Chapter 3

Touching the Untouched: Historicizing Rituals around Virginity

1. Clearing the Ground
   1.1. Talikettu and the Age of Consent Debate
   1.2. Talikettu and the Normative Social Sciences

2. The Ritual Wound: Descriptions of Talikettu
   2.1 Travel Writing
   2.2 Administrative Writing
   2.3 Ethnographic Explanations
   2.4 Kathaleen Gough: Limits of Psychoanalytic Explanations

3. The Vexed Virgin: The Body between Brahmanic Scriptures and English Law

4. Reformist Reconstruction of Talikettu
   4.1 Ezhava Reform
   4.2 Nair Reform

5. From Virgin and Bride to ‘Virgin Bride’
Chapter 3

Touching the Untouched: Historicizing the Rituals around Virginity

Few details of the sexual life of primitive people are so alien to our own feelings, as their estimate of virginity, the state in a woman of being untouched. The high value a suitor places on a woman’s virginity seems to us so firmly rooted so much a matter of course that we find ourselves at loss if we have to give reasons for this opinion.

Sigmund Freud, *Taboo of Virginity*, 1908

While small minority of strict conservatives still maintain that the *tali-kettu* is the real marriage intended to confer on the bridegroom a right to cohabit with the bride, an immense majority describe it as a fictitious marriage *the origin of which they are at a loss to explain*.


Virginity is a puzzling concept as it brings up the question of the interaction between the sexual and the cultural. By constantly referring to the body and always characterizing the body as a ‘physical thing’ it acquires naturalness and in that sense suggests an originary
position to begin with. The above two quotations show the difficulty in addressing the question of virginity. Here, both the European male and the Indian male invariably arrive at the same place while trying to ‘touch’ the virgin. It might not be coincidental that both of them use the same figure of speech while addressing the question and admit that they are ‘at loss of explanation’. I do not want to suggest that virginity has some inherent qualities attached to it, which place men uncomfortably against the loss or the abyss so that they are forced to ask questions about the origin of culture. Such an argument will take on the stand of there being a pre-cultural body that could anchor discussions around ‘natural origins’. But this reference to loss gives an interesting entry point to the discussions on ritualizations around virginity. Because all the rituals of virginity documented in anthropology in general or addressed in the chapter in particular are rituals that affirm or assert the loss of virginity – ‘rituals of defloration’ as anthropology puts it. This empirical fact invites our attention to the temporality of virginity and defloration as something that affirms this temporality. It has been argued that defloration is a more complex process which makes the temporality more ambiguous by ‘re-marking what is lost or passed’ (Davis, 1993, p. 10). This chapter engages with the discourse around defloration which produces an ambivalent figure of the virgin who oscillates between being valuable and being problematic. The chapter analyses matrilineal and patrilineal customs around virginity, and Indian and European ideas of marriage and attempts to foreground the cultural economy of virginity which is crucial to understanding the contemporary First Night.
1. Clearing the Ground

*Talikettu kalyanam* or *kettukalyanam* or *talikettu* (*talikettu* from here onwards) was a pre-pubertal rite observed by matrilineal and some of the patrilineal groups in Keralam. The rite as it is invoked in the chapter is informed by anthropological writing and Malayalam descriptions of the rite circulating in the culture. Travel writing and colonial ethnography describes the rite as involving actual or ceremonial defloration of virgins and in most accounts it is represented as a pre-pubertal rite. However I was not able to find an expression or word in the Malayalam descriptions that is an exact translation of the term ‘deflowering.’ One term that comes close to deflowering is ‘Sekam’. It comes from the Brahmin ritual of *Nishekam* – a ritual acknowledging the first copulation. The usage of this expression is limited to upper caste matrilineal groups.¹ There are expressions that suggest the transition in status the rite brings about in a woman’s life tacitly, which has also been documented by colonial ethnographers. For instance, take the expression “*taliketti ammayaavuka*” (Thurston and Rangachari, 1909, p. 327). This can be translated as “after *tali* tying one becomes mother”. This expression suggests a transition of body and identity. I would like to bring attention to the negotiation over the origin, meaning and purpose of this rite in different locations such as travel writing, colonial ethnography, and colonial administrative writing. The reformist effort to reconstruct the rite also reproduces the contestations over the meaning and purpose of this rite. But before getting

---

¹ Another expression is the word “*Kumarakkikkuka*” which from ancient Malayalam and the word is a combination of two words *kumaru* or *komaru* and *azhikkal* where *kumaru* means lock and *azhikkal* can be unlocking. Thus *kumarakkikkal* becomes unlocking the lock. The word belongs to old Malayalam and is not currently in use. [http://ml.wiktionary.org/wiki/കുമരക്കിക്കു](http://ml.wiktionary.org/wiki/കുമരക്കിക്കു)
into such discussions it is important to clear the ground so that the discussion could caution itself from reproducing some of the problems it is trying to address.

1.1. *Talikettu* and the Age of Consent Debate

Whenever I have searched the Kerala State Archive (KSA) for accounts of *talikettu* I was guided to early twentieth century debates around child marriage and Age of Consent. Initially I was enthusiastic as it was the first time I had access to something ‘solid’ from the archive. But simultaneously the archive was dragging me to an object called ‘child marriage’. The accounts of *talikettu* available to me through ethnographic sources were informing me that there was no ‘child’ in *talikettu*. Some accounts talked about the figure of the ‘Kanyaka’ or ‘Kumari’². The apparent inter-changeability of the accounts of *talikettu* and Age of Consent debates in the physical registers and in the semantic and heuristic registers of the archive is illuminating. Accounts of *talikettu* and Age of Consent debates are often plotted contiguously in the archive and might be the reason why the slippage between virgin (*Kanyaka*) and girl child (*Balika*) went unnoticed. But this slippage is suggestive of a further problem and sets into motion a number of questions around modernity and sexuality.

² Kumari and *Kanyaka* are the two terms used in these accounts and it can be translated as Virgin. Kumari is the one who has passed *balyam* (childhood) and has reached *koumaram* (teenage). She is no longer a *baalika* or girl child. As per the definition of the word *Kanyaka*, she is a 10-year-old woman. After ten years she would be known as *rajaswala* -‘menstruating woman’. Both these terms if rigorously followed, their etymological root suggests pre-pubertal woman. But broadly they represent or suggest the transition to womanhood. It is precisely the tensions around the definitions of terms and its connection with understanding womanhood that this chapter tries to address.
Age of Consent debates in colonial India is well documented. ‘child bride’ or ‘child wife’ and ‘marital rape’ are the major issues that come under the scanner of this scholarship. This scholarship has shown the dynamics of nationalist politics which worked on Age of Consent and child marriage while creating a gendered narrative of nationalism. This scholarship most often talks about the child bride by placing her within the matrices of state, legality and community. I would like to argue that this matrix places many constraints on opening up the domain and is seldom helpful in addressing the liminal space that makes a bride out of the child. While discussing the Age of Consent debate or child marriage debates, it would be useful to pause for a moment and ask: consent for what? This question directly takes the debates to the first instance of penetrative sex which might or might not involve the rupturing of hymen. It is interesting to note that, this scholarship finds it difficult to address that moment and any reference to this act of penetrative sex appears as marital rape. It is the sexual act which set the backdrop of the discussions around Age of Consent debates in this scholarship, but it is precisely this act which escapes theoretical attention in this scholarship. It becomes the unspeakable act that looms large over these debates as an act that informs them and yet is ineffable to them. And whenever it confronts the narrative gravity of such an account where death and blood marks the contours of the body and bodily exchanges, this scholarship finds it difficult to attend to the lived body and it rather explains the lived body in terms of large historical processes.

---

3 See Nair (1995, p. 157-186) and Sarkar (1993, p. 1869-78) for a detailed discussion on the figure of the child wife in the late nineteenth century colonial India.
One way of making sense of this moment of death is with the emerging ideas of ‘right to life.’ Tanika Sarkar in “Pre-history of Rights: The Age of Consent Debates in Colonial Bengal” (2003) explains the Age of Consent debates as the gradual emergence of a modern legal apparatus where rights were transferred from family-kin-community nexus to the individual female body and self. Her discussion of the Age of Consent debates in colonial West Bengal starts with the description of the case involving the death of a girl named Phulomonee on her wedding night. It starts with the statement of Phulomonee’s mother Radhamonee in the court, “I saw my daughter lying on the cot, weltering in blood” (Sarkar, 2003, p. 226). This description presents a difficult situation for any feminist scholar and Tanika Sarkar explains how “consent” becomes the “polyvalent, mid-term word, containing the seeds of concepts about personhood and right” not only in the legal discourse but also in the emerging public sphere (ibid, p. 227). So what about the girl who was lying on the cot? Can we understand her life and her death by moving along the vectors of personhood and rights? By seeking ‘Pre-history of Rights’ in the debates around the death of Phulomonee, Tanika Sarkar implicitly acknowledges the limitations of legal discourse in engaging with such moments.

Sites of defloration – whether actual or ritual – can be puzzling for women and feminists, who invariably employ the very idea of consent to explain and negotiate their own and other women’s ‘sexual’ experiences. On a confessional node, I myself find the scene of the ‘daughter lying on the cot weltering in blood’ primal and unspeakable. It comes to me as an act of sexual violence or violation and not as a physical act of rupturing the hymen. And my immediate response is to condemn it politically. But I cannot engage with it. I denounce it to ‘get over’ it. I do not know whether my sisters or I will ever ‘get over’
with the reading of Phulomonee’s case. But from where does this discomfort, this feeling of violation, transgression or disruption stem? What is cultural about this sexual act?

In a way, an attempt to understand my own discomfort as a feminist researcher with the accounts of ritual defloration shapes this inquiry. The question that guides this inquiry in that sense is whether there is anything in these accounts that resist an explanation with modern categories of sexuality? And was it the linear transition from family-kin-community nexus to the modern individual, who has a sufficiently individuated self to give ‘consent’? And the more important question: Is the notion of consent sufficient to understand and negotiate through these experiences? Are they sexual experiences? This question is part of a larger enquiry that ponders over the connection between modernity and sexuality. It probably helps to understand the very formation of modern sexual subjects who negotiate the experience of sexual relation where age and consent emerge as two major nodes of autonomy and sexual agency. I keep these questions in mind while making an exploration into the debates around talikettu, an official rite of passage in a culture at a particular historical period. These debates provide a useful lens to look at the transformations in the language around virginity during the colonial encounter. In the process they help to see the emergence of First Night as an event crucial to the formation of the modern family.

1.2. Talikettu and the Normative Social Sciences Since this discussion tries to delve deep into a domain which has been studied over and over by Kinship Studies and Structural Anthropology, it is essential to acknowledge their passage through normative Social Sciences. Structural Anthropology and Kinship studies were at the heart of
colonial regime providing epistemic justification to its inherent assumptions of ‘progressive West and primitive East’. This field of study exerted great influence on social-scientific knowledge production during the nineteenth and the early twentieth centuries. This field of study has created many models of kinship which were taken as a pre-linguistic given and has enjoyed an immutable status. The current discussion while engaging with domains denoted with terms such as ‘matriliny’ and ‘patriliny’ tries to acknowledge their passage through this normative scholarship. This chapter will address an array of rites and customs that have been labelled as patrilineal or matrilineal. But sometimes these rites do not belong even empirically to patrilineal or matrilineal groups or any of the given classifications. And in such situations the chapter will try not to trim down those elements in a rite that would not fit in neatly with the given ideas of matriliny or patriliny. ‘Kerala Matriliny’ is a dominant location available within this normative scholarship. And any study that tries to engage with this space invariably reproduces that matrix of power relations that has contributed to the hyper visibility of ‘Kerala matriliny’ within scholarship. This study might not be free from it and it is quite possible that there can be internal critique of this selection itself. But while looking at this site of difference I do not wish to endorse it as a unique arrangement free from patriarchy or do not wish to project a pre-colonial permissive past marked with fluidity of relations. This chapter addresses Kerala Matriliny with a different set of questions and these questions do not begin and end with the uniqueness of Sambandham. The question of Sambandham and the nineteenth century legal battle around it is one of the anchoring points of scholarship on matriliny.¹ But the focus of the current chapter is not the permissive legal discourse on

¹ Matriliny generally, and the arrangements of cohabitation particularly were a point of great excitement to
Sambandham. I would like to argue that Sambandham being the closest of the Indian and European marriage, at least could project itself as a point of difference. While the other two customs where not allowed that privileged position of representing matriliny. The transformations these three customs went through in nineteenth century and early twentieth century are illuminating in this instance. A plea was made to legalize Sambandham and it was projected as a stable monogamous conjugal marriage. But the other two customs were rendered completely meaningless through social and community reform, a point this chapter tries to revisit later.

The point this discussion tries to drive home is that whatever the function and meaning of talikettu it was exclusive neither to Keralam nor to matrilineal communities, but warrants a crisis in representation fuelled by “administrative empiricism” (Ganguly, 2006, p. 35). This administrative empiricism recast, framed and contained most of the pre-colonial social and cultural practices “within a colonial taxonomic apparatus”(ibid, p.36). The practice of talikettu mentioned in this chapter is documented primarily among matrilineal groups but there are also evidences of traces of these customs practiced among tribal and other lower caste non-matrilineal groups in Keralam and other parts of south India. C. A.

many writers. There were three different customs related to the matrilineal marriage; namely talikettukalyanam –pre-puberty ritual of defloration, Thirandukalyanam - puberty ritual and Sambandham, or Mangalam - the customary marriage. Among them the question of Sambandham has received extraordinary visibility both in academic scholarship and in the official colonial discourse and is argued to be the locus of the community’s plea to reform matriliny. See Praveena Kodoth (2001, p. 349-384) for a discussion on the representations of Sambandham in reformist, colonial and academic scholarship. See Robin Jeffrey (1976) for a detailed discussion on the transformation of Nair matriliny.
Innes (Innes, [1908] 1997) gives a detailed list of castes among whom the *talikettu* or similar practices were alive. He observes the rite is common among all matrilineal and patrilineal castes except patrilineal Brahmins and “polluting castes” (ibid, p. 124; 172). *Castes and Tribes of Southern India*, (Thurston and Rangachari, 1909) documents this rite among many lower caste groups who practice variations of patriliny and fraternal polyandry. They observe pre-pubertal *talikettu* among *Panan* (1908, p. 33), *Tandan* (1909, p. 11), and among *Valans* (1907, p. 283). Among the Pulayas, primarily a patrilineal group, girls went through a pre-pubertal rite of *Tandakalyanam* which was different from real marriage (1909, p. 22-23). The practice of *talikettu* is observed among Parayans and all the sub-castes of Kammalans such as Marasari (Carpenter), Kallasari (Mason), Musari (Brazier), Karuvan (Black smith), and Thattan (Goldsmith) (Menon, 1911, p. 203-205)

Edgar Thurston in his book *Ethnographic Notes* (Thurston, 1906) gives an elaborate account of what he calls ‘initiation rituals’ in many parts of south India and Orissa. Though there are minor variations in the nature and essentials of the rite, the form of these rituals remains the same. He notes that a rite similar to the *tali* rite was observed by all castes except Brahmin in Orissa (ibid, p. 34). Thurston says, “the girl is married to an arrow, if a suitable husband has not been found for her before she reaches puberty. The actual marriage may take place anytime afterwards” (ibid, p. 35). He quotes Mysore Census Reports (1901) to prove that the lower caste groups of Mysore followed an initiation ritual which involved pre-puberty marriage of girls. His accounts present the initiation rites of the Sudras of Ganjam district (ibid, p. 41), Billavas or the toddy tappers of South Canara (ibid, p. 47), and Chakkilians or Telugu leather workers (ibid, p. 147). A
detailed account of the initiation rituals of the Basavi caste (the dancing girls or the devadasis) of Bellary district of Karnataka too can be found in the notes (ibid, p. 39-40). All these rites hold close resemblance to the *talikettu* explained in the context of Malabar by travel writers from 15th to 18th centuries. Thurston notes similar rites in *Castes and Tribe of Southern India*.

It has been observed that in the beginning of nineteenth century 50% percent of the population of Keralam followed matriliny (Tharamangalam 1994 c.f Arunima, 2003, p. 2). If the non-matrilineal groups who followed the practice of talikettu is added to this percentage, then it can be seen to have been a common practice in the beginning of the nineteenth century. It is necessary to engage with the form and functions of these rituals without losing its empirical specificity before extending the argument beyond ‘matriliny in Keralam’. The available accounts hint towards the possibility of a space beyond the celebrated ‘Kerala Matriliny’ to wider social arrangements and communities. However the present discussion focuses primarily on the debates around *talikettu* among Nairs and Ezhavas, two dominant matrilineal communities in Keralam. One reason behind this selection is that the legal and reformist intervention which redefined the significance and meaning of the customs and practices in these two communities have exerted its influence and pioneered changes in other matrilineal and patrilineal communities in

---

5 It requires further work to create an archive on *talikettu*. This would help to advance the argument that in the beginning of nineteenth century it was not just a matrilineal practice but a practice that hinted towards the possibility of a pre-colonial space; a space where what has come to be called as matrilineal, patrilineal and mixed inheritance groups followed this ritual (except Brahmins, Christians and Muslims). Creation of such an archive is beyond the scope of the present project and this project mentions those practices to suggest a way to emerge out of the celebrated model of ‘Kerala Matriliny.’
twentieth century Keralam. Another reason is that the ‘transformation of matriliney’ as an already available trope of academic discussion provides a launch pad to ask the question with more empirical specificity.

The chapter highlights the descriptions, debates and disputes around talikettu to show how this custom lost its ability to signify itself. It examines how the idea of defloration inbuilt in these rites is then slowly erased and taken over by a new logic of contagion that informs the idea of ‘corporeal intactness’ which defines the virginal body. The attempt here is to understand the ideas of virginity circulating in the culture in relation to the rites of the different caste groups and communities in Keralam and its connection with marriage. Or in other words the chapter delineates how discussions around virginity and marriage collate two figures, namely virgin and bride, to produce the virgin bride. As a first step this inquiry analyses accounts of talikettu available in travel writing, colonial administrative writing and colonial ethnography before attempting an engagement with the reformist reconstruction of the rite.

2. The Ritual Wound: Descriptions of Talikettu

This section engages with three different corpuses of writing that describes and explains the rite of talikettu. In some of them the link this ritual has with virginity is evident. In some others it is a mooted problem where there is silent acknowledgment and active resistance on engaging with questions related to virginity or defloration. Whenever the link is visible virginity is laid out as an ‘unclean thing’ or virginal defloration as a primitive or savage practice.
2.1. Travel Writings

Travel writings and engagements with it is a contested terrain. In Post Colonial scholarship travel writing is aligned with other textual practices associated with colonial expansion such as mapping and ethnography. All of these are critiqued for the “imperial eye” (Pratt, 2003). But there have been attempts to take the project forward so that the engagement does not stop with the acknowledgement of the imperial eye at the heart of the genre, rather begins with it. Such engagements try to unearth the capacity of this genre addressing the politics of representation (Mohanty, 2003; Claire, 2011). While reading the description of *talikettu* in travel writing one cannot but notice the awe and wonder expressed by European writers on the spectacle they had witnessed. The Post Colonial impulse would be to dismiss them for exoticizing the culture difference. Drawing from Stephen Greenblatt (Greenblatt, 1992) who has argued for the recognition and acknowledgement of wonder in travel narratives as a remarkably tolerant gesture of culture difference, this reading tries to engage with this ‘wonderful accounts’ than to dismiss them for being wonderful.

Accounts of ritual defloration can be found in most European travel writers’ description of Malabar.⁶ It is described as a pre-pubertal rite and is explained as a temporary relationship involving defloration of the pre-pubertal girl. The earliest accounts are

---

⁶ In most of the early travel writing, Malabar stood for the entire geographical stretch from the Indian Ocean to the Western Ghats as its two borders. It is from the 19th century onwards that Malabar becomes the British districts of South and North Malabar in the colonial writings. This is a much more geographically limited area and included Kannur, Palakkad, Kozhikkode and Malapuram districts and also parts of Kasargod district. The rest of Malabar consisted of the native states of Travancore and Cochin. Parts of Kasargod belonged to the South Canara district of the British Empire.
available from travel writers such as, Pedro Alvares, Ludovico di Varthema and Duarante Barbosa. All the three give a description of a rite as it existed in the 15th century AD. These accounts suggest that in the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries defloration of a virgin in the Malabar Coast was done by a man of authority. It could be a Brahmin (in the case of wealthy families and the royal family), a stranger, and sometimes foreigners too were invited to perform this act. In his accounts the Portuguese sailor and explorer Pedro Alvares, who came to Calicut in 1500 AD, talks about Nair women “who beg the men to deprive them of their virginity” (as cited in Westermack 1922, p. 184). The reason given for this act is that “they can find no husbands as long as they remain virgins” (ibid, p. 184). Barbosa’s narrative talks about prenuptial defloration by an idol in the South Indian coast. (Barbosa, 1866, p. 184) He also talks about having come across mothers in Malabar who were begging strangers to take away their daughter’s virginity (Barbosa 1866, p. 125-126). Varthema provides the description of the defloration of the King’s sister (Varthema, 1863). Varthema’s account is given below which talks about the custom of the royal family. His account does not refer to virginity as an unclean thing.

The king of said city [Tarnassery] does not cause his wife’s virginity to be taken by the Brahmins as the King of Calicut does, but he causes her to be deflowered by white men, whether Christians or Moors, provided they be not pagans. Which pagans also, before they conduct their wives to their house, find a white man, of whatever country he may be, and take him to their house for this particular purpose, to make him deflower the wife. And this happened to us when we arrived in the said city. (Varthema, 1863, p. 121-3)
Another description made around the 15th century AD is by a Genoese merchant Hieronimo di Santo Stefano. It says, “the men never marry any woman who is a virgin; but if one being a virgin, is betrothed, she is delivered over before the nuptials for some other person for fifteen or twenty days in order that she may be deflowered” (as cited in Westermack 1922, p. 184). The Muslim traveller Shaikh Zainuddin, who visited Malabar during the fifteenth century, also notes the similar customs among the Nairs. In his travelogue *Thuhfat-Al-Mujahidin*, he describes the rite under the title ‘The strange customs of Hindus of Malabar’. He observes that “there is no proper marriage among Nair. It is true that a man ties *Tali* round the neck of a woman during marriage, but he has no power over the woman. Nair woman enjoys the right to accept or reject men as per her choice” (Zainuddin, 1963, p. 71-3). Westermarck in the *History of Human Marriage* quotes two more European travellers who had documented the practice of inviting foreigners to deflower a virgin.

Verhoeven states that when a lord or noble man in Calicut marries, he hires either a Brahmin or a white man to spend the first night with the bride and pays him about four or five hundred florins for doing so. …Roggewin adds that “this was formerly a considerable advantage to such foreigners as were settled here, the Malabars making choice of them, rather than their own countrymen; and on such occasions they made very large presents which sometimes amounted to 500 or 600 florins: but of late days, this source is quite dried up, for the Brahmins are become so very religious that they take care never to be out of the way when this part of the duty is to be performed. (Westermack, 1922, p. 187)
A comparatively later account is provided by Buchanan who had visited Malabar in 1800 AD. He considered the arrangement an “extraordinary manner of conducting intercourse between the sexes in Malayala” (ibid, p. 411-412). His account describes the rite as follows:

The Nairs marry before they are ten years of age, in order that the girl may not be deflowered by the regular operations of nature; but the husband never afterwards cohabits with his wife. Such a circumstance, indeed, would be considered as very indecent. …She lives in her mother’s house or after her parent’s death with her brothers and cohabits with any person that she chooses of an equal or higher rank than her own. (ibid, p. 411-2)

2.2. Administrative Writing

By the beginning of twentieth century another type of description came into prominence which not only assume truth value but also has tried to codify and classify native life. These descriptions are part of the official colonial discourse and appear as instruments of governance. Bernard Kohn (Kohn, 1987) and Nikolas Dirks (Dirks, 1989; 2001) in their detailed study of caste in India has shown how the colonial archive and ethnography as documented by administrative writings were recasting the life and practices of the natives in a powerful way. The administrative writings presented here range from census reports and manuals made by Western officials of East India Company to the same kind of reports and manuals made by the native officials. The Malabar Manual by William Logan was one of the most influential among these reports. Following the same path
natives wrote the *Travancore State Manual* and the *Cochin State Manual*. Travancore Census Reports followed the Madras Census Reports. The *Bulletin of Madras Museum* embodied the codification impulse of colonial governance and the ethnographic reports published from the Madras Museum documented the native life in all its details.

Detailed descriptions of *talikettukalyanam* in Malabar, Cochin and Travancore can be found in this corpus of writings. I consider them for their representational value and for the influence they have exerted on later legal discourses. These provided blue prints of rituals and customs based on which colonial courts passed legislations/judgments. These documents served as authentic records of native life and were invoked in legal discourses as undisputable evidence. Though the details of the rite vary slightly among these descriptions, major aspects of the rite remain the same throughout the two princely states and the one British territory. One interesting aspect of these descriptions is that none of them employ the word deflowering while talking about *talikettu*. The administrative writing treated it as a “formal ceremony” (Aiya, 1906, p. 352) or as a “component of marriage ceremony.”(Logan, 1906, p.135) But references to the connection the rite has with sexual initiation can be found in other writings also. For instance, *Malabar Law and Customs* written by Lawrence Moore invokes the resemblance the ritual has with the initiation ceremonies of lower caste groups in other parts of south India. He treats it as an exploitative relation introduced by Brahmins. Moore writes in *Malabar Law and Customs*, “The tali-kettukalyanam introduced by the Brahmans, brought about no improvement and indeed in all probability made matters worse by giving a quasi-religious sanction to a fictious marriage, which bears an unpleasant resemblance to the sham marriage ceremonies performed among certain inferior castes elsewhere as a cloak
for prostitution” (as cited in Thurston, 1909, p. 327). C.A Innes’ description of talikettu in Malabar Gazatteer also follows this theory of Brahmin dominance. He observes, “It seems to be generally considered that the ceremony was intended to confer the tali-tyer or Manavalan (bridegroom) a right to co-habit with the girl; and by some the origin of the ceremony is found in the claim of the Bhu-Devas or “earth Gods” (that is the Brahmins) and on a lower plain of the Kshatriyas or ruling classes, to the first fruits of lower class womanhood a right akin to the droit de seigneurie” (Innes, 1908, p. 102-3). He reads Varthemas’ description of a Brahmin deflowering the King’s wife as evidence substantiating his claim.

William Logan says, “Every Nair girl is married in one sense at a very early age. The strange thing about all this is that the girl is not really married to the man who performs the Tali tying ceremony”(ibid, p. 135). He observes the rite among Nair, Ezhava and many other communities and provides a detailed description of the rite among Nairs. While engaging with this corpus of writing Arunima observes the colonial tendency to abstract out an “ideal type” from the range of customs (Arunima, 2003, p. 7). It is useful to engage with this description while keeping in mind that Logan’s description quoted below is also not free from that tendency.

“The most characteristic custom of the Nayars is connected with their marriages. Every Nair girl is married in one sense at a very early age. The tali is tied round her neck before she attains puberty, and is considered to be disgraceful in her relations not to have this ceremony performed before that event takes place. The tying of the tali is a great event in each household, and frequently several girls go through this event simultaneously. When this can be managed it enables the family to make a greater display than they would be
probably able to afford if there was a separate ceremony for each girl. The marriage pavilion is in the case of influential families very often magnificent in its decoration – bright coloured rows of columns supporting Gothic Arched or Saracenic roofs resplendent in tinsel and colours, with an extremely ingenious and pretty device of domes revolving slowly at intervals and showering down at appropriate moments sweet smelling flowers at the guests and bridal party. The auspicious day and hour are carefully selected beforehand in consultation with the astrologers: friends relations and neighbours all flock to the ceremony, and at the selected auspicious moment the *tali* is tied around the girl’s neck amid much tom tomming and shrill music accompanied by deafening shouts from the assembled people. Then follows the usual distribution of betel and areca nut, and the guests afterwards sit down to a banquet. The ceremony is prolonged over four days in the case of well to do families. The strange thing about all this is that the girl is not really married to the man who performs the *tali* tying ceremony. In the case of good families the man selected for this duty is usually either an *Ilayattu* or an east coast Brahmin, and in the case of others a man of their own kindred. After the ceremony he receives a suitable present and departs. When the girl comes of age he can not claim her as his wife nor solicit her favours in after life. (Logan, 1906, p. 135)

The detailed description of *talikettu* in *Malabar Manual* is in contrasted with the relative absence of ceremonies that institutes conjugality among the Nairs. Logan expresses his inability to find a proper rite that would officially initiate the husband–wife relationship religiously or legally and says: “The ceremony of instalment of her husband is exceedingly simple”. (ibid, p. 136)

The *Travancore State Manual* also gives a detailed description of the four days long ritual of *talikettu*. This description is helpful to see if the *tali* rite makes a man a
bridegroom and a woman a bride. This Manual observes the ritual among Nair, Ezhava, and many other castes, but gives a detailed description of the same among the Nairs alone. The bridegroom is called manavalan and the bride is called manavatti and the decorated inner chamber is called Manavara\(^7\) (ibid, p. 355). The description of the ritual shows how the four days long event acknowledged and ritualized the entry, exit and time spent in the nuptial chamber. Nagam Aiya’s account observes the grand feast and festivities associated with the ritual such as the processions, fire-works and illuminations. The account also says that the bride and bridegroom are “required to observe pollution for three days.” But it does not delve into the origin or reason for pollution (ibid, p. 355). It talks about two songs: Ammachan pattu (the song of the maternal uncle) sung during the time of the entry of the bride in to the nuptial chamber (ibid, p. 355), and Vathil-thurapattu (literally open-the-door song) sung by the groom’s friends to open the door (ibid, p. 356). The Cochin State Manual also gives detailed descriptions of talikettu (Menon, 1911, p. 192-194). Though these manuals find it difficult to account for the origin of this rite, it is generally not connected to the deflowering element which was prominent in the travel writers’ description.

2.3. Ethnographic Explanations

The twentieth century ethnographic accounts of the tali rite demands special attention as they not only describe the rituals and customs of the ‘primitives’ but also make an attempt to explain them. The ethnographic accounts of talikettu point towards the

\(^7\) Even today throughout Keralam these are the Malayalam words used to designate the bride, the bridegroom and the nuptial chamber.
possibility of this ritual being the vestiges of ritual defloration practiced by matrilineal communities. At the level of analysis most of them try to explain the structural meaning and function of the rite and are able to find structural uniformity within different Indian customs. Most of them explain it using structural principles of kinship and caste. Writings of Dumont provides a very influential framework for analysing the kinship structures in South India (Dumont, 1957). Many later writings employ this framework and explain ‘rites of passage’ as being adjunct to kinship structures. Dumont works with the idea of primary and secondary marriage (ibid, p. 114). Fuller builds on Dumont’s analysis and treat talikettu as the first marriage (Fuller, 1976, p. 105). The primary concern of colonial anthropology was the connection the rite has with establishing fatherhood. Yalman draws heavily from Dumont’s framework while trying to provide an explanation of talikettu (Yalman, 1963). He connects the rite with incest and caste and argues that such rites are needed as people are extremely cognizant about boundaries. This rite is interpreted by Douglas as “a pre-puberty rite of substitute marriage” (Douglas, 1988, p. 145) aimed at institutionalizing ritual fatherhood and thus securing the purity of the caste and purity of the blood. Another influential take on talikettu is provided by Kathaleen Gough who starts with a structural explanation and later move on to psychoanalysis to lend meaning to the rite as she finds it essential to address the unconscious psychological motives to understand the rite.

2.4. Kathaleen Gough: Limits of Psychoanalytic Explanations
Among the huge amount of literature produced around Kerala matriliny Kathaleen Gough’s take on matriliny had been very influential. Three major influences on Gough’s scholarship are Structural Anthropology, Marxism and Psychoanalysis. Even in her first writing, she tries to move away from the conventional rendition of anthropology and has tried to make connections between economic and political changes to changes in kinship structures (Gough, 1952). It has been observed that most of the colonial anthropological writings have tried to explain the difference in matriliny utilizing the idea of the civilizational impulse and social evolution (Arunima, 2003, p.2-3). Unlike these writings, Gough’s take is free from such impulses. Rather than explaining the meaning and function of rites on an empirical level she employs psychoanalytic concepts to make sense of the rites. However my primary discomfort with Gough’s take is not that her psychoanalytic explanations do not make sense; rather they make perfect sense and in the process gives up on the ‘gendered subaltern’. Is the gendered subaltern available for the master discourse of colonialism? Is there an already constituted subject available for examination? It has been argued that these questions can only be addressed by taking into account the “ideological underpinnings of psychoanalysis as epistemology” (Croocks, 1994, p. 175-218). The attempt here is a less ambitious one. I am trying to put in perspective the explanation given for the matrilineal rite of passage talikettukalyanam. The attempt is to show how psychoanalytically informed ethnological writing on the ‘the primitives’ can act as spaces “where the use of psychoanalytic categories might themselves become the mark of a foreclosure” (Spivak, 1990, p. 218-29).

---

8 For instance see the discussion on tali rite by C. J. Fuller (1976, p. 99-123) where his description of tali rite depends solely on Gough’s take on the same.
Gough takes the blueprint of the rite from the above mentioned sources and she uses her data from her own field work. Her field work happened during the period 1940-1955 and her work looks upon an already translated structure of matriliney. However her account of *talikettu* is open to the possibility of actual defloration. Gough states that *talikettu* is “ritually if not actually a defloration ceremony” (Gough, 1955, p. 50). She argues that in the nineteenth century *talikettu* never resulted in any actual sexual relation but in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries it resulted in sexual relation, especially if the girl was nearing puberty. She contends that the description of the nineteenth century rite clearly suggests the possibility of ritual defloration.

Gough observes that this rite generally did not result in any enduring relationship. The Brahmin stays with the woman for four days and leaves the next day. He was given money and gifts by the bride’s family as token for performing this duty. Among certain sub castes he leaves after symbolically terminating the relationship and at others the woman and her children observe pollution upon the death of this ‘husband’ though he is not the biological father of the children. After the four days the woman’s virginity is not under question. She argues that this could be considered as a social initiation into sexual life and after this rite the woman is supposed to adhere to the laws of incest and prohibition. Another reason she cites for treating it as an initiation ceremony is the change in identity it brought to a woman’s life. The virgin was referred to as *Kumari* and after the *tali*tying, the *Kumari* is conferred with the title *Amma* which clearly suggests her status as someone who has been initiated into sex.
Gough explains talikettu with classic psychoanalytic concepts such as oedipal fixations, incestuous wishes and ceremonial acting out behaviour. She observes, “This rite issues out of marked horror of incest in these castes which makes it necessary for the natal kinsmen of a woman to renounce the rights in her mature sexuality before she is in fact mature” (Gough, 1955, p. 64). But it is not clear from Gough’s formulation why the men found it necessary to renounce the rights they had over a mature woman’s sexuality. The native anthropologists rule out the hypothesis of ‘fear of hymeneal blood’ among the matrilineal castes of Malayalam. Gough herself is not able to document any kind of cultural prohibition against the male head of the household on non-performance/non-celebration of the rite. The ill effect affects the whole matrilineal joint household (Tarawad), and the Tarawad does not belong to the senior male member or to any of the male members rather it belongs to the senior female member. So a useful question to begin with might be whether the men had any special rights over women’s sexuality that could be renounced as needed.

The colonial ethnographer’s argument is preoccupied with what men did with women’s sexuality, what men felt and how they would have tackled it. Empirically it treats women

\[9\] See for instance the discussion on the rite by A Aiyappan (1941) in the article “The Meaning of the Tali Rite” and also the discussion by Tankappan Nair (1976) in the article “Defloration and Couvade”.

\[10\] There is a popular belief that the matrilineal household is a mirror reflection of patriarchal family where the father is replaced with the maternal uncle. Though in the Nair Tarawad under question, the Karanavan (the eldest maternal uncle) was a powerful figure, the idea of ‘headship’ was a colonial legal invention. Arunima (2003) makes a detailed analysis of official colonial legal discourse which separated out and strengthened the maternal uncle’s position in its attempt to redefine matrilineal household along the lines of the Hindu Joint Family. She argues that this power was extended to control over female sexuality. She also documents how a junior female member’s claim over property was rejected by the colonial court in favour of the Karanavar when she entered an alliance on her own. (Arunima, 2003, p. 72-105).
as passive objects exchanged between men while that was not the (actual) case in matriliny. The lineage and inheritance were tracked through women. Though there is not much evidence that they enjoyed more mobility than their patrilineal counterparts, the matrilineal women moved from their household to their partner’s household very rarely; a factor indicating the reversal of the power differential embedded in the relationships. The very explanatory grid, which is perpetually concerned with what men did with woman’s sexuality that Gough invokes, then becomes Western and Patriarchal. Gough’s argument aligns itself with the psychoanalytic concern over ‘what happened to woman’ or ‘what is woman’ and tries to grasp the feminine with patriarchal tools.¹¹

Though Gough’s argument starts with a psychoanalytic explanation where oedipal fixations and incest taboo are readily observable in the matrilineal joint household, the crisis intensifies with ‘prolonged economic dependence’. The reading of matriliny as an arrangement that leads to economic dependence of junior men is in itself a colonial reading (Kodoth, 2001). Gough has explained the disappearance of talikettukalyanam in 1930s with the development of cash economy, private property and the collapse of the lineage system. It should be understood along with the reformist projection of matriliny as a less evolved arrangement that was not capable of dealing with the developing cash

¹¹There have been attempts to reverse this gaze of Psychoanalytic theory by asking what women felt during defloration. Yates furthered the psychoanalytic interpretation by analyzing the act of defloration from the woman’s point of view, suggesting that defloration is experienced as an act of infidelity to her father and as a sadistic act by the bride and groom, arousing guilt and anxiety that are resolved by the public ritualization and cultural legitimization of the union (Yates, 1930, p. 175-176). But it should be remembered that rather than a simple reversal this explanation also cannot do away with the problems it tries to address. It cannot displace the Father or the Law of the Father from the explanatory status it enjoys in Psychoanalysis.
economy and private property. Fuller disputes Gough’s argument which considers the entry of land into market as the only determinant of changes within matriliney. He points out the endurance of joint property system which prevailed in Malabar even after it started disintegrating in Travancore. (Fuller, 1976 p. 140) This reading of matriliney was not only limited to the colonial or reformist circles. Kodoth observes that this reading influenced the post independent Indian historians’ take on matriliney where all of them track the origin of decay of matriliney with the beginning of the fifteenth century and the introduction of land as commodity in South Asia. (Kodoth, 2001, p. 359) Gough being a ‘Marxist anthropologist’ makes an attempt to infuse psychoanalysis with elements of economic exchanges. The problem with this argument is that it cannot account for the interplay between the erotic and economic exchanges. Her explanation cannot account for how oedipal fixation disappears with the emergence of cash economy. As per the teleology projected by colonial anthropology, with the legal abolition of matriliney, the family here progressed further to become proper patriarchal family. Oedipal fixations must have intensified further. But instead the ritual completely vanished from the cultural memory of people. Two conclusions can be drawn from this situation: Either the tali rite was not a “ceremonial acting out stemming from marked horror of incest or castration anxiety” as Gough has argued or the legal abolition of matriliney has not resulted in the transformation to a patriarchal order. 

3. The Vexed Virgin: The Body between Brahmanic Scriptures and English Law

This section looks at the ways in which the notion of virginity was being defined in the colonial legal debates on the validity and acceptability of talikettu as a marriage ritual.
This inquiry draws from the scholarship that projects equation of scriptures, law and tradition as creating a specific matrix of constraints within which questions of gender and body were generally articulated during colonialism. (Mani, 1989). Lata Mani observes that the privileging of Brahmanic scripture and the equation of tradition with scripture was the effect of ‘colonial discourse’ on India (ibid, p. 90). In the same vein, this inquiry tries to look at the different ideological positions the discourse takes while discussing the origin and validity of talikettu. The attempt to define tradition gets caught between Brahmanic scriptures and English law where they serve as interlocking grids in the re-articulation of virginity.

It has been observed that with the exposure to colonialism the upwardly mobile matrilineal Malayali’s have internalized the colonial reason and this shaped their response to matriliny (Fuller 1976, p. 130). The individual legal suits dealt with questions of property and inheritance, and there was a perceived need among the progressive community members to legalize relations stemming from matriliny. This perception was accentuated with the Madras High Court’s refusal to accept Marumakkathayam and Aliyasantanan marriage as legally valid marriages. The colonial court treated the matrilineal woman who entered Sambandham as ‘concubine’ and the children born out of the union as ‘bastards’ (Kodoth, 2001, p. 371). The reason for such a reading of Sambandham was that it was easy to dissolve the alliance and the alliance did not result in any enduring property relation. The general feeling amongst the community members was that the court failed to understand the meaning of native customs. During this period,

\[\text{Aliyasanthanam}\] is a variation of matriliny that existed in the British Province of South Canara, which is now part of Karnataka.
several legal committees were formed to study and evaluate the status of matriliny and especially the marriage practices in different parts of Keralam. These committees were caught between Hindu law and English law while defining customs and usages. They tried to gain respectability for the marriage system within Marumakkathayam, projecting Sambandham as being close to European marriage. But at the same time they proposed a reform of matriliny that would transform Sambandham to becoming a proper contractual marriage where the husband was both a legal entity and the provider (for his children). The Report of the Malabar Marriage Commission (1896) and The Travancore Marumakkathayam Committee Report (1908) were the culmination of two major initiatives towards the reform of matriliny.

One major obstacle they faced while advancing Sambandham as contractual marriage was the presence of talikettukalyanam. While the reformers wanted to project a single unified custom that could represent the ‘native marriage’ in colonial courts, talikettu posed a threat to the candidature of Sambandham. The arguments made by the committee members and the evidences presented before the committee reveals the difficulties in defining talikettukalyanam - its meaning, purpose and functions. The committees found it difficult to explain the rite either with Shastric principles or with English law. Attempts to gain respectability for Sambandham has employed the contractual nature of it and aligned itself with English law. But talikettu defied the codes of both the Vedic marriage prescribed by Brahmanic scriptures and the contractual marriage prescribed by English law. Another aspect that accentuated the confusion was the lack of ritualization associated with Sambandham and the highly ritualized state of talikettu. While Sambandham only involved presentation of cloth by the male partner to the female
partner in front of a lighted lamp, *talikettu* was a four day rite accompanied by a battery of rituals and with detailed prescriptions on how to proceed from day one to four.

The Report of the Malabar Marriage Commission\(^\text{13}\) (RMMC from here onwards) provides many instances of the struggle to define this rite and to make sense of it. Justice Muthuswamy Aiyer, the president of Malabar Marriage Commission, acknowledges the connection of the rite with the formation of sexual relations within a community and observes that *talikettu* was an “essential caste observance, preliminary to the formation of sexual relation (RMMC, 1985, p.18).” But he treats it as a “purificatory ceremony” similar to the ones found in Brahmanic scriptures. He considers it to be analogous to the ceremony of *Samavartana* prescribed for Brahmin bachelors who desire to terminate the state of celibacy (*Brahmachari Asrama*) or the status of a Vedic student who enters on *Grahasta Asrama* or the status of a married man.\(^\text{14}\) He even treats it as a religious ceremony.

As a *religious ceremony* the *Kettukalyanam* is taken to give the girl a marriageable status. But in relation to marriage, it has no significance, save that no girl is at liberty to contract it before she goes through the Tali Kettu ceremony. A ceremony which creates the tie of marriage, only to be dissolved at

\(^{13}\text{This is the report submitted by Malabar Marriage Commission which was formed in 1891 to inquire about the customs of matrilineal caste groups in Malabar. The main focus of the inquiry was on the desirability of introducing changes in marriage, inheritance and family organizations among matrilineal groups.}\)

\(^{14}\text{Enclosure A. Memorandum submitted by Justice T. Muthuswamy Aiyer, President of the Malabar Marriage Commission, RMMC, 1985, p. 5.}\)
its close, suggests an intention rather to give the girl the merits of a Samskara or religious ceremony than to generate the relation of husband and wife. (Ibid, p. 6)

The general assumption of the members of the Commission was that it was a purificatory ceremony. But all of them were open to the possibility that this rite had some meaning in the past. “The *talikettu* now is no marriage in itself. It is a preliminary purifying ceremony analogous to *Samavartana* in point of capacitating to marry”\(^\text{15}\) observes Rama Varma Raja of Parappanad, a member of the Commission. O. Chandu Menon another member of the Commission observes, “In my opinion, the *talikettukalyanam* is a mere preliminary ceremony something like a *Samskram* among the Hindus which makes the person who undergoes it eligible to marry.”\(^\text{16}\) But these explanations are unable to account for the cultural significance associated with the ritual. Chandu Menon himself observes that “the non performance of this ceremony before the girl attains her puberty works a forfeiture of caste of the whole *Tarawad* to which the girl belongs” (ibid, p. 8).

The connection this rite has or had with the matrilineal *Sambandham* was a contested point and RMMC documents the contestations and confusions very well. K. R. Krishna Menon quotes the evidence given before the Malabar marriage Commission on the nature and meaning of *talikettu* as follows:

> Of those who gave evidence before Malabar Marriage Commission, some thought it was a marriage: some not. Others called it a mock marriage, a formal marriage, a sham marriage, a fictious marriage, a marriage sacrament, the preliminary part of marriage, a meaningless ceremony, an empty form, a

\(^\text{15}\) Enclosure B Memorandum submitted by Rama Varma Raja, RMMC, 1985, p. 6.

In Travancore, the first attempt to legislate matrilineal marriages started with the Marumakkathayam Marriage Bill introduced by Pattam Thanu Pillai in Travancore Legislative Council (TLC) in 1896. It was heavily influenced by RMMC and the discussion generated as part of it. The bill argued for the legal recognition of *Sambandham* as valid marriage. The speech and the bill presented by Pattam Thanu Pillai put forward *Sambandham* as the single valid marriage rite among the matrilineal Nairs and project it as a monogamous conjugal marriage. Reference to any other rites or customs in connection with the formation of sexual relations or marriage is conspicuously absent in this formulation. The speech appears in the Report of the Marumakkathayam Committee, Travancore (RMCT from here onwards) with great prominence and sets the tone of the discussion (RMCT, 1908, p. 5-6).\textsuperscript{18} However, RMCT carries a detailed discussion on the status of *talikettu* and acknowledges that few witnesses treat it as “an essential rite in connection with *Sambandham*” (ibid, p. 6). RMCT acknowledges that there is a section in the community who argues for the validity of *talikettukalyanam* as the “recognized form of marriage” by invoking the symbols of Brahmin marriage in the rite of *talikettu*. In the memorandum submitted by K P Padmanabha Menon, he quotes C V Raman Pillai one of the strong advocates of this argument who contends that *talikettu* carries elements of *Panigrahanam, Saptapadi* and *Homam* which are part of Brahmin marriage.

\textsuperscript{17}K R Krishna Menon’s Evidence before Malabar Marriage Commission, RMMC, 176-177.

\textsuperscript{18} This report addressed the same set of concerns that were present in RMMC, such as changes in marriage and inheritance. See, Preface to the Report of the Marumakkathayam Committee Travancore (“Preface,” RMCT, 1908, p. 1-2).
members of RMCT refuse to treat *talikettu* as Brahmin marriage or Vedic marriage saying the similarities proposed by some of the witnesses before the Commission is “too fanciful for a serious discussion” (ibid, p. 6). The Commission on the one hand contends that this is a vestige of some “Dravidian ritual” which are “at least contradictory if not abhorrent to the principles of Hindu laws” and on the other hand compares it with Brahmin purificatory rituals. It quotes RMMC here and considers *talikettu* to be a “formal rite”, a “caste rite” and a “religious ceremony.”

This was also the time of the Malayalai Memorial and the Ezhava Memorial, two major movements which presented the case of ‘Malayali Sudras’ against that of ‘Paradesa Brahmins’ (Foreign Brahmins). Both RMMC and RMCT echo this need while trying to explain the rite. But at the same time they are forced to contend that *talikettu* is a purificatory ceremony as that of Brahmin *Samvartam*. While RMMC takes it as an “essential caste observance preliminary to the formation of the sexual relation”, RMCT contends that “the rite has no connection with the conjugal union…and it is difficult to see how it could be construed as contended by some, into a vicarious betrothal” (ibid, p. 6) and leaves the question to social reform:

> If the leading members of the community desire either to dispense with the *Tali-kettu* as a useless ceremony, or postpone it till puberty, that would be a matter of social reform which they have themselves to work out by educating public

19 Enclosure A to RMCT, Memorandum submitted by K. P. Padmanabha Menon, xviii.
20 Enclosure A to RMCT, Memorandum submitted by K. P. Padmanabha Menon, xii.
21 Ibid: xviii
22 Rajeevan B, (1999, p. 13-27) makes a detailed analysis on the formation of linguistic and regional identities in pre-independent Keralam and how these movements represented resistance against ‘Brahmin Domination.”
opinion and not by invoking the interference of the legislature. All that the later can do is to recognize existing usages, and there is no doubt that the conjugal union is effected by the ceremony of presentation of cloth and not by the Tali-kettu. (Ibid, p. 7)

The travel writings present talikettu as a rite of defloration and the colonial and native manuals emphasise the significance of the rite in asserting caste relations and sexual relations without explicitly mentioning the defloration element. In both RMMC and TMRC this element is not mentioned as something contributing to the cultural significance of the rite. However, TMRC is forced to engage with such a reading of the rite when it is confronted by the definition of the tali rite as “de-virgination ceremony” by the colonial court. The Travancore Law Reports presents the details of the legal suit that led to the definition of tali rite in colonial court.23 The legal suit mentioned here is between a matrilineal woman and a patrilineal Brahmin male who was the biological father of the woman’s children. The case is representative of the many suits filed in colonial courts demanding ‘right to maintenance’. In the suit the Brahmin husband accepted the alliance and the fatherhood of the children but denied the alliance the status of lawful marriage and his liability towards maintenance. Justice Govinda Pillai and Justice Hunt of the Division Bench held that the children are entitled to maintenance. Justice Padamanabha Iyer wrote a dissenting note which said that under the Hindu law a Brahmin cannot contract a valid marriage with a Sudra woman and especially one who was not a virgin. Referring to the talikettu of the woman, Justice Padmanabha Iyer states:

Manu declares that a man may marry only a virgin (Manu VIII 116; V 161 to 163). …a Brahmin can marry only a virgin and he cannot contract a valid marriage with one who had been the wife or concubine of another even though she had divorced him or been divorced by him. …The 1st plaintiff was not a virgin when the Sambandham took place. I am of the opinion that there has been no legal marriage between third defendant and 1st plaintiff. (ibid, p. 112)

RMCT considers the judgment was made “under the influence Hindu Smriti system” and observes that the judge is unable to understand “the marriage among castes untrammelled by the meshes woven by the Smrities”.24 It went on to say that it was incorrect to treat talikettu as “de-virgination ceremony” and ‘it does not create the relationship of husband and wife’.25 It is silent about the possibility of ‘de-virgination’ by someone other than the husband and it cannot account for the property relations ensuing from such an arrangement where the virginity of the woman is not directly exchanged. RMCT’s take on the judgment tries to erase the status of talikettu as a rite that sanctions sexual relation and argues that it is a Vedic reading of the Dravida custom. But at the same time, it employs the Vedic ideas of purification in an attempt to give a positive definition of the rite. In the process, TMRC erases the connection talikettu has with sexual relation and tries to provide a dignified position to it by calling it an initiation ceremony. It is the Victorian idea of virginity26 which is informing the report here and it fuels the

24 Enclosure A, RMCT, xix
25 Enclosure A, RMCT, xix.
26 The Victorian virgin is the figure of virgin who emerged in the nineteenth-century England. Lyod Davis (1993, p. 3-24) argues that discourses around body, language and gender contributed to the production of this figure as a central figure in the society and sexuality. He also shows how this figure translated the idea of corporeal intactness to purity and chastity.
community’s attempt to project *Sambandham* as English contractual marriage where the object of exchange should be a virgin.

4. Reformist Reconstruction of *Talikettu*

While the official colonial legal discourse has tried to legalize *Sambandham*, the question of *talikettu* and *thirandukalyanam* (rite of first menstruation) was pushed into the domain of social and community reform. These were the two rites where the female body and the sexual and reproductive functions of the body were culturally validated. The social and community reform in the nineteenth century and twentieth century Keralam responded to the emerging ideas of family and presented monogamous conjugality as the ideal arrangement among the many customary practices that existed in Keralam at that time. In this process it had to argue for the abolition of *talikettu* and *thirandukalyanam* – two rites which were as important as marriage or which constituted marriage in several communities. The reformist argument for abolition of *talikettu* presents many contested terrains where the meaning of body and virginity are negotiated and new relations are forged with the female body and the exchanges around it.

The social and community reform around marriage and conjugality had serious difficulty in addressing the sexual arrangements under matriliney. The discourse created a moment of empty exchange out of the rituals that marked the female body. It created a mock object, a farce, an empty signifier out of these rites. Unlike the colonial accounts which either pathologized difference or erased difference, here difference was re-constituted to an empty object. The reformist logic confronts the sexual act which is at the centre of the rites as a source of disgrace and shame for the community. The rights of the girl child are
also not referred to here, unlike the debates in other parts of India and especially in south India. There are two identifiable strands in the reformist reconstruction of *talikettu*: 1) It focused on the sexual relations involved in the rite and recasted it as disgraceful and 2) It focused on the economic relations, where *talikettu* was depicted as ‘extravagant’ and ‘luxurious’. Looking at the language of reformist discourse is helpful in understanding how an erotic exchange is rephrased as an economic exchange and the economic exchange is later rendered as ‘extravagant’ and ‘luxurious’. The first attempts and pleas to legislate matrilineal practices started from among the members of the Nair community in the late nineteenth century. But by the beginning of the twentieth century it was the Sree Narayana Dharma Paripalana Sangham (SNDP) under the leadership of the saint and reformer Sree Narayana Guru which spearheaded the interventions in the domain of marriage reforms.

4.1. Ezhava Reform

Sree Narayana Guru was against both *talikettukalyanam* and *thirandukalyanam* and asked his followers to work towards the abolition of these rites. In the 1905 meeting of SNDP, the major agenda was the reform of these rites. In this meeting Sree Narayana Guru gave a public speech on the need to abolish “unnecessary and unscientific” practices like *talikettukalyanam* and *thirandukalyanam* and the need to reform marriage customs. Though Guru was very influential among the community members, the attempts to

27 See Mytheli Sreenivas (Sreenivas, 2008) for a discussion on how the rights of the girl child figured centrally in shaping the Dravida politics in colonial Tamil Nadu.
abolish *talikettu* had met with strong reactions from many circles within the community. The reformist debate is often presented as a battle between young and the old, between the progressive and the conservatives, and between tradition and modernity. Since this rite enjoyed an immutable status among the community members and lack of observation of this was connected with extreme consequences such as losing one’s caste and the honour of the *Tarawad*, any attempt to touch upon the rite was treated with resistance. The reaction to Guru’s 1905 speech in the community is documented by C. Keshavan as follows:

1080 Kanni 31st is an important day in the history of Ezhavas. That day there was a great meeting presided by Sree Narayan Guru at Kollam Paravur. C.V. took the main role in that meeting. He used to write and talk about ritual reforms even before that. It is during this meeting that Swamy sanctioned these reforms. Swamy suggested abolishing ‘unscientific and unnecessary rites’ such as *talikettu* and *therandu kuli* and reforming the marriage system. It was a controversial meeting which created an uproar. One of the community chiefs expressed his anger after the meeting saying ‘a rabid dog from Mayyanadu came and bit all dogs in Paravaur’. But in due course that rabid poison was let lose in the entire region (Keshavan,C., 1968, p.103).

The discourse on *talikettu* inaugurated by Guru is silent on the defloration aspect of the rite. This can be attributed to Guru’s symbolic silence on matters pertaining to sex. Other than noting that the rite was “unnecessary and unscientific”, Guru never explained why he thought so. Guru was very keen on the abolition of both *talikettukalyanam* and *thirandukalyanam*. He has prescribed a ‘New Manual for Marriage’ in the 1905 meeting
where he asked people to combine *tali* tying and cloth giving and make it a post puberty ritual. These prescriptions were first published in SNDP’s official magazine *Vivekodayam* (1905, p. 83-84) and later became codified as a book ‘*Vivaaha Vidhi*’—‘Marriage Injunctions’. As per the new manual, *tali* tying was a post puberty ritual where the right to tie *tali* around a girl’s neck was reserved for the husband (ibid, p. 83). Guru while modifying the customs of the Ezhava community used a Vedic framework and has tried to simulate many of the Hindu marriage rituals. Guru’s prescriptions replaced the senior *Vannathi* lady from the officiating post in the rite and a male priest was introduced. In Travancore, one of the first marriages as per Guru’s direction was at C. Keshavan’s house (1968, p. 105). It was the marriage of Keshavan’s sister Gourikkutty. And Keshavan observes how the marriage had increased the separation between the conservative old generation and the reformist young generation (ibid, p. 106). In Malabar one of the first marriages as per Guru’s new injunctions was Moorkkoth Kumaran’s daughter’s marriage (1975, p. 121).

In a message sent by Guru to SNDP officials in 1909, he expresses satisfaction over the gradual disappearance of *talikettu* but urges community members to work hard to uproot

---

28 Understanding the valence of what Guru was trying to do by invoking Hindu deities and practices is important in understanding the anti-caste stance of his reformist project. Dilip Menon observes how reform operated with “ideas of cleanliness, hygiene, purity and abstinence” where “individuals were to be incorporated within a normative identity”. (Menon, 1994, p. 88). It is possible to argue that Guru’s reformist intervention also was a project which invoked this “normative identity”.

29 The modification of the marriage customs should be understood in relation with the general ethos of Sree Narayana Movement in twentieth century Keralam. The reform was not restricted to marriage practices and it tried to transform the entire gamut of Ezhava rites including death rites and rites of worship. The temples made by Guru had Hindu deities and followed the worship pattern of Hindu temples. The political significance of these acts in addressing the caste system needs to be evaluated carefully.
the expensive and luxurious talikettukalyanam completely from among the community members (as cited in “Kerala Charithram”, 1973, p. 1218). The same message promotes stable monogamy against the different customary practices prevalent among Ezhavas. There are occasions where the message touched upon the financial aspects of the rite. He considered this rite to be an unwanted expense and burden on the community members and something that hindered the “progress and prosperity of the community”. Guru was an admirer of the industrial revolution and considered industrial revolution to be a means for emancipation from the shackles of caste and especially from toddy tapping – the traditional livelihood of the Ezhavas. In the very first meeting of the SNDP, industry was projected as an important avenue for the community’s growth. The Ezhava reform combined these two goals and urged the community members to start industries instead of wasting money on unnecessary rites such as talikettukalyanam and thirandukuli\textsuperscript{30}. Vivekodayam (1905) published another article along with Guru’s prescription for new marriage rites that urged the community members to “create a fund with the money saved from not conducting certain rites and use them for education and other activities that would lead to the progress of the community” (“Reform of Customs”,1905, p. 85).

C.V. Kunjuraman was one of the influential members of SNDP and shared the stage with Guru in many public meetings. All his public speeches and the articles written on Vivekodayam talk about “reform of customs.” His speeches analysed the customs on financial terms. He starts the analysis of wastage associated with talikettu with the

\textsuperscript{30} Almost all leading Ezhava reformers lament upon the wastage of money that could have been saved through the abolition of Talikettu and Thirandukalyanam. And according to them money thus saved can be used for growth through industries. See K Damodaran (1962, p. 39-41) for a sample of such a discussion.
statement, “wealth is the blood of the body of community. Anyone concerned with the community will be alarmed at the sight of this perpetual bleeding” and then gives a detailed description of the gravity of ‘bleeding’.

As per the last census there are 35480 Ezhavas in the Karthigappalli Taluk. Among them 18471 are women. If hundred rupees is spend for the talikettu, thirandukuli (puberty rite) and pulikuti (pregnancy rite) of each of these 18471 women, 1847100 rupees is spent by the community in this taluk alone. If the expenditure of a single taluk is this frightening, just imagine the amount of money wasted by the community in all the thirty taluks in the state. All this money is hard-earned. The community has not earned a single penny from a government job or through bribery. For each silver coin that we own, we have spent nine drops of sweat. Anyone with concern for the community will find it difficult to accept that the hard earned money is spend for celebrating wicked rites which have neither religious nor worldly benefits (Kunjuraman, 1905, p. 94-5).

C. Keshavan gives a detailed description of the Ezhava talikettu in his autobiographical memoir Jeevithasamaram (1968, p.96-100). He talks about his own talikettukalyanam experience in Jeevithasamaram. He starts the narration with the statement “One would be astonished on recounting the rites and expenses associated with talikettukalyanam” and the narration then focuses on the areas of expenditure (ibid, p. 97). He says the rite starts with erecting the Pandal and from that day onwards the Tarawad witnesses an ‘Ashwamedham’ suggesting the scale of festivities and extent of expenditure (ibid, p. 97). He reflects upon the effectiveness of reforms saying it is useful to “Calculate how much money the community has saved due to these reforms. These old customs were
destroying the foundation stones of the houses” (Ibid, p. 105). C. Keshavan also recounts how he spent four days in the nuptial chamber and left on the fifth day with an Ambalapuzha loin cloth and two Chakram (traditional Travancore coin) as the “wage for tying tali” (Ibid, p. 105).

Though Guru was silent on the ‘shameful aspects’ of the rite the hagiographers of Guru give the description of *talikettukalyanam* where it is described as a ‘nasty practice’ and a ‘contemptuous practice’ (Kottukoyikkal, 1975, p. 108).

If we make a list of the ‘bad customs’ (*anaachaaram*), the first one staring at us is the nasty practice known under the name of *talikettukalyanam*. Ready the virgin for *tali* tying long before marriage, bring the men that are supposed to do the tali tying to the venue in a pompous manner on elephants or on horses, make the girls sit in a public place with faces covered like brides, tie the *tali* on these girls without taking into account their age; and this rite has no connection with marriage! Also, another *contemptuous matter* – the *tali* tiers should stay with these girls for some days. A great soul – Sir Sadasivaya Aiyer who was the Judge at Trivandrum and Madras – gave a certificate based on this rite: “Through this *talikettukalyanam* the community was giving its blessings on violating the virginity of an innocent unmarried girl staying with her mother”. This is indeed a certificate of honour received by the community! (Ibid, p. 109)

There are reasons to believe that Guru took special interest in the abolition of *talikettu*. All his speeches during the initial years of SNDP focused on the need to abolish this rite. In 1905 Guru appeared at the *talikettukalyanam* venue of an Ezhava landlord at Karimkulam and blocked the ritual (Ibid, p. 110). Many hagiographers of Guru
narrativize this event as the beginning of a battle against talikettu between the reformists and the lovers of orthodoxy (Maamool Priyar) in the community. K. Damodaran describes the intervention in detail in his biography of Guru (Damodaran, 1962, p. 57-60). He describes Guru’s efforts as that of Lord Krishna’s who went to the Kaurava Assembly for negotiation. Damodaran quotes Guru’s words to the landlord at the venue of the talikettukalyanam. Guru says: “Talikettu is unnecessary. I have told you several times. But you are not listening to me. I am saying this for the sake of your well-being. If you trust in my words avoid this rite. Saying this, Guru declared : I have blocked this rite. I do not wish my people to engage in this unnecessary rite” (ibid, p. 58). Damodaran considers this to be “the last rites of talikettu in Travancore”. This intervention by Guru in south Travancore influenced the Thiyya community in Malabar who were ardent followers of the Sree Narayan movement. Moorkkoth Kumaran compares this intervention of Guru with the act of compassion of Lord Budha, “Budha through his speech set free the animal which was brought to offer as a sacrifice in a Vedic rite and thus brought an end to the practice of violent sacrifices. We still celebrate that act of kindness. If we think we can understand the kindness of that act, then the act of Guru is not less than this act of kindness” (Kumaran, 1971, p. 264)

C. Keshavan observes that the message poetry ‘A Message’ written by C. V. Kunju Raman in 1897 was hugely popular among the reformist circles (ibid, p. 128). This was written as a welcome note to the Marumakkathayam Marriage Bill presented by Pattam Tanu Pillai at Sree Mulam Assembly. The poem is a parody or pastiche of the famous message poetry Mayoora Sandesam. The messenger in this poem too is a peacock as in the original and the women who send the peacock reminds the peacock that it is the same
route it should take while going to Thiruvananthapuram. The very selection of message poetry serves a purpose here. The origin of message poetry in Malayalam can be traced back to the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries and draws its influence from Kalidasa’s *Meghasandesam*. Later it developed into a major movement in Malayalam Literature. The general format of the poetry is the separation of lovers where the male partner sends a message to the female showing the intensity of the separation and the desire for reunion. A detailed study is required to contextualize message poetry and its functions. It has been observed that the general ethos of the message poetry invokes matrilineal alliances.31 C. V. Kunju Raman’s message poetry reverses this practice and here it is a bunch of women who send the message to an all male legislative body. The message has nothing to do with love or longing, but it extends support to reform of matriliny. The official discourse seldom documents the opinion of women on the reformist measures and is silent on what women felt or thought about reform. This has been treated as more an act of strategic erasure than that of silence (Kodoth 2001, p. 381-382). And in the context of this silence or erasure this depiction of women as staunch supporters of reform serves the double purpose of re-presenting women’s voices.

The evidences presented before the Ezhava Land Commission document the transformation of the rites in the beginning of the twentieth century and show the influence of the reform started by Guru and perpetuated by the SNDP. The Ezhava land

31Message Poetry was critiqued as promoting the loose nature of matrilineal sexual alliances and it is characterized with explicit descriptions of the female body and acts of copulation. See Elamkulam Kunjan Pillai (1963)*Kerala Charithrathile Irulatanja Etukal* (The dark pages of Kerala History) for such a reading of message poetry. Udaya Kumar points out that the “repetitive formulaic description of the female body” in this poetry is instrumental in negating individuation of the heroines (Kumar, 1997, p. 262).
committee was primarily an attempt to legislate the property relations of the matrilineal Ezhavas. But it presents a complex discursive constellation where ideas of conjugality, modern marriage and property relations ensuing from these relations were presented for discussion. The first question of the committee collecting evidence was on the nature of marriage and it clearly asks whether the community members were following old marriage customs or the new one.\footnote{32} The Committee has collected evidence from a wide range of places such as Karthigappally, Paravoor, Kunnathunaadu, Ambalapuzha, Harippad, Meenachal, Kottayam, Ettumanoor and Thirkkunnappuzha. All the memos which give evidence on the point of marriage present the tensions of the transformation in detail. Hundreds of evidence memos submitted before the Committee talks about the change of \textit{talikettu} from a pre-puberty rite to the official segment of the post puberty marriage ceremony. Some of the memos invoke the manual ‘Vivaaha Vidhi’ to describe the new rites\footnote{33} and some others explain the new rites and their significance. Following the evidence submitted by the Ezhava community leaders of Ettumanoor is representative of the hundreds of evidences submitted before the committee where a new rationale of stable conjugality is emerging:

There are some modifications in the customs of marriage: \textit{Talikettu} and cloth giving are conducted on the same venue; some other customs are introduced to make people aware of the seriousness of conjugality and to keep in mind the worldly and divine purposes of marriage; an amount is fixed as a contribution to

\footnote{32} “Report of the Ezhava Land Committee together with Draft Bill and appendices” (Travancore: Judicial Department) Kerala State Archive, Thiruvananthapuram (Judicial File, Extracts of 1904, File No: 315).
\footnote{33} See for instance the Memo submitted by Ezhava community leaders of Kottayam (Kerala State Archives, Judicial File 1904, File no: 315, Memo no: 120).
Sangham for the growth of the community; the relation is extended to inspire mutual participation in the worldly and spiritual dimensions of marriage; the relation (Sambandham) is also extended to include the right to property (Muthal Sambandham). This is the new marriage and it has been five years since this marriage system came into practice here.\textsuperscript{34}

In the evidence submitted before the Ezhava Land Commission, pre-puberty \textit{talikettu} becomes a ‘savage practice’.\textsuperscript{35} These memos document the perception of the community that pre-pubertal defloration of virgins is a source of disgrace to the community. Whenever conducted it was made sure by the Sangham that \textit{talikettu} was a post puberty rite. Also these memos suggest the intervention by Sangham to combine \textit{talikettu} and cloth giving ceremony where the \textit{tali} tier and cloth giver were the same person and this person enjoyed the status of husband.\textsuperscript{36} This discussion hints towards the changes in imagination in the production of modern marriage. The community’s insistence that \textit{tali} tier and cloth giver should be one person ensured that the one exchanged there was a virgin and the husband held the right over the virgin’s body and sexuality. By producing a virgin bride and subjecting her to the newly formed marriage, a new connection was forged between customary relation (Sambandham) with property relation (muthalSambandham). This moment inaugurates the emergence of modern marriage which introduces the logic of private property.

4.2. Nair Reform

\textsuperscript{34} Judicial File, Memo: 121
\textsuperscript{35} Judicial File, Memo 93
\textsuperscript{36} Judicial File 315: Memo 114, Memo 107, 124, 101
The reformist attempt to re-define customs went along with the attempts to legislate matriliny in Colonial Malabar, Cochin and Travancore. The magazines carried many discussions around the suitability and appropriateness or lack of customs towards the end of nineteenth century and in the beginning of the twentieth century. Discussions around Malabar Marriage Bill proposed by Justice C. Sankaran that appeared in Malayalam magazines provide one of the earliest sites of contestations. The editorial published by Vidyavinodini titled “Malayala Marriage Bill” talks about the need to end “certain disgraceful customs that is a source of ridicule of Malayalis among other people” (“Editorial”, Vidyavinodini, 1891, p. 202). In this entire piece the focus is not on the “loose nature of Sambandham” as projected by the colonial court. On the contrary it supports the easy solubility of Sambandham:

Malayalis must be reluctant in implementing the English law which states that divorce can be allowed only in the case of adultery and that too should be proved in front of the court. Malayalis who enjoy immense freedom in tying and untying might not find it pleasing to enter into relations that are not easy to dissolve. And we do not find it desirable either when we look at the experience of people who have been into such relationships. (Marriage Bill, 1891, p. 204)

If it is not the easy solubility of Sambandham which is causing disgrace to the community what else constitutes disgraceful customs? The editorial prescribes an easy way to overcome the disgrace which helps to get a clue as to the source of disgrace. It says, “The best practice is to combine talikettu and cloth giving which are two different customs now to a single one and conferring the husband with the right to tie tali” (Ibid, p. 203).
It has been observed that what women felt towards the male reformers’ ‘attempt to legislate matriliny’ is either absent or it has been erased from the official records (Kodoth, 2001). Aside from the official records, women occasionally took part in the discussions on the reform of customs. Lakshmibai, one of the pioneering women’s magazines in Malayalam, published such discussions. In one such article titled “Malayali Marriage” written by a “Kerala Woman” defends Sambandham by comparing it with the Indian tradition of marrying without any rites namely Gandharva Vivaham but treats talikettu as a Brahmin imposed rite. It says: “On contemplation it can be seen to be the result of the selfish interest of the Brahmins who were influential once either with the help of Parasurama or in some other ways” (1907, p. 118-120).  

In a reply written to this article by Parakkal Gouri Amma,(1908) she cites the difficulties faced by Shakunthala in entering Gandharva marriage and demands the installation of religiously and legally validated marriage in the community (1908, p. 359-366). She too supports the Brahmin exploitation theory and argues, “It is essential to think who created the practice of talikettu and what its benefit is and what the reputation it has among learned people is”. Towards the end of the article she asserts, “If we do not change the talikettu which is respected by Malayalis now, it will never bring glory to Malayalis. It is highly recommended that there should be a regulation which states that only the husband can tie

37 The reference to Parasurama comes from the myth which explains the origin of Kerala. The myth circulated widely in the Brahminical texts such as Keralolpathi and Keralamahatmyam and informed many discourses around matriliny and the sexual or relational arrangements within it. As per the myth Parasurama who is the reincarnation of Lord Vishnu created Kerala from sea and gifted it to Brahmins. According to these texts Parasurama also wanted Nair women to be polyandrous. These texts were severely critiqued by Nair male reformers for their inherent Brahminism and cited as an evidence to strengthen their claim that matriliny favoured Brahmins and resulted in exploitative sexual relations.
the *tali* around a woman’s neck. If there is a rule that the one who ties the *tali* is the husband, the exogamous marriages in Nair community can be stopped”. In an article titled “The Customs among Kerala Women,” V. Narayaniamma cites *talikettu* as the prime evidence for the fact that many of the customs observed by the community are bad or inappropriate (Narayaniamma, 1914, p. 588). These women more or else echoed the sentiments expressed by male reformers.

Ka. Kannan Nair is one of the early reformers who tried to understand the origin, meaning and significance of the custom. He has written a number of articles in *Lakshmibai* on *talikettu*. In the article “The ancient customs of Nair marriage” he connects *talikettu* with the ancient practice of “community marriage” (Nair, 1918, p. 85) and treats it as the “disgraceful custom that should be destroyed so that proper marriage which is still absent among Nairs could be established among them” (ibid, p. 91). In another article titled “Methods to establish patriliny among Nair Community” he suggests marriage reform, financial reform and legal intervention to establish patriliny in the community (Nair, 1919, p. 377-8). While talking about the marriage reforms he concludes that including more elements to existing practice of cloth giving is “external reform” and defines internal reform, “Community reform becomes internal reform only when it is able to destroy old customs and annihilate the evil in them. It becomes one internal reform if the *talikettu* and cloth giving are combined and it is insisted that only the *tali* tier becomes the husband” (ibid, p. 377-378). Kannan Nair’s analysis of the origin of *talikettu* reflects the popular reformist assumption that matriliny is savage and inferior. He connects it to similar ceremonies existing in other parts of south India and confirms that this is a relic of an old custom which was commonly practiced among all the
branches of Dravida population (Nair, 1918). He delineates the purpose of this custom in
two different ways. First one distinguishes one particular girl from other girls who might
not marry; who will remain God’s servants or will remain available to the community
members. Next strand is not readily palpable in his writing. However, he acknowledges
that this custom makes a virgin ‘auspicious’ and marriageable. But he does not connect it
to virginity or the taboo of virginity if there was any. Instead he actively refutes this
connection when he says the origin of the ritual bath on the fourth day remains
unexplainable even though that bath among Brahmins represent pollution and purification
from cohabitation (Nair, 1918, p. 130).

The Nair reformers identified with the Ezhava attempts to reform rituals and customs and
were ready to acknowledge the influence of Sree Narayana Guru. In his article Mannathu
Padmanabhan acknowledges the influence of the spiritual teachings of Guru and the
enthusiasm of SNDP in reformist activities (Padmanabhan, 1964). The Nair reform’s
main focus was on the reform of matriliney. Several organizations with reformist goals
were formed by the end of nineteenth century and the beginning of the twentieth
century. All of these organizations were committed to the reform of marriage practices
in Nair community and the first meeting of Keraleeya Nair Samajam took the decision to
combine talikettu and cloth giving ceremony and made it a post puberty rite (Pillai, 1964,
p.248). Mithavaadi, one of the reformist groups, published C. Krishnapillai’s personal
diary in 1916 which records a number of meetings conducted at the houses of elite

38 Samoohya Parishkarana Sangham (formed in 1899), Thiruvithamkooor Nair Samaajam (formed in 1903),
Keraleeya Nair Samaajam (formed in 1907) and Uthara Keraleeya Nair Samaajam are the major ones
among them. Nair Service Society was formed in 1914 unifying all these attempts which were scattered
throughout Kerala.
members of the community for the abolition of *talikettukalyanam* and describes two such “progressive marriages” conducted at Chennithala in 1907 (as cited in Pillai 249). As one of the critiques against *talikettukalyanam* was the “wastage of money associated with this meaningless ceremony” even a decision to conduct the ceremony in a non-luxurious way was considered to be bold. In 1910 Thevalakkara Krishna Kurup conducted the *talikettukalyanam* of his daughters and nieces in a simple way. He received many congratulatory messages from the community leaders. K. C. Keshavapillai made a scathing attack on the *tali* rite in the congratulatory letter sent to Krishna Kurup. The letter describes *tali* rite as a practice where “the guy who ties the *tali* leaves taking wages on the fifth day (ibid, p. 249). K.C. Keshava Pillai’s poem ‘Lakshmee Keshavam’ which was hugely popular among the reformist circles attacks the rite on this ground. The practice of giving *Kachappanam* (cloth money) or *Kettukaanam* (tying charges) is reconstructed here as wages. The reformist attempt was to foreground this economic transaction as something that could hinder the possibility of a connection emerging from the rite. The economic transaction is posited as disgraceful and goes against the naturalness of man-woman relationship.

*Talikettu* is most often regarded as the practice that destroys the jointly acquired properties of the *Tarawad* – the matrilineal household within Nair reform. The discussion on *Talikettukalyanam* initiated by the editorial board of the magazine *Nair Samudaya Parishkari* (Nair Community Reformer) documents the early twentieth century reformist debates around this rite in detail. The magazine published the discussion on the

---

39 This is an all male discussion published in the 2 consecutive issues of *Nair Samudaya Parishakari* (1916 June and July Issues) where several important social reformers expressed their opinion on the rite.
appropriateness of this rite, with a stated objective to “form consensus among the community members” (“Talikettukalyanam”, 1916, p.16). on the abolition of Talikettu. In this all male discussion, which lasted for more than six months, all the members stated that it was an unnecessary rite, the origin and meaning of which was unknown. In trying to come to a consensus within the community members this discussion included opinions of all the major reformers from Travancore, Malabar and Cochin. What drives this discussion is more a nascent imagination of a unified Keralam than the differences within the princely states. The discussions talked about ‘Keraleeyar’ and Malayali disregarding the geographical, political and social differences within Travancore, Cochin and Malabar. The comparison is between Malayalam and paradesam (other land), where paradesam becomes neighbouring states such as Madras and South Canara. The three major arguments that emerged out of this discussion focused on 1) the meaningless of the rite, 2) the demeaning nature of the rite 3) and the expenditure associated with the rite.

The meaningless of Talikettu is expressed by A. C. Kannan Nambiar, one of the leading reformists of Northern Malabar as follows:

This rite is based only on the custom. Other than that no religious, scientific or rational base can be found supporting this rite. This is not prescribed in the Dharma principles of Varna system. This is not an essential purificatory rite. Since this is a meaningless rite we cannot justify saying it is an age-old rite. So this tainted rite should be abolished from among Keralites as soon as possible (ibid, p.18).
But there are instances where the history of the rite is traced from the Brahmanic texts. These attempts unlike the legal discourse which explained the rite as a preliminary purification ceremony focused on the sexual aspects of the rite. Though the general idea was that *talikettukalyanam* was not a Vedic rite to be justified using any of the Hindu or Vedic texts, Manusmriti is occasionally quoted in this debate by the ‘conservatives’ to defend the rite. According to this line of argument, the Manusmriti says that if a girl reaches puberty before marriage the father of the girl has to drink the menstrual blood to save himself from the sin of not conducting the marriage. The *talikettu* is validated in some rare instances as a Brahmin rite of pre-puberty marriage. Manusmriti, Vasista Upanishad and Sankarasmriti are some of the texts used in this context to validate the rite. Since these texts talk about a permanent relation and *talikettu* never resulted in any kind of relationship this argument had not many takers. The wastage argument once combined with the meaningless argument provided enough reason for the abolition of *talikettu*. In the same essay by A.C. Kannan Nambiar, he expounds further on these reasons:

> First, because of an innocent girl or girls the family has to spend a huge sum of money for this meaningless ceremony. Due to this extravaganza even wealthy *Tarawads* decline over time. The not so wealthy *Tarawads* also perish as a result of this practice. And due to their ignorance and false sense of pride, poor *Tarawads* fall in debt because of this rite. The belief that the non-performance of the rite before the girl comes of age can result in losing one’s caste is very strong.

---

40 See the discussion on child marriage by Ennakkatt Rama Varma Thampuran. (Tampuran, 1922, 204-206).
that even knowledgeable people do not take a stand against this tainted rite.

(Nambiar, 1916, p. 18)

In the same discussion there are occasions where the demeaning nature of the rite is foregrounded along with the wastage argument to ask for the abolition of *talikettu*. Pannikkottu Karunakara Menon’s observation on *talikettu* reveals this argument.

I am of the opinion that, *talikettukalyanam* is an unnecessary expenditure among us Nairs. It is not enough to say that it is unnecessary, but one must also state that it is shameful. It could be forgiven if “*talikettu*” is a symbol of marriage; but it is well-known that the *tali* tier and the husband are not the same. …In our neighbouring states the Devadasis need their mother or the idol to tie the *tali*; but they need an elite business man, a chieftain or a Brahmin to conduct ‘*Velissesham*’ – this knowledge ought to help convince the readers why I contend that *talikettu* is a shameful practice (Menon, 1916, p. 19).

There are several other instances in the discussion where the similarity of this rite with the initiation rites of the devadasi community from the neighbouring states is invoked to induce shame and disgrace among the community members. The Vaathil-thura-paattu

41 The word literally means “after marriage” and it is a popular usage for *nishekam* or *sekm* which involve the first act of copulation. See the discussion on Brahmin rite which follows for a detailed description of *Velissesham/Nishekam*

42 See the opinion by Sub Judge Ayillath Narayanan Nambiar on Talikettu in *Nayar Samudaya Parishakari*, 17(1916) 20, and C. Kannan Nambiar in *Nayar Samudaya Parishakri*, 16(1916) 20-21. The same discussion cite the novel “Parappuram” by K Ramakrishnapilla which involves a re-definition of talikettu as a rite leading to the loss of chastity(*Chaarithra Bhramsam*) of Nair women as in the case of Devadasi (ibid, p. 22-23).
sung during *tali* rite had also come under the reformist scanner. This song was sung by two groups - usually the bride’s group and the groom’s group - where one group asks to open the door and the other group gives reasons for not opening the door. By the beginning of the twentieth century these songs were regarded as obscene and the presence and use of this song also contributed to the disgrace argument around *talikettu* (Sankupillai, 1964, p.403).

The deflowering element of the rite comes to the forefront in the reformist arguments of the Ambalavasi (temple serving caste) groups. The reformist attempts of Pisharoti Samajam recounted in the autobiographical memoirs of Cherukad Govinda Pisharoti reveals the reason for the community’s revolt against this practice. Brahmins were appointed for the *talikettu* of Ambalavasi girls and the reformers made slogans that focused on the act of copulation involved in the rite where old Brahmin males were invited to deflower the young girls in the community. Cherukad quotes one of the slogans written by K.P. Narayana Pisharoti to reveal the ‘barbarity’ of the practice.

“On the *Konna*43 garland and on the newcloth

Lies the little girl who sucks breast milk

It is her ‘sekam’ or it is not ‘Ulsekam’44

This is disgraceful, disgraceful” (1984, p. 161)

As mentioned earlier, there were matrilineal, patrilineal and mixed inheritance groups other than Nairs and Ezhavas that followed this practice. The Nair and Ezhava reforms

43 Golden Shower Tree
44 Ulsekam means enthusiasm or auspiciousness
were echoed by these communities. Pandit K. P. Karuppan one of the leading Araya reformers has set up Araya community organizations following the model of SNDP. In the 1905 meeting he asked the community members to stop the practice of *talikettu* which according to him were “meaningless and expensive” (Velayudhan, 1983, p. 72). He took on the Manusmriti argument where the logic of Brahmin pre-puberty marriage is used to understand *talikettu*. He replied to it by providing a new translation of Manusmriti which interpreted the Smriti in a new light (ibid, p. 73). The early years of Velukkutty Arayan’s social interventions centred on the abolition of *talikettu* and *thirandukuli* (Babu, 2005, p. 16). K. P. Vallon’s efforts towards Pulaya reform focused on the abolition of *talikettu*. The newspaper started by him from the Dharmakaahalam Press published many articles which asked for the abolition of this rite (as cited in “Kerala Charithram” p. 1217).

The meaninglessness attributed to this rite often feeds into the argument of wastage. The word ‘Artham’ means both meaning and wealth. In many instances the reformist discourse plays with this particular word to foreground the above argument where *talikettu* becomes ‘nirarthakam’ - meaningless, ‘anartham’ - demeaning, ‘durartham’ - ill meaning, and ‘vyartham’ - meaningless on the one hand and becomes ‘arthahethukam’ – causing expenditure - on the other hand. (“Talikettukalyanam”, 1916, p.21-22). The discussion on *talikettu* in *Lakshmibhai* also resonates with this argument.

We must accept with shame that we attribute immense meaning and significance to *talikettukalyanam* and spend a lot on this rite. I have stated earlier that it is a rite without meaning (Artham illaatha). Now it has become a rite which spoils wealth (Artham ilaatheyaakkunna) (Eswara Pilla, 1910, p.189-190).
While publishing these reformist debates on matriliny, Nair Samudaya Parishkari also published a novel which touched upon the same set of issues. The title of the Novel is *Karthyanì Ammayute Thalayana Manthram* - The pillow talks of Karthyanì Amma –where each chapter is a kind of dialogue between the conservative Karthyanì Amma and her reformist partner over many aspects of matriliny. Karthyanì Amma is generally against all the reformist measures and considers them the influence of the English and makes an emotional argument against them. Her reformist husband always wins the discussion with his reason and poise. The third chapter of the novel is on the unwillingness of her partner in taking up the initiative to conduct the *talikettukalyanam* of their daughter Ammu. After denigrating the English and their influence initially, Karthyanì Amma tries to decipher the real issue behind the unwillingness. Interestingly, this is also an argument on income and expenditure, but it is a reversal of the reformist argument.

We have understood the meaning of progress. When men spend money for their own needs, it is progress. When women reduce their expenditure, it is progress. Women should give up silk and should use cotton to become progressive; but men need to use silk coat, knickers, collar and tie to become progressive. Do you think we women don’t understand all these? Money can be spend for your marriage. But not for our *talikettu*; it’s meaningless. Aren’t you ashamed to think that we don’t get your hidden agendas? These days the *Tarawad* is spending

---

45 The author of the novel hides behind the acronym Ma.Na. The only place a female voice is represented in the journal is in the novel and the author of the novel is conspicuously absent, making it read like an extension of the all male discussion on *talikettu*.
money for the education of men - for their B.A and B.L degrees. Initially we used to get some gold ornaments. Now with your progress even that is shrinking. Earlier, families used to spend money for the women’s talikettu. Now even that’s gone. …If my Granduncle were alive there would be four elephants for Ammu’s talikettu (“Karthyaniammayude Thalayanamanthram”, 1916, p. 28-32).

The decision made by her husband reflects the reformist reconfiguration of the talikettu. The novel says the husband decides to conduct the talikettu after watching his sobbing wife. But he is resolute not to yield completely to the emotional arguments of his wife. He finds a middle path and decides, “I will find an ideal husband for Ammu, will make him tie tali on her neck” (ibid, p. 32). His attempt is to merge the rituals of tali tying and cloth giving so that the tali tier and the husband would be the same person. He thinks only that would help the Tarawad from the disgrace of following an old custom.

The Travancore royal family followed matriliny and used to celebrate the talikettu of the princesses extravagantly. In the beginning of the twentieth century, the royal family spent around Rs. 1 lakh to celebrate the talikettukalyanam of the daughter of H.H Sree Moolam Thirunal. This was critiqued by the Swadeshabhimani newspaper as ‘royal family’s wastage of money’ (Pillai, 1910). The discussions on talikettukalyanam in Lakshmibhai bring this question to the ambit of a newly emerging domesticity. It repeats the male reformist argument of ‘wastage of money’ as a problem resulting from the inefficiency of the individuals in running the household where the resources are limited. The discussion on talikettu appeared under the title Grihabharanam – Governance of House – making the whole issue a matter of wise and judicious usage of family resources. It says, “No one is worried much about spending so much money on marriages. It is sad that people don’t
keep in mind the old saying ‘even nectar is toxic on over consumption’. The English have a saying, ‘Fools make feast, and wise men eat them’. We should be careful to save ourselves from bankruptcy through over expenditure” (C.D.D. 1906, p. 315).

Mannathu Padmanabhan, one of the leading Nair reformer and founder of Nair Service Society, considers talikettu to be one among the four ‘kettu’ that destroys the wealth of a household.\textsuperscript{46} He observes:

Marriage usually means the occasion that makes the man and woman husband and wife. …But in a Nair house if a marriage takes place, we should understand that the man has not received a wife and the woman has not received a husband. Usually, after marriage, the man and woman join to start a family. Instead of this, after marriage, the Nair couple separates without even trying to hold on to a relationship. To publicize this shameful state of affairs each family spends a fortune. The decorations and the ornamentations at the venue, processions with drums and bugles and the four days feast – once this is over – the Tarawad has to bear the huge debt on its shoulders (Padmanabhan, 1978, p.38).

At the same time, the reformist discourse was silent on the expenses and luxuries associated with the new Sambandham. The discourse was desperately trying to bestow the respectability of ‘stable and modern marriage,’ like a Hindu or European marriage, on the Sambandham. Mannathu Padmanabhan himself observes how he presided over the

\textsuperscript{46} Mannathu Padmanabhan, in his autobiography \textit{Ente Jeevitha Smranakal}, explains the other three ‘Kettu’ as, \textit{Kuthirakettu} - the effigies of horses made for temple festivals, ‘Vetikettu’ - the pyro-techniques displayed during festivals and ‘case kettu’ - the legal suits filed by the community members in relation to the division of the property of matrilineal household (Padmanabhan, 1978, p.82).
rites of a modern *Sambandham* in his locality that combined *talikettu* and cloth giving. The description details the pompous display of wealth, but here the pomposity is granted/allowed as it is a ‘real marriage’ and not just a mock ceremony (ibid, p. 39). This instance makes one pause and ask what it was that was the real issue behind the reformist displeasure over ‘wastage of money.’

### 5. From Virgin and Bride to ‘Virgin Bride’

The reformist reconstruction of *talikettu* was successful in presenting a new idea of the bride where her body is understood to be in a kind of corporeal intactness. The imagination of the body of this bride is similar to that of the Victorian bride who was at the centre of English contractual marriage or the *Kanyaka* who was exchanged during the Vedic marriage - ‘*Kanyadan*’ (literally, gifting of virgin). To understand this further it is essential to engage, at least briefly, with patrilineal marriage and the rituals associated with first copulation.

In the beginning of twentieth century the major patrilineal groups in Keralam were Namboodiris – the Hindu Brahmins, Christians and a section of Muslims. The practice of ‘Nishekam’ followed by Malayali Brahmins who had patrifocal families and patrilineal inheritance suggests a highly ritualized first copulation. They followed a strict primogeniture where only the elder member married from the same caste and all the younger male members of a family formed customary relations with matrilineal women. Nishekam or Sekam was a ritual associated with endogamous Brahmin marriage and was

---

47 Muslims of north Malabar were mainly matrilineal and stayed in the matrilineal joint family.
basically the ritual aimed at producing the right progeny (Fawcett, 1900, p. 65). The idea of ritual defloration is not readily available in the descriptions by the Western ethnographers of the rites. But it is possible to unearth this element from the rituals of first copulation among Brahmins. The participants of the marriage live apart for the first three days of the ceremony. On the first three days the bride is kept in seclusion where it is believed/imagined that the gods copulate with her. The first copulation with the virgin bride is the right of the Vedic Gods. First among them is Indra, the most prominent God, and he is followed by Varuna, Agni, and the remaining Gods. And it is only on the fourth day that the Brahmin bridegroom is allowed to enter the room which the bride inhabits. The fourth day is popularly known as *Velissesham* which literally means ‘post marriage’ and it is understood as the day the bridegroom can have sexual relation with the bride. And this night is geared towards the production of progeny and is highly ritualized with the priest sitting outside and chanting prayers and the bridegroom is supposed to repeat the chanting while he is copulating with his wife. Fawcett describes it as follows:

On the fourth day of marriage …at night the couple are led to the bridal chamber by the Vadhyaar. The bed is but a grass mat or common country blanket covered with a white sheet, a little ridge of rice and paddy, signifying plenty, around the edges. The Vadhyaar withdraws and the bridegroom shuts the door. The Vadhyaar outside, and the bridegroom inside following him, repeat appropriate passages from the sacred writings. (Ibid, p. 65)
Syrian Christians follow patrilineal inheritance and the marriage rituals are highly influenced by local customs. They marry according to the Synod of Udayamperoor – a twelfth century treaty which generally recommends ‘Hindoo rites’ (Joseph, 1994). The Syrian Christians in Keralam generally followed ‘Hindoo Customs’ till the beginning of the sixteenth century. Even in the beginning of twentieth century their marriages involved four day rituals and it combined elements from both Brahmin marriage and matrilineal marriage customs. The marriage starts with talikettu and proceeds with a ritualized opening of the bedroom door (Atachu Thura) as in Nair and Ezhava customs. Thurston gives a detailed description of the Syrian Christian marriage (Thurston, 1909, p. 451-454). According to his description, in the nineteenth century, Syrian Christian marriage was held at the church on Sundays and till Wednesday the bridegroom sleeps with the ‘bestman’ and the bride in another room. It is only on the fourth day of marriage that the bride and bridegroom sleep together as in the case of the Brahmins. The Syrian Christian marriage incorporates the ritualized opening of the bedroom along with the open-door song from matrilineal talikettu. On the fourth day – that is the Wednesday – the bridegroom and the bestman is requested to open the door by the bride’s mother. The songs that accompany the opening of the bedroom door are called ‘atachu thura paattu’. The mother of the bride comes and sings songs and in the songs she requests him to open the door of the bedroom and makes many offers for doing so, such as expensive utensils, dress, bed sheets and luxury goods. Once they open the door, the bridegroom and bride

\[48\]

The Synod of Diamper has twelve decrees on matrimony (decree I to XII) which explains the marriage custom.
are taken for a bath separately and after the feast they are taken together to the nuptial chamber.

The Muslim community in Kerala followed matriliney, patriliney and mixed inheritance and it varied as per geographical location. By the beginning of the twentieth century marriage among Muslims was invariably called ‘kalyanam’ and it is accompanied by ‘Nikah,’ the religious part (Innes, 1903, p. 192). No pre-puberty ceremony is observed among Mappila Muslims though they predominantly followed matriliney in the beginning of twentieth century. The nuptial chamber is a major aspect of marriage and is arranged and adorned in advance. The people who come for the marriage ceremony usually pay a visit to the room. In the Muslim marriage there are highly codified rituals related to the entry of the bride and bridegroom to the nuptial chamber and their exit from the same. Both the bride and bridegroom are taken to the nuptial chamber with Oppana songs. The Oppana songs revolve around the theme of love, longing, waiting and describes the carnal pleasures of man-woman relationship. While the bridegroom enters the nuptial chamber on his own, the bride is reluctant to enter the chamber, and is pushed to the room by aunts and other female members in the family and this ritual is called “arayilaakkal” which can be literally translated as “pushing to the chamber”. The next four days are marked with festivities where the bridegroom is presented with a feast. Innes observes, “In some parts of south Malabar it is the bride who is first conducted to the nuptial chamber, where she is made to lie down on a sofa; and then the bridegroom is

49Mappila is the Malayalam word for Malabar Muslims.
introduced and left with her for a few minutes. Cohabitation as a rule begins at once (ibid, p. 193).

Interestingly in Brahmin, Christian and Muslim marriage rites, the moment of first copulation/defloration is acknowledged. But it is a moment within marriage or something that constitutes the marriage. The guy who ties the tali and the one who initiates the sexual act are the same and he is the husband and it leads to a lasting relationship while in the other rites mentioned so far, the first act of copulation forecloses the possibility of a future sexual relation with the same male partner. This difference is precisely the point of contestation that makes a rallying point for change in the reform of talikettu among the matrilineal communities.

The discussion on reformist reconstruction has shown how the pre-pubertal ritualized first copulation was reconstituted as an object of shame and disgrace and how this disgrace was also constituted as an economic affair. A new logic of purity and pollution comes into circulation while re-defining marriage and this language introduced new ways of understanding and relating to virginity in the matrilineal communities, and even influenced the patrilineal ritualizations around copulation. The rights over the female body or the virginal body are reconfigured as an exclusive right of the husband. Parallel to the moment of establishing father as a legal entity, the entity of the husband is established by reconstituting the relations the community has with virginal defloration.

The discussion between the poet-reformer Cherukad and his mother on the suitability of his to-be-bride, recounted in his autobiographical memoir is a telling instance of this new logic of contagion which sets into motion a new discourse on body and chastity.
Cherukad’s mother discourages him from taking forward the marriage proposal with his cross cousin saying it is her second alliance. Cherukad dismisses this ‘disqualification’ by projecting her educational qualifications and his mother insists, “It’s her second”. Cherukad confronts his mother’s logic with the same reason and says, “It’s not her second. It’s her third. She had her *talikettu*. She must have gone through *Sekam* that time” (1984, p. 256). On another instance his maternal uncle tries to dissuade him from starting an alliance with the same cousin with the following remark, “Why do you insist on tasting the *Pindipayasam* (an ordinary dessert) polluted with canine drool when there are many out there ready to give you *Panchasaara Payasam* (a special dessert) till you are satiated”. (Ibid, p. 294). The woman who had gone through *talikettu* and a customary alliance is represented as ‘polluted dessert’ here.

In early twentieth century a similar move was happening around patrilineal customs of defloration. The rite of *Nishekam* comes under the scanner of Brahmin community reformers in early twentieth century and was abandoned gradually. The idea of gods copulating with the bride was imagined as shameful. Fawcett himself notices the resistance from Brahmins in acknowledging the presence of *Vadhyaar* – priest – during the time of *Nishekam* (Fawcett 1900, p.65). This should be read in conjunction with the reform in Nambuthiri community which focused on the abolition of primogeniture and urged all community members to marry from their own caste and encouraged widow marriage. The statement made by E. Subramania Aiyer in Travancore Sri Mulam Assembly in relation to the discussion around child marriage restriction act is revealing in

50 See Devika, (2007, p.111-172) for a detailed account of the Nambuthiri reform.
this instance. He reproduces the popular story of the mythical figure called Scholar Kakkassery Bhattathiri who mockingly comments on the copulation of Gods with the Brahmin bride as an act that would take away the bride's claim to chastity. Subrahmania Aiyer quotes this popular story to strengthen his argument on the misuse of Shastraic principles and human intellect. This story reveals the popular sentiments around the custom at that time. It reveals the new idea of chastity which was slowly gaining acceptance in all the communities where even copulation with Gods was reconstituted as an object of ridicule and an element of contagion. The rite of first copulation was being transformed into the exclusive right and privilege of the husband. The value of virginity was also being re-negotiated where it becomes a virtue. The monogamous conjugality that was getting stabilized in the beginning of the twentieth century involved the exchange of the virgin and imagined the transformation of the virgin bride to a chaste wife.

It is essential to acknowledge the many factors that went into the shaping of First Night as a cultural event; from the structural changes in the family, and property relations to neo-liberal regimes of consumption that created the spectacle of the romantic couple. But it is equally important not to lose sight of the sexual politics underlying the event. It is the

51 The abridged version of the story goes like this: Bhattathiri refutes all the statements made by an eminent scholar in a session of logical argumentation. As a final refuge the scholar makes a statement, “Your mother is chaste”. He thought Bhattathiri would not be able to refute it. The next instant Bhattathiri says, “No, No. My father could assert his rights on her as a husband only on the fourth day; after she had been used by thirty three million Gods. She is not chaste.” See, Proceedings of the Travancore Sri Mulam Popular Assembly, Vol. XIII (1939, p.188).
cultural anxiety around virginity and the act of penetrative sex that fuels the many discourses and converge them to the production of a phantasmagoric event. First Night anchors the contestations over the figure of the virgin and the virginal body. It emerged out of this flux of customs and rituals that existed in the community to acknowledge the first act of copulation. First Night is a moment where many elements in past rituals appear in a condensed and displaced form. The vestiges of the custom are still prevalent in many parts of Keralam. In my own field work, upper caste Hindus mentioned the practice of taking the bronze lamp to the bedroom and keeping the “eight auspicious objects” (Ashtmangalyam) in the nuptial chamber. The custom of an aunt accompanying the bride to the nuptial chamber is also practiced in many areas which is a clear vestige of the original talikettu. Even today the bride and bridegroom are not allowed to enter the temple or other auspicious places for the first four days after marriage – a practice that could be traced back to the observance of ritual pollution of four days in talikettu.

The popular perception of First Night as the first and foundational step of conjugality emerges from this arrangement of sexual relation. This arrangement becomes modern when the modern state makes the husband the right bearing individual to have sex with a woman. This explains why consummation is presented as a major point of culmination in marriage. The act of copulation operates at the fissures of the legal narrative marriage, making the man and woman, husband and wife. First Night emerges as a decisive moment by bestowing the man the right to have a ‘sexual relation’ with the woman. This moment is key to the formation of the monogamous unit as this becomes the first moment where a man could exercise his right over a mature woman’s sexuality and body. This is the movement from the figure of virgin and the figure of bride to the figure of virgin
bride where she is defined with ideas of corporeal intactness and ideas of purity and chastity. She is the one who is exchanged in the marriage to create a ‘modern family’ out of a ‘household’.

**Conclusion**

This chapter was an attempt to produce an account of the emergence of the figure of the virgin bride from culturally circulating ideas of virgin and bride. The chapter is anchored around official colonial discourse and reformist discourse around *talikettukalyanam*, the ritualized first copulation that falls outside modern ideas of marriage. In addition to foregrounding the semantic difficulty the ritual poses to both these discourses, the chapter documented the reformist creation of an *empty object* out of a culturally validated ritual. This discussion showed how the first act of copulation gets reconstituted as a prerogative of the husband and how the virgin bride becomes the ‘Victorian virgin’, whose body is defined by notions of purity. The chapter critically engaged with the reformist arguments around wastage of community wealth as a reason for the abolition of the rite and tried to show the fissures in the argument where the economic reason gives way to questions related to sexual or erotic economy.

This thesis while formulating the research problem out of the cultural practice of first night has contended that there is the need to re-inscribe and relate questions of political economy with questions of sexualized exchange. It has deployed Irigaray’s notion ‘exchange’ to show the incessant cross over between political economy and erotic economy. The analysis provided in the present chapter takes the question back to ‘exchange in virgin’. The present chapter departs from the existing scholarship on
matriliny in its analytical focus. It foregrounds talikettu as a point which needs further
examination. The archive shows the difficulty in representing the ritual as it does not fit
in to any of the modern registers of sexuality. While Sambandham held a chance of
getting translated as European marriage, a point lead to the permissive legal discourse
around it, talikettu was recast as a mock object. What was deployed around this rite was a
regulative discourse leading to the abolition of it. It was not a proper legal abolition.
Perhaps such a legal abolition is not possible also (the rite already invokes the taboo
making it inaccessible to legal discourse). Instead the ritual validation of virginity in
talikettu is incorporated into the ideas of modern marriage aligning it more with Indian
Kanyadan.

This element of ritual validation of virginity involved in talikettu makes analysis of
matriliny difficult. Such a ritual validation itself is capable of usurping the liberatory
ideas associated with matriliny through foregrounding the ‘exchange in virgin’. This
project has been trying to be cautious not to reproduce the unproblematic rendering of
matriliny as a radically different form/other of patriarchy. The ritual validation of
virginity as suggested by the present discussion hints towards the possibility that
exchange in sexualized female is there in matriliny too. But whether the virgin was
treated as virtuous or there was a certain taboo at the heart of it is a contested point and
might not be easy to explore further given the ‘always already translated’ state of
matriliny. Perhaps the difference is in the resultant social and cultural world produced out
of this exchange. What remains observable is the relation woman had with space and
property. And for Irigaray these two coordinates are important in understanding the
nature of commodification. Irigaray presents the spatial arrangement of the subject while
thinking about exchange where men are represented as moving and exchanging and women are represented as moved and exchanged between men. Irigaray has contended that if the exchange is played out through the bodies of women, as ‘matter’ or as ‘sign’ the resultant relations are reflected in the relation to property and space. In patriarchy men owns property/ women are property, men own and occupy spaces and women/women are space or transferred between spaces. Post-marital residence is one of the concrete sites where anthropology captures this relation women have with space. It suggests the change in the actual place of residence of a woman after marriage and is considered an important feature in defining kinship structures. In the case of matriliney, the women never changed their place of residence in their life time and it is through them lineage was tracked. This empirical feature is always foregrounded while describing the difference of matriliney and it is seldom analysed for its specificity. This empirical difference provides a concrete location to think about the connection between exchange in matriliney and commodification in the woman or in other words to think about erotic economy. When the very condition of the formation of patriarchal family becomes the physical movement of the woman, the virgin bride from one family to the other, matriliney suggests another organization. Is it possible to ask whether the absence of the physical movement of woman in the matrilineal joint household as suggesting something about the status of woman as commodity. I do not wish to suggest that there is no commodification in matriliney. The ritual validation of virginity suggests there is ‘exchange in virgin’. Matriliney also treated woman as ‘infrastructure’ but perhaps not as “unknown infrastructure” as Irigaray suggests. Woman was not the unknown infrastructure and the exchange in woman is culturally acknowledged and reflected in property relations. So the
emergence of first night could also be treated as the emergence of a new erotic economy where woman was forced to move from one place to another and this exchange is captured in the creation of the modern patriarchal family or this makes the modern family in Keralam patriarchal. The matrilineal exchange in virgin and the contemporary exchange in virgin perhaps create two different orders and two different economies.

This discussion also shows how the modern practice of First Night carries within it many elements of a past order where the virgin becomes the source of both fear and pleasure. This ambiguous status of the virgin and its ability to invoke the taboo or the norm is crucial in understanding the presence of psychological discourses in the intimate domain of First Night. The next chapter tries to document the deployment of psychological language to address the anxieties of the modern husband and shows how the norm takes on the form of romantic love.