissed of late as a modernist, structuralist, and Eurocentric endeavor. Postmodern theoreticians have increasingly recommended local or positional studies, and have rejected the utilization of large-scale, global concepts.

Simultaneously, as syntheses, structures, and meta-narratives have been set aside, discourse analyses have replaced material analyses, and postmodern epistemology has taken the place of empiricism. Although postmodern criticism has introduced many fruitful insights, academicians should be cautious in abandoning such structural concepts as capitalism and patriarchy, which may still have great relevance. However, these concepts must be analyzed in a complex way, with careful attention given to geographical, cultural, and societal differences, and how they interact with a variety of social processes. Universal history does not exist, but phenomena such as the organization of production and reproduction may serve as a framework for common human experiences—and in this context, gender is of crucial importance. Gender relations have long been negotiated and have influenced other societal categories. Gender has been constructed, changed, and “modernized”. It is a relational and non-essential concept that continually is being reconstructed, and that constantly interacts with other non-essential categories such as class, caste, ethnicity, religion, and generation.<sup>1</sup> Gender can never be isolated, but must be analyzed in correlation with other categories.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> For discussions on gender and identity, see Sheila Allen, ‘Race, Ethnicity, and Nationality: Some Questions of Identity’, in Haleh Afshar and Mary Maynard (eds), *The Dynamics of ‘Race’ and Gender: Some Feminist Interventions*, London: Taylor and Francis, 1994, pp. 85–105; Kathryn Woodward, ‘Concepts of Identity and

This study on the cashew workers of Kerala is interdisciplinary in methodology, theory, and topic. It draws its conceptual framework from history, social anthropology, development studies, and particularly from gender studies. Indian history is often written as if it stops in 1947, but the present study spans a period from the 1930s to the present day. The methodology employed here combines official documents with discourse analyses of newspaper accounts as well as chronicles written by trade unions leaders. They are all supplemented with extensive interviews at cashew factories and in the homes of workers. The outcome may be described as multi-theoretical because it tries to analyze various aspects of society by using different tools. It is a commonplace these days for concepts used by “constructivists” to be rejected by “deconstructivists”, with the two theoretical schools often being seen as incompatible. I find myself allied with the approach of the media researcher Norman Fairclough, who argues that different aspects of society follow a different logic, and therefore must be analyzed with various tools and theories. He sees this as a way in which to reconcile postmodern approaches with more conventional ones.<sup>3</sup> The retention of some structural analyses can be combined with post-modern insights that stress *difference*. Discourses may be related to concepts that often are linked to the modernist school, for example ideology and material processes. There is no need to view the two epistemological traditions as antagonistic: they may be united in a fruitful analysis in order to achieve a deep understanding for historical processes.<sup>4</sup>

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Difference’, in Woodward (ed.), *Identity and Difference*, pp. 8–50; and Kum-Kum Bhavnani and Ann Phoenix (eds), *Shifting Identities, Shifting Racisms: A Feminism and Psychology Reader*, London: Sage Publications, 1994.

<sup>2</sup> For a discussion of the concepts of so-called intersectionality and gender, see Floya Anthias and Nira Yuval-Davis, *Racialized Boundaries: Race, Nation, Gender, Colour, and Class in the Anti-Racist Struggle*, London and New York: Routledge, 1991.

<sup>3</sup> Norman Fairclough, *Discourse and Social Change*, Cambridge MA: Polity Press, 1992; *Critical Discourse Analysis: The Critical Study of Language*, London: Longman, 1995.

<sup>4</sup> Rosemary Hennessy, *Materialist Feminism and the Politics of Discourse*, New York and London: Routledge, 1993; Barbara L. Marshall, *Engendering Modernity: Feminism, Social Theory, and Social Change*, Cambridge: Polity Press, 1994; Harriet Bradley, *Fractured Identities: Changing Patterns of Inequality*, Cambridge: Polity Press, 1996.

The analysis is placed at the center of women's experience and identity-creating space, which lies in the intersection of discourses, ideologies, and material conditions. According to Chandra Mohanty, marginalized people's narratives and interpretations of experiences give us alternative discourses that, although affected by hegemonic discourses, may challenge power production.<sup>5</sup> Mohanty has been considered as one a group of postcolonial and postmodern feminists. More than fifteen years after her well-reputed article, "Under Western Eyes: Feminist Scholarship and Colonial Discourses", she has modified her standpoint and stresses that global structures, capitalist and otherwise, still should be given high priority in feminist analyses. She holds that by analyzing and disclosing *differences*, we are able to write global history that does not homogenize societies, cultures, or human groups. However, *differences* must be related to the universal. "The challenge is to see how differences allow us to explain the connections and border crossings better and more accurately, how specifying difference allows us to theorize universal concerns more fully".<sup>6</sup> This position makes it possible to see global relations—whether economic, political, cultural, and ideological—that bring together different societies in united and dependent discursive and material regimes.

Our main concern here will be the gender division of labor and changed constructions of femininity and masculinity in Kerala—a region of South India that belongs to the so-called "Third World". Logically, concepts with positive connotations, such as *development* and *modernization*, become central in such analyses. They are concepts that should be considered as non-essential phenomena. It is not meaningful to try and define their *real* and essential meaning. Rather, their discourses should be the focus of our analysis. Such an approach asks us to

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<sup>5</sup> Chandra T. Mohanty, "Cartographies of Struggle: Third World Women and the Politics of Feminism", in Chandra T. Mohanty, *Feminism without Borders: Decolonizing Theory, Practicing Solidarity*, Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2003, s. 76–84.

<sup>6</sup> Chandra T. Mohanty, "'Under Western Eyes'" Revisited: Feminist Solidarity through Anticapitalist Struggles", in Mohanty, *Feminism without Borders*, s. 221–251: 226.

investigate a kind of power much more subtle than that built upon violence or economic oppression, viz., the power to construct categories or such concepts as masculinity, femininity, or development and modernization.

The women in this study have been affected by capitalism and both Western and indigenous ideologies and discourses concerning modernization. These ideas and representations of categories have concerned production as well as reproduction. Issues regarding femininity and masculinity have been particularly influential. In analyzing South Indian gender relations during the twentieth century, I focus on the “lowest” castes in four distinct spheres: production, political activity in trade unions, appearance in society, and the reproductive sector (taken to include marriage and dowries). The difference between those women, living for so long on the edge of starvation within the limitations that a strict, religious and social caste system impose upon them, and, for example, Western working class women is of course enormous, but to some extent they have had similar experiences.

### *The Cashew Factories and Their Workers*

In the early 20<sup>th</sup> century, cashew nuts were processed in people’s homes or on the streets and commonly sold at markets. They were considered to be especially healthy and nutritious and frail people were advised to eat them.

In the 1920s, an agent from the American company, General Foods, came to Kerala in order to search for profitable export goods. His attention was drawn to cashew nuts and soon the first shipment of cashew kernels left Kerala. Some British companies also became involved in the business, but before long indigenous men were in majority among the cashew factory owners. The processing of cashews started as cottage production in which entire families—men, women,

and children—were engaged. By the 1930s, production became centralized into small factories. Cashews soon became one of Kerala's most important export items. Profits were huge and factory owners were referred to as cashew barons or cashew kings. Exporting cashew nuts was a way for the owners to become rich quickly, while the workers in those early factories lived under conditions that have been described as deplorable and slave-like.

As I began to analyze archival documents and statistics, and read accounts of the history of the cashew industry written by trade union leaders, I found two kinds of stories: one related a glorious history of male leaders forming unions among women cashew workers and improving their working conditions. A second told of ruthless capitalist exploiters—the factory owners.

Nowhere, however, was there any questioning of the strict gender division of labor that prevails in contemporary cashew factories; it was accepted as a natural and timeless condition—part of the order of things. To understand this gender division of labor, one needs to look at the four principal operations: roasting, shelling, peeling, and grading.

Today, males make up no more than 5% of the total work force in cashew factories, and it is they who do all the roasting. Of the 95% of cashew factory employees who are women, 40% are involved in shelling, and 55% in peeling and grading. A few incidental jobs, such as drying cashews, carrying sacks, packing tins, and loading trucks, are mainly carried out by males.

Male cashew factory workers are generally paid monthly and receive a certain amount of unemployment compensation when factories close seasonally because raw nuts are not available. Women, however, are paid neither by the month, the week, the day, or the hour, but by the piece, and usually receive nothing when a cashew factory closes.

According to statistical records, male cashew factory employees numbered between 25% and 30% in most factories in the early 1930s—in some factories the figure was as high as 50% to 60%. However, when I asked factory owners and trade union leaders about the existence of male

shellers, peelers, and graders in the cashew factories, they replied: “No, no! There have never been any men doing that work.” “Your data is wrong! Unless you mean some young boys—just children!” “Perhaps sometimes handicapped men worked in female sections—blind, lame or very, very old. But no able-bodied men ever did this kind of processing. Only women can do that! Only women have the patience and the nimble fingers needed to do this work!” “Men do the roasting. It is heavy and dangerous—women can’t do that work. It also involves machines and only men can handle machines.”

Then I found a 1960 article in the daily newspaper, *Jennajugham*, in which a journalist interviewed some women who had been roasters in the 1930s, but later became shellers. One woman recalled: “I can still feel the smoke and how heavy the sacks were that we had to carry”. When I visited the homes of cashew workers, several older men and women confirmed this story. They told me that in those days men did shelling along with women and children. It became evident that the strict gender division of labor only dated from the 1950s.

Other cultural processes that served to widen the gap between lower caste men and women came about in the 50s and 60s with regard to jobs, dress, marriage, freedom to move about in society, and self-sufficiency. The reasons for this increased gender gap are many and are found embedded in “modernization”, “development”, the institutionalization of trade unions, and wage bargaining. Formal trade unions were established in the late 1940s. At the same time, a labor department was created and a labor commissioner was sent to the UK to learn about modern labor laws and collective bargaining practices.

In Kerala, minimum wages paralleling the British system were introduced by the Minimum Wages Act of 1948, but they did not take effect in the cashew industry until five years later. The Indian constitution stated that men and women should have equal wages for equal work, but the international trade union movement had fought for “male breadwinner wages”,

which they understood as setting a man's wage at least 40% higher than a woman's.<sup>7</sup> Women, it was argued, were not expected to maintain a family; if they worked for wages at all, it was an exception. Those who held jobs must have been widows or single women who also did not need to maintain a husband. However, the reality has always been that most female cashew workers are the main breadwinners in their families. Moreover, prior to 1950, the lower castes even had a tradition that women were *supposed* to support themselves and their children—something that was overlooked in discussions on wages in Kerala.

In trying to solve this conundrum, state officials and union leaders turned to a book published in England in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century by Beatrice and Sydney Webb—names that have figured prominently in British labor history. The argument used by members of the minimum wage committee ran as follows: In Britain they have solved this dilemma by establishing a strict gender division of labor. If they can do so in such a modern country as the UK, we can do it in Travancore [Kerala] as well without violating against our constitution, and yet still implement male breadwinner wages.<sup>8</sup>

It was decided to assign women two-thirds of a man's wage and designate certain departments of cashew factories exclusively male or female. Male shellers were dismissed or reassigned as roasters, and female roasters became shellers or peelers. Simultaneously, a new gender discourse appeared. Newspapers no longer referred to low-caste women as “workers”, but described them instead as “helpless women”. In articles about strikes, it would be conceded that “even women participated”—despite the fact that the clear majority of the demonstrators were women. Working women were at this time seen as anomalies. Female *roasters* were now rebuked

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<sup>7</sup> With regard to male breadwinner wages in the West, see Angélique Janssens (ed.), *The Rise and Decline of the Male Breadwinner Family?* New York and Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997.

<sup>8</sup> Government of Travancore-Cochin, *Report of the Minimum Wages Committee for Cashew Workers 1953*, Trivandrum: Government Press, 1953.

for being masculine, causing some of them to change jobs. Male *shellers* were laughed at “as those who only mingle with women”. Still, general working conditions became better for all, although it was men who received more favorable treatment, got higher wages, and more often were given permanent jobs.

In the 1960s, the presence of trade unions became a real problem for cashew factory owners, so they began to shift their plants to neighboring states—mainly Tamil Nadu. At the same time, they began using whatever means they could to side-step the labor laws. One stratagem was to close down a factory every few months and reopen it under a new name. Another was to open *kudivarappus*, non-registered, illegal factories in which no labor laws were followed and wages stood at about half the legal minimum wage for women.

Going on strike was no longer an effective weapon for workers. Since factories closed down all the time and became seasonal, it was actually counterproductive. (The *kudivarappus*, however, were not seasonal and continued to be tolerated as an open secret). In Tamil Nadu, factory owners bribed civil servants and politicians in order to evade labor laws. This may have been the case in Kerala as well, but we only have evidence of it in Tamil Nadu, although the cashew factories in Tamil Nadu were owned by the same people as in Kerala. Factory owners threatened to shift production to *kudivarappus* in Kerala if politicians insisted on implementing labor laws in Tamil Nadu. Had it been done, this would have led to severe unemployment in Tamil Nadu. In Kerala, owners argued that they would shift their factories to Tamil Nadu if unions and civil servants were not cooperative, similarly causing unemployment in Kerala. So the two states would be played against each other.

The Left parties and the unions were ultimately successful in nationalizing some of the cashew factories. At the end of the 1970s, Kerala State became the largest employer in the cashew sector. However, although the state-owned factories were successful in the beginning,

they soon failed, and ultimately were only open for short periods each year. Moreover, the gender discrimination with regard to wages and unemployment benefits was almost as conspicuous in the nationalized as in the private factories.

What actions did the trade unions take against the illegal *kudivarappus*? Union leaders argued that they were helpless against the powerful factory owners, and that they made efforts to prevent their members from going to work in *kudivarappus*. However, since many women were illiterate and ignorant, and could not understand the long-term goals of socialism, it was hard to prevent them from going to work there, according to some union leaders. Others claimed that the husbands of women who were unemployed would provide for them, once again characterizing women as mere contributors to male-supported households. Women's low participation in trade union activities in India has often been explained by female characteristics, rather than by the patriarchal nature of unions. Specific women's issues, such as the Equal Remuneration Act, have never been taken seriously by the unions.<sup>9</sup> In 1957, a publication attempted to explain this supposed lack of interest. It cited a high illiteracy rate, female conservatism with regard to religion and social traditions, and a lack of free time because of domestic responsibilities.<sup>10</sup> More than forty years later, these same arguments are still being echoed by some researchers.<sup>11</sup>

I located several sources that showed it was not only women, but unemployed male roasters as well who went to *kudivarappus*. The glaring difference was that women were paid half-wages in *kudivarappus*, while men were actually paid *more* than in the registered factories to

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<sup>9</sup> Nivedita Menon, "Women in Trade Unions: A Study of AITUC, INTUC and CITU in the Seventies", in Sujata Gothoskar (ed.), *Struggles of Women at Work*, Delhi: Vikas Publishing House, 1992, pp. 187–196; see also Nirmala Banerjee, "Introduction", in Nirmala Banerjee (ed.), *Indian Women in a Changing Industrial Scenario*, New Delhi: Sage, 1990, p. 28.

<sup>10</sup> A. S. Mathur and J. S. Mathur, *Trade Union Movement in India*, Allahabad: Chaitnya Publishing House, 1957, p. 71.

<sup>11</sup> Kanchan Sarkar and Sharit K. Bhowmik, 'Trade Unions and Women Workers in Tea Plantations', *Economic and Political Weekly*, vol. 23, no. 52, 1999, pp. L50–52.

compensate them for the loss of their fringe benefits, and to reward them for their loyalty to the owners of the *kudivarappus*. This appears to have been a kind of bribe to keep them calm.

Curiously, when it comes to the cashew factories, the distinction between the formal and informal sector is a hazy one, as the same owners and same workers often operate in both sectors.<sup>12</sup>

With the advent of “modernization” in the 1950s, workers who were formerly defined in terms of caste and class, have come to be constructed in terms of gender. The radical working class in Kerala was looked upon as if it could only be male.<sup>13</sup> Men did not even need to be organized into unions to be considered “radical troublemakers”.

The following conversation, which took place in 1999 at the home of three shellers, Santha (born 1957), her daughter, Meena (born 1982), and Santha’s mother, Velumbi (born 1930), a former sheller, illustrates the gender paradox of the working-class:

*Santha:* I work in a state-owned cashew factory, but now it is closed.

*Interviewer:* How do you survive when the factory is closed?

*Santha:* I go to a *kudivarappu*. I have to—otherwise there will be no rice in the house.

*Interviewer:* How often do you go there, and how much do you earn?

*Santha:* I go six days a week and I get thirty rupees a day. I work about eight hours a day.

*Interviewer:* Isn’t that betraying the trade unions—going to a *kudivarappu*?

*Santha:* It is a betrayal of the *idea* of trade unions—not the trade unions.

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<sup>12</sup> See also Jan Breman, “The Study of Industrial Labour in Post-colonial India – The Formal Sector: An Introductory Review”, and “The Study of Industrial Labour in Post-colonial India – The Informal Sector. A Concluding Review”, in Jonathan Parry, Jan Breman, and Karin Kapadia (eds), *The Worlds of Indian Industrial Labour*, New Delhi: Sage Publications, 1999, pp. 4–17, 407–432.’

<sup>13</sup> See Joan W. Scott, *Gender and the Politics of History*, New York: Columbia University Press, 1988, pp. 53–112, for an account of the male construction of the British working class.

*Interviewer:* Can you explain what you mean?

*Santha:* There is no trade union in the *kudivarappus* and we can't start one, because then we will no longer have any work. The trade union leaders from outside know about this, but they don't do anything. It is not in their interest—some of them are even involved in *kudivarappus* themselves. That is *also* betraying the idea of trade unions. This illegal processing could not have continued without their approval. On the other hand, we need them. When the state-owned factory is open—last year it was only about one month, but before it has been a little bit better—I get a “dearness allowance”, a bonus for *Onam* [a traditional festival], and some days off with wages. We would not have achieved those rights without trade unions.

The older woman and her granddaughter now entered the conversation.

*Velumbi:* That is what people say today, that the unions are involved in businesses behind our backs. I can't believe it, but if it is true we should object loudly. We should not hide when there is a problem like this. Without the unions we would never have reached this stage.

*Santha:* But, Amma, what should we do? There is no rice in the house, *kudivarappu* owners have their own laws and rules, and the unions only are concerned about registered factories. We are caught in a trap.

*Velumbi:* I am old, but you must never give up like this. Go out and shout!

*Meena:* Grandmother is so full of trust in unions, but things are not like they were when she was young. Unions are not for us—they are beyond our spheres of life.

*Santha:* No, Meena, not like that, we need the unions, but it is difficult to make them engage with the *kudivarappus*. They should—but I do not know how.

We changed the subject and started to talk about supporting a family.

*Interviewer:* How many are working for wages in this family?

*Santha:* My daughter and I, and sometimes my husband. The other children are too young—they are still at school.

*Interviewer:* What about your husband? What kind of work does he do?

*Santha:* He is a casual laborer in agriculture and construction work, but he only works a few days a week.

*Interviewer:* How much does he earn a day?

*Santha:* One hundred rupees is the minimum, but for hard work he earns 150 rupees. Normally he has a job two or three days a week and usually he gives me 50 or 75 rupees for food after a day's work

*Interviewer:* Is he a trade union member?

*Santha:* No, we felt that it was too much to pay the fees for two memberships, so we paid only for me.

*Interviewer:* Can your husband get more work if he accepted lower wages?

*Santha:* Nobody would do that among the men! And nobody asks them to do it!

*Interviewer:* Why do you do it?

*Santha:* What would you do if your children were starving? I will do *anything* for my children. I will even kill myself if that would help them! Last week I had a fever, so I could not go to work. My daughter fainted from hunger. I borrowed 100 rupees from a moneylender. Now I have to pay it back, but every day my debt will increase by one rupee.<sup>14</sup>

*Interviewer:* Is your husband not also prepared to do *anything* for his children, as you are?

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<sup>14</sup> This corresponds to an exorbitant annual interest rate of 365%!

*Santha*: You see, the responsibility for the children has always lain on my shoulders. My husband is often out and he does not hear their cries of hunger. Men just don't understand these things. They take it for granted that there is food in the house. I can't change him. I suppose he does his best, and besides, what would people think of him if *he* started to work for half wages?

The dominant gender discourse within the culture of these women holds men up to be the breadwinners in their families, creating a paradox between ideal and reality. The same prevailing discourse also assigns men the roles of radical workers, loyal unionists, and party members. The strength of these identifications overshadows the breadwinner role, leaving men to pursue their political aims—even to the detriment of their family obligations—and yet not be looked down upon as anomalies. In this process, trade unions, which have become more and more hierarchical, have played a major role. The institutionalization of unions has made them more masculine and less grassroots-oriented. For example, in 1937 female cashew workers first raised the demand to be paid for kernels that happen to break during processing, but more than six decades later this grievance has still not been addressed. Many women complain that trade union leaders do not entertain “small questions” any longer—only issues that are of great political importance. They claim that women held more power in the unions in the 1940s than they have had in subsequent years.

The discourse of femininity and masculinity among low-caste women and men was not as dichotomized in the first half of the twentieth century as it was to become after the 1950s. Up to about the mid-1940s, low-caste members of both sexes were considered capable of doing hard labour, going out at night, having alcoholic drinks in a public place, providing for themselves,

and dressing only in a loincloth. By the same token, many low-caste men did not feel obliged to assert their masculinity and performed jobs that were later characterized as “women’s work”.

A new expression of femininity among low-caste young women of today is manifest in the wearing of jewellery (although most can only afford imitation gold) and in covering their bodies to a greater and greater extent. The female body has become sexualized and thereby subject to control in a way it was not in the 1930s and 1940s.

Reflecting this changed sensibility, many of the women with whom I spoke stated that, although they themselves were factory workers, they wanted their daughters to become housewives. Even women who said that their work had given them a certain amount of freedom and empowerment vis-à-vis their husbands told me the same thing. Such women have even begun to consider themselves anomalies because they are not housewives. They felt that the best way to secure a brighter future for their daughters was to get them a good husband, that is, a husband who could provide for a family. Their strategy was to “buy” a husband who had a good job by enticing him with a big dowry. Where should this money come from? Years of women’s labor is very frequently converted into dowries—in effect, a transferring of resources from women to men. It is a common strategy nowadays for poor female labourers to stop working at their formal jobs prior to retirement age, withdraw the savings they have accumulated in a pension fund, give it away as their daughter’s dowry, and start working in the informal sector.

The dowries referred to here are not so-called *stridhanas* (bestowals that remain the bride’s property), but wealth that goes to the groom or his family, often called *modern dowry*. If one looks back to the period prior to 1970, most poor cashew workers owned neither the land nor the houses they lived in – nor did they have any security at work. It is ironic that when female workers finally have obtained some resources and a little security, they surrender it again due to the dowry system. Not only do they lose the equity in their houses, but circumstances force them

from their positions as registered workers into the informal sector.

The relinquishment of *self-earned* dowries not only leads to family resources being unequally distributed among males and females, but also causes women's labour to be transferred into men's possession by having their life savings or pensions turned into *modern dowries*. Similar to the case of their mothers, young women toil at any job and at any wage under capitalist exploitation, only to see what little they accumulate pass as dowries into the hands of men.

From the perspective of the bride, then, *modern dowry* may either represent the loss of her inheritance, or the loss of her earnings. In the second case, a woman's body (of which her labour is a part) is rendered largely out of her control, benefiting others rather than herself. There is, therefore, a structural link between the cultural practice of *modern dowry* and women's economic exploitation. The highly praised achievements and human rights linked to the Kerala Model have left certain cultural phenomena in the reproductive sphere out of consideration. Looked at in terms of consequences, they have a male bias. Viewed in the context of amassing a dowry, daughters have become a burden to poor families. This may lead to a tendency to prefer sons, something that has not existed in Kerala earlier.

Ironically, a "good wife" for a low-caste man in the 1930s was a strong woman who was able to do a lot of work and provide for herself and her children. Similarly, a "good husband" for a woman of lower caste at the time was a man with a good landlord who would offer job opportunities for the woman.

The case study of the Kerala cashew workers is an illustration of how forces beyond the economic sphere affect the lives of poor workers, and especially how a shift in hegemonic gender discourse and ideology has been decisive in the ongoing struggle against capitalism. Despite the fact that the women depicted here have obtained substantially improved conditions at work and in society in general, the power discrepancy between low-caste men and women has increased in

favour of men. Low-caste women have gone through a process that we may call *effeminization*—the way a woman dresses and behaves in different spaces (i.e., in the factory, at the union, at home, and in society at large). Today, to a greater extent than in the 1940s, low-caste women are stereotyped as weak and dependent. The distinction becomes especially overt in the sphere of marriage. Although women have improved their living conditions over the past 70 years of “development”, “modernization”, and the Kerala Model, they have not achieved as much as their male counterparts; in fact, the gap between masculinity and femininity has increased considerably.

I have chosen to term the changes that have influenced women *effeminization* instead of the more common ‘feminization’ because the latter is strongly associated with such processes as ‘feminization of poverty’ or ‘feminization of labour’.<sup>15</sup> In those instances, ‘feminization’ is simply a quantitative term designating an increase in the sheer numbers of women present. The concept of *effeminization*, on the other hand, is more ideological and discursive, and has qualitative implications. Nevertheless, there is a connection between the two: *effeminization* often leads to the feminization of both labour and poverty—and this appears to be what has happened to the cashew workers. In spite of being the largest group of workers in progressive Kerala, they belong to the poorest sector of society.

Several structural forces have operated to create this situation: global capitalism, Westernization, modernization, and to some extent Sanskritization—a term used to represent the striving of people to rise in the social hierarchy by emulating higher castes. One aspect of Sanskritization is the relegation of women solely to the role of housewives. The response to such

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<sup>15</sup> For feminization of labor, see Guy Standing, “Global Feminization through Flexible Labor”, *World Development*, 1989:7, pp. 1077–1096. For feminization of poverty, see United Nations, Department of Public Information, “Review and Appraisal of the Implementation of the Beijing Platform for Action: Report of the Secretary-General”, Geneva, 2000.

forces by female workers, who should not be viewed simply as ignorant victims, has been to negotiate the best options available to them within the social structures in their quest to keep their daughters away from factory work and secure for them a brighter future through marriage.

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