Abstract

This thesis examines the complex genealogies of contemporary ideas of sexuality in Keralam, a state in the southern part of India known for its achievements in social development and gender equity. The emergence of liberal forms of sexuality in the late 20th century on a global scale and its influence has significantly restructured the public sphere in Keralam. With both the advocates of liberal sexuality and their opponents claiming to be ‘progressive’ in their approach the thesis investigates the close association between ideas of progress and ideas of morality and sexual discipline. The thesis undertakes homosexuality as a special case although its significance is foregrounded in terms of its situatedness in the locally prevalent practices, sexual traditions and norms.

The analysis here focuses on contentions in Keralam during different periods in its modern history around questions concerning sex and desire. Through an examination of important sites – contestations, networks of knowledge and cultural practices around them and their linkages with the contemporary – the thesis attempts to offer a critical understanding of the interconnections between modernity and sexuality. The thesis challenges any designation of sexuality as a silenced sphere. On the contrary sexuality remains at the centre of the cultural constructions which together constitute the regional experience of modernity. Thus my thesis also problematises the radical sexuality politics’ claims of the post 1990s India of breaking the long silence and embarking on an era of openly challenging the moral regimes.

I foreground the significance of the long and complex histories where the very definition of modernity was arrived at by engendering a language of sexual discipline in the regional context of Keralam. Just as the language of rights and politics of visibility spread across the
globe this thesis has attempted to unravel how non-normative and homoerotic sexual practices in Keralam were consistently contested and rebuked even resulting in faked representations in order to consolidate this language of discipline and morality. Thus my analysis besides disturbing the depictions of a clean progression from silence to exposition also points at how significant the contextual specific structures, systems of representation and metaphors are in reproducing the socio-sexual hegemonies.

I begin by analyzing how a new science of morals and technologies of hygiene existence was introduced during the reform movement in the late 19th century. The traditional, non-monogamous practices, labeled as non-normative, were objectified and targeted in order to consolidate the language of sexual discipline and to construct the modern subject premised upon the principles of discipline and gendered demeanour. The second chapter focuses on the transformation of smarthavicharam into a powerful archive of memories of a degenerated past, the constant depiction of the pre modern as sexually anarchic and the politics behind the representation of Thathrikkutty through a victimhood/revenge frame. The third chapter discusses the emergence of progressive realism in Malayalam literature in the mid 20th century and the shifts in the representation of body and sex. The figure of flute and its social and imaginary existence is discussed in the fourth chapter. Thus the thesis invokes time inside the region as connected through sets of argumentations and cultural practices around questions of sexual morality.