Chapter 8

Summary and Conclusion

Social space is a gendered space. The concept of gender is central to the understanding of women’s space throughout history. Gender identity is deeply rooted in the overall social space and in the habitus of women and men alike. This gendered habitus is acquired during the socialization process and asserted and perpetuated by the social structure. Women’s habitus (as well as men’s) is influenced by past experiences of women themselves and the community or group to which they belong. These experiences are carried over to the present, unconsciously shaping their beliefs, perceptions, thoughts and actions, in short, their dispositions and their world-view. They are conditioned to that, accepting it as ‘the natural order of things’.

The changing social space of women sought to be analysed in the context of the social and political evolution of the wider community as the former is embedded in the latter. The social analysis should be done in a historical perspective, for the space have evolved through a series of historical processes. In this process developed varying social spaces with different dispositions and there by new habitus. The position of women in the space also got transformed. Meanwhile in the changing social space
new strategies are developed to keep the women 'in their position'. Masculine domination exerts its power, disguised as hold of tradition. This process, while overtly allowing the players to make new moves in the social space covertly keeps them under its fold. Review of literature explicitly shows that there is a major gap in the local women studies to explain the shifting social space. This study is an attempt to discover the changing social space of women and the formation of new dispositions disrupting the traditional habitus and the agencies responsible for that. Bourdieu’s concept of space, capital, Habitus and field is followed for this study. For analytical convenience the study is divided into various periods.

**Major findings**

The spread of Brahmin religious symbolic system resulted in the stratification of the traditional communities, devaluing the manual jobs as polluting, placing the traditional occupation which requires physical work in degraded categories, the work and workers closely related to land in the lowest strata. The regulations were inscribed in the spatial distance allotted to various communities. In traditional societies emphasis was given to the organic and religious life and the collective interest rather than that of the individual. Each caste and community had their own rules and regulations for women, within their caste space. The division was based more on the caste and communal lines than that of gender, the caste differentiation being more prominent. They were part of the caste group to which they
belong, constrained by the caste and religious practices. Meanwhile the position of women was inferior to that of men within the caste space. According to the rules and regulation based on purity and pollution, women were considered doubly polluting, especially in certain periods of their life due to constructed gender difference. In early tribal culture of the region menstruation or attaining the reproductive capacity was a matter of celebration. But in caste society it became a means of discrimination of women. In tribal societies the sexes were considered as complementary, their roles and status different, but equal. The reproductive work as well as the domestic work was devalued in caste society, degrading the position of women.

The division of labour based on gender is practiced from traditional period onwards. This phenomenon is a social construction and social structure. It appears to represent the natural order of the world, since it is based on the division of sexual labour and thus has biological foundation.

Position of Syrian Christian women was influenced by the patriarchal values of the community. They had a strong belief in St. Thomas tradition, their way of life and religious practices expressed as “Marthomayude margavum Vazhipadum”. Yet they claimed a higher status in the social formation saying that they were converted from Brahmins. The main characteristic feature of the community was adherence to patriarchal practices in the
religious as well as social field and the legendary respect to elders. The position of women in patriarchal culture is always inferior. The space of Syrian Christian women was thus regulated by caste and patriarchal community practices in traditional social formation.

During Portuguese intervention, the caste identity of Syrian Christians was questioned and the formation of a new religious identity differentiated from caste hierarchy was initiated. The synod of Udayamperoor took some emancipatory measures for Christian women. The Decree concerning the inheritance of daughters in the absence of sons, diluted the patriarchal structure. Similarly the removal of the stigma related to the caste practices, the notion of uncleanness and impurity in certain periods of the life cycle of women, challenged the caste practices (even though the practice of pollution and the restriction to go to the church after childbirth for a short period continued among Syrian Christians of some places). Attempts to abolish child marriage, which was the custom of the region for Christians as well as for other communities, is a notable change. A few modifications were incorporated in the canon laws of the Syrian Jacobite Church also. These decrees enabled women to improve their position in a highly patriarchal community although diffused very slowly and in the course of time.
The spread of modern education initiated by the Christian Missionaries for both men and women accelerated the individuation process and became the stepping-stone for reform movements for all communities. Major changes took place in the social space, especially in the caste space due to the interaction with the British, with the British ways of administration where equality rather than ones origin became the concept, remodeling of judiciary by affirming the rights of the individual (hitherto caste offences were regarded as offences against the state, the same law was immediately made effective with regard to British and the “Native Subject”). introduction of plantation crops, construction of roads and railway line providing job opportunities for all irrespective of caste. Due to their close contact with the missionaries, the reformation commenced with the Syrian Christian community. The formation of community organisations with individual membership, indicate the formation of an individual identity different from corporate and relational membership of the traditional social space. In the socialisation process there emerged a new subjectivity, that of “Malayalee”. Political as well as non-political organisations, with individual membership, prompted to strive for the formation of a civil society.

Women’s education brought about changes in their habitus. Reading habit helped the development of mental faculties and thereby an individuality of their own. European teachers introduced a new role model
as teachers and leaders, persons having some interest other than family and working for the transformation of society, which was hitherto unknown to them. Girls residing away from their homes, in the boarding schools for the first time in the history helped to break some traditional customs and superstitious practices, thereby initiating the process of the formation of a new habitus. A new type of community living was introduced. Education helped to change some social practices such as the age of marriage. Women entered salaried jobs and they participated in social activities. The emergence of nuclear families initially due to job opportunities in distant places, created more interactive space for husband, wife and children, thus changing the domestic space. There were some changes seen in the religious space, regular attendance of more women in the church services, and place of women in reformed churches arranged side by side with that of men (in traditional churches the place of women was behind that of men). The social transformation has happened first among the upper and middle class women of all communities with universal education and gradually spread to other sections of the population.

However the space evolved was a gendered one. Unknowingly, the education imparted by the missionaries was gender biased. Emphasis was given to the domestic training and the inculcation of religious principles, intended to make them better housewives. This helped to relegate women to traditionally feminine role and confine them to the domestic space.
establishing the patriarchal order that had far reaching consequences in the development of the social space of women in later periods.

The question of gender reemerged in the social space of independent India. Although equal rights and opportunities irrespective of gender were ensured in Indian constitution, equal participation of women was not realised. Women entered the political space through the freedom struggle (In Travancore it was the struggle for responsible government). However participation in the political process especially in elected representative bodies except as voters is very less. As mentioned earlier, devaluation of women’s work, dividing the social space into public and private space (private as domestic space) and women confined to domestic space, symbolic universe of religion, the gender oriented courses in education, the denial of equal property rights to women, continuation of the practice of dowry, the lack of institutional organisational structure for women’s participation in socio-political structures constructed subjugated or inferior self in women.

Work participation is an important indicator of explaining the position of women in the social space. Economic subordination or low ‘economic capital’ of women is one of the major factors that influence the position of women in the social configuration at any point of time. Work participation rates among women are low mainly concentrated in
traditional occupations such as teaching and nursing among the middle class and in coir factories, fish and cashew-processing, small-scale industrial units for the lower middle class women. Some women are employed in home nursing and as sales girls. In all these areas the chances of exploitation in the form of low salary, long working hours and sexual harassment are high. The sexual division of labour is another important factor that contributes to the economic subordination of women. Domestic work by women is grossly undervalued.

The law in itself does not provide economic freedom without developing appropriate structures. Absence of proper inheritance laws for women, dowry not as the share of parental property to be managed by her but as ‘sale money’ given to the bride-groom is the basis of economic subordination of women. As a result the female child is regarded as a liability to the parents resulting in increased rate of female foeticide. The law banning pre-natal sex identification alone is unable to prevent this social evil. In addition to this, in patriarchal societies male offspring continues the lineage, hence the preference for the male child.

Women possess low cultural capital as well. All throughout history cultures have attributed a lower position to women. This has been established through andro-centric myths, legends and proverbs. In the story of creation, woman has been picturised as fallen. Caste society regarded
her as doubly polluting. In the modern and post-modern social formations women are undervalued, pushing them to the domestic space. In all these instances the biological difference is projected as the basis for degradation and endorsed as the 'natural order of things'. What appears as 'natural' is the result of deliberate action by agencies and interrelated institutions of family, religion and the state.

In Indian culture 'motherhood' is illustrated as the innate essence of woman, 'the mother of sons', loving, caring, sacrificing her whole self for the family. Placed in a pedestal, she is to be worshipped in any form suitable for the time and space; (as 'sati mata' the devote wife, as goddess 'Durga' the powerful female incarnation, as 'Bharat mata' to be protected from invaders during the freedom struggle). Thus she is placed away from the transactions of day today life, from the power relations and struggles. In mundane activities, her agency is degraded and dominated. Women themselves internalise this value system of the society. Their 'habitus' and dispositions are formed accordingly. Thus their symbolic capital is very low, incapable of recognising the dominating value system. They also lack the means to put forward effective resistance to overcome the same.

All these factors lead to low social capital for women. They lack the power to intervene in the struggles of the social field to improve their position. They are also unable to resist various strategies employed by
individual agency, religion and the state to perpetuate masculine domination. Very few women, enhanced by their education and family status were able to acquire social capital. They too were not able to act freely or escape fully from the clutches of masculine domination.640

Symbolic violence also plays a role in the dominated position of woman. Symbolic violence is a gentle violence, not imposed forcefully but is projected as legitimate. The dominated accept it as the natural condition or the way things should be. Symbolic violence acts through misrecognition. The dominated accept the domination as the natural order of things. The strength of the masculine order lies in the fact that it dispenses with justification, based on biological order. Bourdieu points that the andocentric vision imposes itself as neutral and has no need to spell itself out in discourses aimed at legitimising it.641

Feminine disposition is inculcated by the family and the whole social order in umpteen ways, helping to reinforce the fundamental sexual dichotomy. It may be expressed as ‘chivalrous protection’ or need for security of girls, ‘call to order’ or submissiveness. This has been inscribed in the order of things by silent injunctions or muted threats. The sexual dichotomy is evident in the selection of courses at schools or colleges (home science or history more suited for girls for they need just a degree

\[\text{640 The case of Naliny Netto (a senior i A.S officer) who had to face sexual harassment in work place in late 1990s is the best example (the case is still going on in the court).}\]

\[\text{641 Bourdieu, Masculine... op. cit., p 9}\]
before marriage). Bourdieu is of the opinion that the social order functions as an immense symbolic machine tending to ratify the masculine domination on which it is founded. This process is visible in the sexual division of labour. Certain jobs and professions were projected as ‘not suitable’ for women. This directs women away from contact with all aspects of the real world ‘for which they are not made’.\(^6\)\(^4\)\(^2\) This dichotomy is projected in all aspects of social life, domestic space, religious institutions and in work place.

In traditional societies, the masculine domination was experienced as patriarchal authority and passed on to later social formations with certain modifications. It moved beyond constraints by force to consent to reasons and from mechanical coercion to voluntary, free and deliberate submission on the part of women. The effect of symbolic domination is exerted not by conscious awareness but through schemes of perception, appreciation and action that are a part of one’s habitus. This perception acts beyond the level of consciousness and control of the will. It also produces a cognitive relationship between the dominant and the dominated that is not visible but obscure.\(^6\)\(^4\)\(^3\) So it is necessary to recognize the underlying forces of masculine domination by reflexive thinking in order to build up strategies to overcome this force for the liberation of the dominated. Because the

\(^6\)\(^4\)\(^2\) ibid. p 62
\(^6\)\(^4\)\(^3\) ibid p 36ff
effect of symbolic domination is the product of unconscious adjustment to the probabilities associated with the objective structure of the dominated and their submissive dispositions. Bourdieu describes the paradoxical logic of masculine domination and feminine submissiveness as both spontaneous and extorted, which can be understood only by the durable effects that the social order exerts on women (and men) through the dispositions spontaneously attuned to that order.⁶⁴⁴

Women have their own explanations and logic for the spontaneous submission to the social order. For example, in Syrian Christian community (as most other communities of Kerala) arranged marriage remains the general practice. Women themselves prefer arranged marriage for they require the continued support of their parents and brothers. Marriage is considered as the ultimate aim in their life. Most of the girls are highly educated for parents prefer to send them to some educational institution till they are married (not engaging these girls in studies or jobs is looked down upon by others). Even employed girls are willing to resign their jobs for the sake of the family. Bourdieu points out that marriage is the prime means of acquiring a social position for women. The girls preference for husbands a few years senior to them (so that they can respect them), their willingness to accept a dowry rather than an equal share in

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⁶⁴⁴ ibid p 37
parental property (for boys have to look after their parents) indicate submissiveness to the traditional model of masculine domination.

Symbolic force is a form of power that is exerted on bodies as well. The power relations are reflected as embodied dispositions in bodily hexis. It is through embodied dispositions that the symbolic power is activated. The custom which requires women to cover their heads while attending church service (sometimes endorsed by priests), protest against new dress codes especially by the elders of the family can be cited as examples. Bourdieu opines that immense primary labour is needed to bring about a durable transformation of bodies and to produce permanent dispositions that it gets activated. This process starts from childhood onwards. He pointed out that the transformation action is very powerful because it is exerted invisibly and insidiously through insensible familiarisation with a symbolically structural physical world.

Progressive changes in the disposition and the full personhood of women can be achieved only when family practices are altered. For early prolonged experience of interaction is formed in family and influenced by the structure of domination. Within the same family with the same traditional background, the opportunities given to the girls vary according to the dispositions of the parents. This is well evident in the lives of women who attained top positions.

ibid 38
The formation and self construction of women cannot be achieved by mere empowerment programme. An awareness of the effects of the deep-rooted habitus of women and the social order as a whole is necessary. Bourdieu points out that “the passion of the dominated habitus- a somatised social relationship, a social law converted into an embodied law, are not of the kind that can be suspended by a simple effort of will founded on a liberatory awareness of consciousness. Symbolic violence cannot be overcome with the weapons of consciousness and will alone. This is because the effect and conditions of its efficiency are durably and deeply embedded in the body in the form of dispositions developed from childhood onwards. This is expressed through kinship relations (filial love, fraternal love, maternal love etc) and also expressed by ‘the call to duty’ towards children, parents and so on.

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646 Bourdieu, Masculine...Op. cit., p 39