ABSTRACT

Sexual and reproductive health is an integral part of human life. The field of Sexual and Reproductive Health (SRH) is different from other components of health because they vary in practice according to the culture and are conditioned by beliefs, values and customs of each community. There exist lots of indigenous practices related to reproductive and sexual health among different communities. Some of these practices may have adverse affect on health but many surely do enrich the health of women and children. Understanding such practices and culture in an indigenous community is mostly an under explored area of research and at times a difficult task, since, for that one need to go deeply in to that culture with an emic perspective.

The actor oriented interpretive approach adopted in this research generalises how people attach meaning to objects through the process of experience and interaction. The research tries to bring out the sexual and reproductive health practices of Muthuvan women. The norms and customs they have been practicing are now undergoing changes due to the interface with external interventions which has forced the women to negotiate with their local customs and practices. This may lead to discontinuity with one system in which they are already involved and a continuity with another system. Therefore, this study attempts to understand the challenges they face while passing through different experiences as the adaptation process occurs in their kudy system.

This kind of continuity and discontinuity does occur in every community. The process of continuity and discontinuity is perceived in terms of shifts in people’s experiences in the changed contexts. In a community that lives together and interacts with one another in close proximity such interactions facilitate knowledge sharing, acceptance of others’ perceptions and sharing of experiences leading to a modified way of processing the system. This helps to develop a mutual interdependence within the system, which is fostered through interaction and negotiation. At times some of the norms, taboos and traditional systems get moderated and a negotiation takes place between power and these systems. These systems and its functions and the norms and its meaning could be developed and shaped by various processes of interaction, experiences, acceptance or resistance, dependence and negotiation within the system and outside the system.
The ontological underpinning of the study is that people’s perceptions are different according to their context, interaction and culture. It is that a human being is a subjective being and resides in a world of subjective reality in the construction of which the person is an active participant. The epistemological position is therefore guided by the fact that people are different and only by observing them one can understand or study what they do and how they interact. Going by this, the study is guided by the interpretive paradigm and utilizes the qualitative approach to understand realities. In this study, traditional practices, belief systems, rituals and customs are all intertwined to enable the human actors to introduce and establish every practice in the community. The epistemological concern of this research is the subject, the Muthuvan women living in the kudy and their subjective interpretations of reproductive health practices. The ontological understanding about Muthuvan traditional practices are influenced by gender, power and external exposure. The world view of research participants can be understood only when the researcher actively participates in all the processes and familiarizes oneself with those processes in order to form an *emic* perspective. This is done by engaging oneself with the everyday life of the researched, where understanding the ordinary becomes crucial to understand the context within which the ordinary takes place. Symbolic interactionist approach is used as an important strategy in this study, and it involves interactions between thought, language and meaning engaged by the two sets of actors (the researched and the researcher) in an attempt to understand each other.

Interface between 'tradition' and 'modernity' has been observed to be causing catastrophic effect in the Muthuvan culture. Agency and power depend crucially upon the emergence of a network of actors who become partially, though hardly ever completely, enrolled in the project of some other person or institution. Agency then entails the generation and use or manipulation of networks of social relations and the channeling of specific items (such as claims, order, goods, instruments and information) through certain nodal points of interpretation and interaction (Long 2000). What become more important to them are their local practices and customs at the same time they are negotiating the external world and modifying the system by meeting both the ends. Within this premises, the study began with the following objectives:
The Objectives of the Study

To explore the role of cultural components in sexual and reproductive health practices of Muthuvan women. Sexual and reproductive health practices of an indigenous community are important in understanding their conceptualisation of each practice and ritual associated to this area. An attempt was made to capture these interactions and to examine the various implications in their everyday life.

To analyse the dynamics of change in sexual and reproductive health practices among Muthuvan women Due to the influence of external bodies their cultural practices related to sexual and reproductive health are undergoing changes. In the interface with external world, their local practices are changing and women face challenges in their sexual and reproductive health practices.

To examine the response of Muthuvan women in the context of changes happening in their sexual and reproductive health practices It is important to understand their response and standpoint in the context of changes happening in their kudy system and their worldview.

The study was conducted among the Muthuvans of Edamalakudy, Idukki district, Kerala. Muthuvan belongs to the scheduled tribe category. Edamalakudy is a Tribal Panchayath which consists only Muthuvans with a population less than 2000. They reside inside forest and away from transportation and other facilities like communication and electricity. For the purpose of the study, Andavankudy and Ampalapadikudy were selected. Further the researcher visited other hamlets in Edamalakudy and also outside Edamalakudy which is in Marayoor. The primary research participants are the Muthuvan women and the other key informants are prominent male members from Muthuvan community and members from other adjacent tribes, health workers, Panchayath members, Government employees who associated with Muthuvans. The objectives of the study demonstrate the need for a qualitative research methodology using multiple methods for data collection that suits an ongoing process of induction. The main methods used in the study are focus group discussions, Participant and non participant observation, informal conversations, event observation and instructed indepth interviews. The researcher was staying along with them for months in different phases of field work.
In going through this exercise, the study has been structured into seven chapters. 

**Chapter 1** is an introduction to general premise of the study drawing from the research concern. It goes on to dwell upon the theories and concepts of health, health culture and sexual and reproductive health. Further this chapter deals with the various studies in the area of sexual and reproductive health and related area especially in the cultural context. The main emphasis is drawing from illustrations of people's experiences and concepts that reveal how they transcend boundaries to associate multiple meanings with experiences and symbols.

**Chapter II** Draws from the literature review to situate the study within its methodological paradigm. The study aims at exploring and understanding the health culture and the challenges faced in an indigenous community. The ontological position explains the subjective nature of reality which changes continuously based on experience and interaction. The epistemological approach of the study is guided by symbolic interactionism and ethnomethodology where the everyday life experiences and practices of people contribute to making a meaning. This involves the interaction, symbols, thoughts and experience that intertwine to create shared spaces.

The study is located on an indigenous community and is placed in a geographically isolated place and therefore their traditions and practices are relevant enough for mention. **Chapter III** describes the Muthuvans of Edamalakudy, the research setting and their general picture.

**Chapter IV** draws the growth of a Muthuvan girl amidst the cultural background of a Muthuvan community. This chapter describes the rituals associated with a girl's growth and its importance in her life. The relevance of rituals in a girl's life to mould her into the identity of a Muthuvan woman is traced here.

**Chapter V** draws from the previous chapter and dwells on the aspects of motherhood and an analysis of rituals and taboos associated to it in their culture and the contesting perspectives of women and how they have been negotiated to stay with the customs and traditions in their culture.

**Chapter VI** follows the response of Muthuvan women in the context of interface between local customs and contemporary changes. Further the interlinkages between the themes are looked into and the social and cultural aspects of sexual and
reproductive health practices of Muthuvan women are examined. The response of Muthuvan women in the interface of traditional practices and contemporary changes are highlighted here.

**Chapter VII** attempts to bring it all together and argues that the sexual and reproductive health practices of Muthuvan women are in the face of a challenge in front of contemporary practices and in this trajectory women are negotiating with their tradition and is appropriating them within their traditional system. Women respect all norms and customs in the kudy. The pollution and the related beliefs and how the women response to those practices are analysed here. The new elements that have entered into the marriage system and the Sankritisation of marriage related practices are detailed in this chapter. Further, it focuses on the centrality of cultural practices in reproductive health and the challenges of the tradition-modernity conflicts constructed by institutions and by actors that are placed in the kudy.

Here an attempt has been made to understand the significance of changes in sexual and reproductive health practices of Muthuvans in the context of their response. The shifts from their traditional practices are challenging their existence itself. Women in most cultures supposedly control their body functions and modify their daily life patterns according to convenience. This 'control' may be considered as her freedom or command over her body or could be a question of comfort. In the case of Muthuvan women in Edamalakudy it is not freedom nor command nor comfort, but is a matter of survival. The norms and taboos associated with menstruation is limiting women from the outside world during those days. Therefore the meaning attached with a contraceptive for Muthuvan is only for menstruation control and may be many of those women even do not know the actual purpose of this hormonal contraceptive. The research also attempts to put forward certain policy implications and scope for further research in the interdisciplinary approach. The researcher is a graduate in Biology and a post graduate in Social Work. Thus the multiple subjectivities of the researcher also have a bearing on the research in terms of methodology and the outcomes. This has been amply reflected upon, at suitable places in the thesis.