CHAPTER - IV

COMMUNISM AND MASCULINITY

A communist has no personal life, hence no personal loss.

(C. Kannan, veteran Communist, founder and State President of CITU

Mathrubhumi Weekly 2013: 65)

This chapter dwells on the discursive cultural geography created by the Communist world in general and the party cadre in particular in Kerala. Communist party was beginning to take roots in the rural areas of Kerala in the late 1930s at a time when the socio-political milieu of Kerala, especially the princely states was polarized on communal lines due to the immediate fall out of the Abstention movement. The Communist ideology entrenched in class consciousness had to fight its way every inch to move forward. They created a new style of politics, cultural idiom, socio-economic perspective and a ‘collective consciousness’ for the people to come together and identify with, similar to what the caste and religious identities performed till date.

Colonialism had an economic impact on the life and relationships of men and women in Kerala. It gave rise to the emergence of a middle class which became the backbone of a whole lot of reforms, agitations and movements. But it also resulted in the impoverishment for many Kerala families and severe reduction in the economic range available to women. Slowly, domestic service and agriculture provided the main resources for women. This plight affected men also but they could, as the system was conducive, develop alternatives. In the case of jobs in factories, offices, and in other professional areas men had a total domination. Hence the alternative economic avenues, developed in lieu of the decline in traditional economic spheres were monopolized by men. Thus women’s relative status and bargaining power in society
and within the family declined drastically. In a gender based study of Communism and its political impact in Kerala this change in the status of women has to be necessarily foregrounded.

**Communist Party**

The birth of the Congress Socialist Party in 1934 and its *en bloc* conversion as the Communist Party in 1939 at Pinarayi in the Kannur district of Malabar were landmark events in modern Kerala. The Kerala Pradesh leaders of the Congress Socialist Party, P. Krishna Pilla, EMS, K. Damodaran and N. C. Sekhar founded the Kerala unit of the Communist Party of India in the presence of its central committee member Dr. S. V. Khate. All except Krishna Pilla belonged to aristocratic families, two from Malabar and two from Travancore. Only Krishna Pilla among them ever worked as a labourer. Of the four founders three belonged to matrilineal Nair community and the other to patrilineal Nambuthiri. Matrilineal system was crumbling and the Nambuthiri was a subordinate younger brother who had no real rights over the wealth of the family at the time the events were taking shape. And the younger members of the matrilineal families also did not enjoy their rights due to them. It is a significant observation that these disgruntled members of the uppercaste initiated the radical left movement in Kerala. (Jeffrey; Dilip Menon; Nossister)

**Marxism and Masculinity**

The Marxists put special emphasis on the agency of the oppressed people, starting with its founders Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels. They approached the issue of gender by way of the concept of the ‘division of labour existing in the family’. It has definite implications for the study of men and masculinities in the context of Marxism.
When EMS Nambuthiripad (hereafter EMS), former general secretary of the Marxist Communist party and the first Chief Minister of Kerala, recounts P.C Joshi’s (who was the General Secretary of the Communist Party of India till 1948) visit and interaction with the women communists of Kerala, this is how he prides over the ‘women comrades’ who zealously accepted the tutelage and guidance of their male comrades. He shows a characteristic parental pride that these young women could excel even men in their spirited confidence in answering questions, which was totally unexpected of women having such educational background. EMS with casual innocence also remembers how Joshi reserved all the credit to the men for being excellent mentors. (Devika 2005: 22)

In 1942 when the Communist Party of India was legalized EMS suggested some changes in the modes and functioning of the party, which did not seem to agree with his emancipatory ideals for women. Of the two suggestions one was that comrades should live an ordinary life. He exhorted his party men:

The life, deeds and words of most Communists give an impression of strangeness, different from the ordinary. It has to come to an end. We should realize and convince others that Communists are normal social beings engaged in ordinary jobs with usual family concerns. Such should be the attitude to family and marriage. It has been common among Communists to keep away from family and marriage. It would be wrong to think that the inexpensive party marriages which break away from traditional or civil marriages would do any good to the party. (1944:174)
How this would affect women’s emancipatory efforts is something to be addressed. What the word ‘ordinary’ means in EMS’ semantic world is quite problematic—how an ‘ordinary life’ (family oriented) was to be performed and defined. This ‘ordinariness’ undoubtedly carries much ideological weight. One might as well enquire how far this norm would be consistent with the Victorian world view and its Indian variant.

In the article published the same year entitled “Where the Nambuthiris are bound to?” (Nambuthirimar Engottu”) he presents a model of woman as a liberated citizen which is far from the picture of ‘ordinary life’ he draws. He also envisions a path of revolution which does not hinder a normal day-to-day existence. For him the situation does not demand full-time party work. The means and end of life proposed by him is a life in one’s home and native place, working for one’s livelihood, persuading one’s family, relatives and acquaintances to participate in organizational efforts, being influential and ensuring public support in one’s locality. (Devika 2005:22)

The communist politics which developed during the heyday of Nationalist movement in India was equally about the construction of a certain selfhood for a section of middle class, in keeping with their social hierarchy. This chapter uses a selection of sources ranging from activist memoirs to the forgotten disputes in the history of Communist party in Kerala.

The second chapter of the thesis discussed protest masculinity of backward castes and how their middle class leaders tried to instil the spirit of dissent and protest against the denial of their civil rights in the minds of their fellow members of subordinate castes. EMS himself argued that educated and cultured, receiving salaries and pensions, they were nevertheless untouchables. They naturally resented against
the caste practices and consequently protest movements were developed. But with the Temple Entry Proclamation in Travancore in 1936, these protest movements were fizzled out. The elites of backward castes underwent ‘embourgeoisement’ and they lost interest in the downtrodden of their own castes. This was the ripe time for the Communist party to step in to harness the political excitement of poor and lower castes which was developing into class consciousness. [EMS 1937:7-9]

EMS muses on how his nationalist and subsequent communist self evolved during the formative period:

Brought up as I was in our environment, I had developed myself in my early life as a devout Hindu. Even the social reform movement of which I was a participant was calculated to reform society within the framework of Hinduism. I read a lot about Swami Vivekananda and his works in translation. Our tutor in my pre-school days was an ardent follower of the Swami. I, therefore, had some inclinations towards Hindu Mahasabha whose leaders Pandit Malaviya and Dr. Munje had made a visit to Kerala. Gradually, however, I was attracted towards the preachings of Ramaswami Naicker in Tamil Nadu and the group of rationalists in Kerala who subsequently launched a Malayalam organ of their own under the title Yuktivadi (the Rationalist). These contacts and the logic of the left in social reform and national movements made me completely break off from the earlier religious ideology. I was coming out of the school as a radical in the social, political and ideological terms. [EMS 1987: 34]
Communists and Wives

This is Comrade Krishna Pillai’s love-note to his lover Thankamma while he was in Nagarcoil Jail: “Yesterday I saw you for the first time. You are good looking; I am dark, almost ugly. Yet I wish to marry you, in case you like me. Life with me will be difficult, different. Not the usual, peaceful bliss of domesticity, of course. My wife should stand by me, the party and its cause. Then alone can she get satisfaction.” (T.V.Krishnan 1971: 85). In drawing the picture of a wife he wanted, he demands a high degree of endurance, since to be the wife of a communist was a tough game altogether. His prospect of life for the wife of a communist is ‘not ordinary’. He assigns her the part of a wife supporting the leader-husband and his party. Evidently whatever little stretching and transgression possible for her from the usual incarnation of a domesticated wife is only for the benefit of the party and the cause her husband stands for. It might be a case of how for a non-communist woman, her identity and choices get determined by her fiancé and the controlling schemes of matrimony and communist masculinity.

Another incident that points to such insistence on the part of Krishna Pillai is their quarrel over her negligence in providing hospitality to Moyyarath, a prominent Communist leader from North Malabar. Krishna Pillai strongly resented Thankamma’s behaviour towards Moyyarath. “How could I know who had come,” Thankamma made a feeble defence. “You should know. It is a disgrace if Krishna Pillai’s wife does not know who Mooyyarath is,” his tone was terse. (Krishnan 1971: 110). It is a hypermasculine self, who was quite sure of himself and his stature as a leading politician of Kerala, against a teenaged wife who was a political simpleton, not expected to know the intricacies of politics and who is who in the party.
EMS had a different conjugal experience which he cherishes. Unlike other communist leaders he married on time and except for a period of life under cover, he could spend his time with his family. He says it was fifteen months after his mother’s death he married a girl of sixteen:

She entered my life in the place of the sixty year old lady who had left me. Whose suffering was more intense, the mother's or the wife’s? I cannot say. In one sense, mother's was less intense: she had suffered only one instalment of my jail life for 19 months and, moreover, knew where I was. For my wife, on the other hand, the 27 months of separation (and she did not know where I was) was only the beginning.

(EMS 1987: 94)

Incidentally if one gets curious about the ceremony of a Nambuthiri marriage it would strike you that EMS does not reveal or reflect on the nature of the marital ritual he had to perform, religious or secular, possibly because he had already become a member of the Communist party as its founder.

Compared to Krishnapilla, EMS’s views on marital life and the role of the female partner is more in tune with the family values generated during the Victorian period. Elsewhere in the autobiography he acknowledges that his family was looked after well by the party. Unlike other Nambuthiri women his wife enjoyed greater mobility, travelling to far off places and meeting different people, which the educationally empowered women from more developed communities intensely aspired for. It is true that the comfort of limited mobility and the security of a conventional setting were denied to her for sometime. But compared with the wives of other communist leaders she enjoyed special privilege and convenience. EMS’
inflation and qualification of experience is here contrary to the masculinist revolutionary zeal of Krishna Pilla:

But, as years rolled on and difficulties mounted, she started suffering more and more. Not because I had "squandered" the properties, as the relatives alleged, but because she could not have a stable family life. My centre of activities being shifted from Kerala to the Party centre and back again, the responsible jobs I had to carry out being changed from one to another, she could not have the type of family life which is the dream of every young girl getting married and ageing into motherhood and grandmotherhood. (EMS1987:94)

EMS laments that his wife was denied the typical middle class life every woman dreamt of. Relating EMS’s statements with that of his comrade and leader Krishnapilla discussed above reveal more than what mere interpretation can convey. EMS quotes a famous Malayalam poet to reflect on the fifty years of her married life: "they praise me for being this and that. How I wish I were none of these but an ordinary woman who is able to live with her husband." (EMS1987:94) His masculine imagination fails to conceive that his wife might have her own thoughts, and he need not think for her. Thus marriage that is a ‘given’ for women and the Hindu notions of wifely devotion coupled with the Victorian ideal of “the Angel in the House,” reinstates women in their conventional spaces. Female energy is orchestrated to the advantage of men.

EMS describes the adverse response of his in-laws to his decision to donate his wealth to the party. But his wife supported him in giving up the properties. His masculinist glorification of himself reaches its zenith in these statements:
My wife's relatives had been happy and contented when they gave her in marriage to me five years ago. Coming from a respectable family and having the reputation of being an intelligent young man, I certainly was a match for the girl. The head of the family (my would-be brother-in-law) was a supporter of the social reform movement of which I was an active participant, developing into one of its leaders. A man of worldly wisdom, he was also tolerant of my politics. The fairly long underground life, followed by the act of my giving up all properties, was beyond his comprehension. He was, in fact, infuriated. (EMS 1987: 95)

A K Gopalan (AKG) the legendary mass leader of the Communist party narrates the experience of parting with his first wife:

The opposition of my father and relatives came to a climax with the Temple Entry Satyagraha. My wife had to suffer abuse at home. She found it difficult to carry on without me. She wanted to accompany me. I did not know whether it was love of me or of the country that prompted her. I explained to her the difficulties of living with me. She gave her word that she was willing to suffer all that. I was relieved. I was eager to educate her. I took her to Kelappan's Harijan ashram, Pakkanarpuram, and put her up there. After two days I left for Calicut. Taking advantage of this opportunity, her uncle came to the ashram, lied that her father was no more and took her away. She was confined to his house. I heard of this and decided to visit her house. I wanted to apologise to her relatives for my mistake. I thought I would be able to convince my wife who was not sufficiently educated politically. I failed.
She would not talk to me. I could not even see her. I knew that she loved me. But she did not have the courage to rebel against customs and come with me. It was my fault, not hers. She did not remarry for four or five years. She did however marry again at a later date. I am happy that she did. So she also deserted me. A partner who was ready to share life's happiness, the burdens of my sorrow and work—she too left me! Why? The answer is not far to seek. (Gopalan: 48)

Though AKG was greatly affected by the desertion of his beloved wife he had to make a choice between the public cause and a conventional matrimony. It was the first major sacrifice he made for the ‘people’s cause’. He says after this agonizing experience he was averse to another marriage. He thought it was a business agreement and a social compromise. Marriage for the politician “can be nothing but a burden, to a public worker a serious handicap,” (49) and for the wife a tale of hardship and misery. Husband as a public worker cannot act with immunity attending to all conventional familial needs. For him marriage makes sense only when “there are young women who are willing to suffer anything and who possess a corresponding political sense.”(49) Like Krishna Pilla he too establishes the binaries of limited domesticity and revolutionary possibilities in terms of gender: “May she not be the knife cutting the throat of his principles?”(49)

AKG reserves space to discuss the manifold limitations of women after his ‘manliness’ received a severe shock of being rejected by his wife under pressure from her family. That incident seemingly incited his sense of gender justice:

I learnt a lesson from marriage. I learnt it at the cost of severe mental anguish. Women today have no freedom. They have no freedom to marry someone whom they like and who is closest to their hearts. Even
deliverance from the despotism of an undesired husband is not possible for them. They have no economic freedom. A time will come when love of one's fellow-men is no longer an offence. A time when a real patriot will be welcome everywhere. A time when women can lead their lives without having to become man's slave. I consoled myself with the thought that readiness to sacrifice even one's life is the only way to make such a dream a reality. (Gopalan 49)

A better comprehension of the different experiences of these comrades is possible when they are placed in a complex historical context of caste, class and gender. In the case of EMS the social reality pertaining to his community was that of Brahmin women who never returned to their family after marriage, either as deserted women or widows. Whatever happened to them after marriage would be concluded as their fate by the elders of the community. For Nambuthiri women there was no escape from a bad marriage. Just like transacting a commodity they treated their women for marriage with a ritual flavour. With AKG the issue was different. The women of Nair caste to which he belonged had more mobility and choice. Nair women were treated as essential part of their maternal family even after marriage. The family could consider the merits and demerits of the marriage and decide whether to continue with it or not. Hence Nambuthiri husbands were ritually and otherwise more empowered than the Nair husbands.

AKG narrates how eventhough he had met Comrade Suseela long back, their marriage could not be materialized due to his political vagabondism and life under cover. With an idyllic sense of fulfilment he says how at last he found a life partner who understood the travails of a revolutionary activist who dedicated himself to the cause of the people:
My long cherished dream of a life-partner ready to share my joys and sorrows, my hopes and fears, my work and leisure, had at length come true. The long wait of nine years added sweetness to our union….I feared whether Susheela, who had grown up in a different environment, would get along with my family. But she was able to integrate herself with my family and become the darling of my aged mother. This was a great relief to me. She was also able to get along with my brother's family….Susheela is not only my wife but also a comrade of my Party. It is a source of pleasure as well as of difficulty when both husband and wife are full time Party workers….Susheela helps me a great deal in my present political activities. But for her help and care I certainly would not have been able to work as much as I am doing now. She plays a great role in keeping me in good health. She dutifully fulfils the task of looking after me as a Party comrade. At the same time, she looks after her own work as a Party worker. (Gopalan 186)

It is of special note that it became a common pattern for Kerala Communists to remain bachelors or to marry only in their forties. Nossiter observes that it was “partly because the marriage system had been in such a flux in their youth that they had no guardians to arrange their marriage. Communists whom I interviewed attributed their bachelorhood or late marriage to the nature of their political life.” (1982:67)

**Communists and Mothers**

The following extracts from the autobiographies of Kesavadev, AKG and EMS have been chosen and juxtaposed for a glimpse into how their mothers also fit
well into patterns of motherhood which have been taken for granted, stereotypical and universal:

But, she is a mother. Every woman is a mother. A mother’s struggle and sacrifice is entirely for her children. They are more valuable for her than her country. She’ll roar like a tigress, wag her tail like a dog or wail heart-rendingly for her children. That is how a mother is. (Kesavadev 257)

Kesavan stood silent, his head hung low. He is a man. He adores the mother in Mrs. Pillai. But he would take sides with Mr. Pillai. He wants Mr. Pillai not to yield to the threats of the government, and believes he would not do so. That is what he expects from a man. (Kesavadev 257)

Kesavan is looking, eyes wide open. A fair and lean, half-clad woman who knows only to love and sacrifice, is walking amidst the ruins. Mother! Mother! His eyes got wet (Kesavadev 264).

“Why do you go home now?”… “I want to see mother.” … “Are you an infant? Only infants want to see their mother?”…. “See mother. Eat the food she serves, and come back, that is all”. (Kesavadev 240)

The man who yearns for freedom is a great being who can break all human bonds. He can ignore his mother, sacrifice his wife and
children, and eventually would be ready to offer himself at the altar of freedom. (Kesavadev 257)

Although mother did not like my going to jail, she understood that it was a part of my political life. She would say: “Six months jail is enough. I will be satisfied if he then comes to see me and spends two days with me and then goes back to jail.” (Gopalan 4)

Mother used to read the newspaper daily for information about me. She thus came to have some familiarity with political matters. Her deepest political tenet, however, was her affection for me. (Gopalan 4)

A significant incident occurred a day before her death. She called my brother and said: “Gopalan is busy with the elections. Do not bother him. Don't inform him about my illness. Let him do election work.” I heard of this when I reached home after her death. I felt proud of my mother's political consciousness. But I was sad that I could not fulfill my duty to her. What difficulties does a political figure not have to overcome! My mother was the greatest solace in my political life. If only she were alive today! (Gopalan 4)

The next visitor was our family lawyer. Briefed as he was by my mother, he used all his powers of persuasion to convince me that I was causing utmost pain to mother. “I don't know,” he said, “what will
happen to the old lady.” Unlike in the interview with my teacher, I could be frank with him. “Do you know what will happen to me?” I asked and answered, “this is such a matter of conscience and honour to me that if I am forced to retrace my step, I would not consider this life worth living”. (EMS1987:45)

The couple of minutes that mother and I spent together, to begin with, were highly emotional and, also, quite embarrassing to me. Suppressing all her feelings and shedding a few of tears, she asked me a single question: "Will you leave me again?" The rational person in me could not give the assurance that I would not: I had chosen my path of revolutionary activity which, I knew, might lead to a repetition of what had just then happened; but the emotional element in my personality prodded me to give my word of honour that I would always be with her throughout her life. (EMS1987:92)

Separation broke my mother’s heart in 1932. I had an inkling of it from a letter I received from her. Written by a friend of the family with whom mother shared her feelings—she was unable to write the letter herself—the letter pained and at the same time encouraged me. It gave full expression to her agony at the separation but showed that she had nothing but concern for my health. The motherly tenderness which was clear in the text of the letter, made me regret at having caused such agony to her but did not deter me from the path I had chosen. (EMS1987:91)
Why did she do this? To be with her son (me) in her last days. She knew that the path I had chosen—radical social reforms plus intense political activity—was at odds with the values and standards which guided my eldest (half) brother (the head of the family). Relations were becoming strained on questions of family property also. It was, therefore, thought that speedy division of the family property, with each of the brothers living separately, was the best course for everybody. The document pertaining to division of the family property was duly registered and the four of us left the traditional abode of the family (EMS1987: 93)

Maxim Gorky’s ‘mother’ was missing among these Communist mothers of Kerala. Gorky’s ‘mother’ was a prominent symbol the Communists celebrated and sustained. In the autobiographies of Communists we have seen glorified images of all enduring, loving, accommodative and suffering mothers. They have not been given subjecthood anywhere. The mothers were denied agency and their subjecthood excluded in the larger scheme of remasculinisation of their sons, brothers and husbands. The marginalization of women continued even in the realm of proletarian discourse. Within the masculinist frame of these narratives women get portrayed as tolerant mothers, chaste wives or supportive colleagues occupying a limited space, their sexuality and subjectivity either denied or dealt with as a moral issue.

**Communists as Political Icons:**

**Stalinism and Communist Masculinity**

This anecdote of KPS Menon, India’s first Foreign Secretary, encapsulates conflicting ideologies and political strategies in the context of Indian national movement: “Twice he spoke of the futility of preaching morals to an evil person.
Gandhiji’s phrase, ‘a change of heart,’ would mean nothing to Stalin. Perhaps it was to Gandhi’s pre-occupation with moral considerations that Stalin was referring when he drew the metaphor of the peasant’s refusal to moralize with the wolf”. (KPS Menon 1953: 26).

All the four founder members of the Communist Party of India were staunch Gandhians before they switched over to the revolutionary path. The contemporary global Communist hypermasculine icon, Joseph Stalin, the leader of Soviet Communist Party influenced the world view of Indian Communists. His masculine image dominated the discourses the Communists generated in India. This aggressive, violent masculinity was therefore in stark contrast and contestation with its equally dominant non-militant Gandhian counterpart.

The way a revolutionary leader was constructed through the speeches and writing of Communist leaders and followers has been a popular discourse on masculinity. Some such images have been culled from their writings that heighten Communism and its leaders to idealistic and iconic proportions:

Readiness to learn anything from anyone, humility, knowledge of his limitations, honesty and at the same time the mental courage required of any leader – it is a totality of all these that made Krishna Pillai a great man…. A good Communist then. (Krishnan 1971: 138).

Bhagat Singh the man of matchless patriotism and valour has won my heart. But it is the Russian revolutionaries, not Bhagat Singh, who have been my gurus. (Kesavadev 275)
If religion ends, the world is not going to end; god would end, murderers and thugs would end. You know the history of religion? It is a history of killing millions. Religion grew drinking blood, wading in the river of blood. You are all lured by the opium of religion. (Kesavadev 260)

Coming as I did from the middle class I was subject to the class traits of false pride, self-conceit and desire for power. I realized that one can never become a revolutionary unless these traits are completely obliterated from one’s character. I felt the structure of the socialist party was not suitable for this. I cast my eyes towards Marxism and towards the Marxist party. I decided to join it. (AKG 1973: 84).

The joint family into which I was born exists no more. The property was partitioned, each of us brothers setting up his separate family. While my brothers used their share of property for making their living, I proceeded, after a time, to sell it and use the proceeds as capital for our Party Press. I have since then been living and maintaining my wife and children with what I get from the Party and from the royalty for my books. Though my family has at times undergone hardships (particularly when I had to remain under cover), it has been looked after, with the children well-educated. All the four children and their spouses are employed. The transformation of my Jenmi family into a working middle class family is thus complete. This, with important variations, is true of almost all families belonging to this
caste/community. Working by hand or brain has become the rule rather than the exception for the generation next to ours (EMS 1987: 13)

I have nothing to say to those who believe that it was cowardly to escape from jail. The life of a first class detenue prisoner bears no comparison at all with the life that we subsequently led outside jail. On one side, there was bread, butter, Sāmbhar, meat, milk, sumptuous feasts, radio and tennis; on the other, hunger, disease, despair, rotten food, harassment by spies, lack of freedom, days devoid of light and breeze, nights devoid of sleep, long journeys, and numberless other travails—which of these would a coward or a pleasure-seeker choose? Which of these would a revolutionary choose? This is something that the reader must decide. My second phase of underground life was to be even more horrible than the first. I had come out of jail fully aware that it would be so. (Gopalan A.K.:154)

A dark chapter in my political life began. Comrade Chandroth and I resigned from the Socialist Party in anger over certain developments. The leadership was incapable at that time of pointing out to us the mistakes in our policy or actions and to correct them. On the other hand, we were not mature enough to take the issues to the leadership instead of resigning in a huff; to argue it out before them and to set the matter aright. We were angered and pained when our loyalty to the working class that we had served for such a long time
was questioned by our co-workers and our idealism doubted. But resignation was not the answer. I was to learn later from experience that by resigning we had only fallen into the trap of party enemies and unwittingly furthered anti-party activities. My political education was the result not of doctrine but experience. It was because of this that I made mistakes initially and was able to correct them later. (Gopalan79)

My health was completely shattered! Doctors wanted me to take complete rest. They said that even talking to people would affect my health. Comrade Krishna Pillai rushed home on hearing this. He forced me to stay at home. He hung around like a watchman. To comrades who called to meet me he would say gravely: “…Do you want him to die? If you love him, don't come to see him for the time being…” Although I wanted to see them all, I did not say a word out of fear of Comrade Krishna Pillai. It was impossible not to submit to that loving discipline. It was a manifestation of the abiding loyalty that Comrade Krishna Pillai had towards friends and co-workers. It was that loyalty and affection that made him what he was. (Gopalan 169)

Krishnapillai is a dark and lean man of short stature. His neck resembling Bhagath Singh; the way he walked like a soldier with regular steps, his head held high, the great commanding power in his words, and the ever present smile were all his specialities. A smiling volcano- that is P. Krishnapillai. (Kesavadev 350)
Hunger and lust! The two passions that caused wars, revolutions and homicide. May be why there have been attempts to negate and suppress lust and hunger. Can negation be the solution? Haven’t centuries passed since their attempts to end these urges? Have they negated? … No, they couldn’t. They could never. Restrain, refine -that is the only possibility. (Kesavadev 328)

The beautiful sunrise and sunset, the star-studded blue sky, moonlight, the green hills, the roaring sea and the beautiful face of a woman would charm him. He could never dismiss delicate human emotions as mere ‘sentiments’. He has never been ready to manipulate or sacrifice friendships or family bonds for the revolutionary cause. Above ideals and revolution he knew how to value humanity and love mankind. (Kesavadev 338)

For the communist, “To have an aim in life, to gallop towards that aim, even unmindful of life—that is the pleasure of living…. A social, cultural, economic and political system based on love and equality is what he aims at. Revolution is the means to that end.”(Kesavadev 271) This represents the quintessential masculinist aspirations which kept on inspiring and stimulating the budding revolutionaries, and dissolving their sense of disillusionment, futility and anxiety.

The idea that those who want to change the world have to transform their sexual energy into ‘real manliness’ by deploying it for societal needs is a form of ascetic masculinity which had been a prominent contemporary ideal. The
constructions of masculinity continue to hold sway in the newly emerging radical sections of the left.

One of the founders of the Communist Party of Kerala, K. Damodaran claimed that Marxism was a science. His statement encompasses the Marxist world view: “With the aid of this science, we can forecast the future of man and society and thus control it. For the first time in history, man begins spontaneously to control his future, his fate”. (Prabhatam Annual, June 1939).

The discourse generated by the Communists also reveals their anxiety about non-violence because they were afraid of the ‘feminine character’ of the National Movement led by Gandhiji. They understood Gandhiji’s techniques of passive resistance and non-violence as quintessentially feminine. Gandhiji was trying to forge a nationalism of a very different sort by unifying diverse classes, communities and religious groups through moral appeals.

Communists and their sympathizers accused Gandhi of demasculinising the virility of Indian Nationalism with his soft and slow approach:

Operation! Without a surgical operation there is no cure to India’s ailment. Political paralysis, social leprosy and economic consumption are India’s diseases. Neither Gandhi’s Satyagraha nor Sree Narayana’s mirror installation can cure India’s diseases. One has to strike at the roots. That is socialist revolution. (Kesavadev 274)

Krishnapillai told Kesavan in his solemn voice: “This won’t do...what Dev says is right. Eating grass, drinking plain water and doing penance on the road by the hedge won’t give you freedom” (Kesavadev: 351)
Burn! The British rule, royalty, landlords, capitalism, religion, god, everything to be burned to ashes! Take the ashes to the centre of Arabian Sea and immerse it. And then? Establish an Indian Socialist Republic based on equality, liberty, and fraternity. (Kesavadev 265)

To believe that Gandhiji’s mode of Satyagraha based on the principle of non-violence, whether individually or involving a group would lead to India’s freedom is an illusion. Any revolt which keeps away from the masses, a freedom movement which does not involve the general public would not be a movement for total liberation. (Kesavadev 190)

If we weave the yarn the British would submit! Learning Hindi would give Swarajya! … All these are the inner-calls of Gandhi…. Gandhi is the enemy of freedom….You cannot attain freedom by eating grass, wearing loin cloth, drinking plain water and chanting Vedic mantras. Gandhi is the enemy of freedom…. servant of British imperialism. No, India would not get freedom as long as Gandhi is alive. Gandhi’s non-violence and ‘inner call’ is nothing but pouring water on the fire of freedom. He has to die for India to be free. (Kesavadev 268)

The danger is not of a heroic confrontation with a ‘masculine other,’ but that the ‘feminine other’ will completely dissolve the masculine. As manifested severally in the above statements the revolutionaries seem to wonder whether the feminine other would destroy the community by robbing it of its masculinity and bestowing upon it a feminine character.
Collapse of Matriliny and Growth of Communism

The base the Communist Party built in rural Kerala and among high castes - notably Nairs - in the 1940s owed much to the collapse of the matrilineal joint-family and the consequent uprooting of a generation. Elsewhere in India as well people of higher castes led the Communist Party of India; but they tended to be urban intellectuals seeking to mobilise lower-caste workers. In Kerala, on the other hand, significant numbers of rural, primary-educated Nairs — ‘the primary school,’ as Puthuppalli Raghavan said, was ‘only a furlong’ from his house — came to the Communist Party because it appeared to offer absolutes and certainties totally lacking in the old society crumbling around them. As commented by Robin Jeffrey,

The collapse of matriliny did not automatically make Communists; but it created the conditions in which thousands of young caste Hindus were forced to ask themselves, 'Why is society in such disarray? How can it be changed and improved?' Elsewhere in India the parents of a higher-caste Hindu male would more often have settled him into an arranged marriage — and ideally, a job — by his late teens or early twenties. But in many Nair families by the 1920s, as Puthuppalli Raghavan asked, 'Who was to care?' When we recall that Nairs were largely rural caste-Hindus, the hundreds who joined the Communist Party and the thousands who supported it represent a phenomenon unique in India. Nowhere else did the Party attract such numbers of rural, higher-caste people.” (Jeffrey 1992: 48)

He adds that nowhere else in India was matriliny so prevalent, the caste system so extreme, and the system of family and of caste shatter so completely.
Moreover, nowhere else did the Communist party establish such a wide, longstanding base in the rural areas. (2010: 26). The collapse of matriliny and the emergence of a new social and family structure was part of the tradition of dissent and protest, which can be read as a process of remasculinisation.

**Communism and Anti-Caste Movement**

Many of the pioneering communist leaders were younger generation social reformers. They participated in various caste eradication movements and other social initiatives which aimed at reducing social inequality and empowering the oppressed, such as educational rights, right to use the public roads, proportional representation in legislature, employment in public service, Temple entry movement etc. When the communist movement was about to take off, the leading activists confronted various caste/community organizations that fractured the society. And the year in which the party was founded in secrecy in 1937 was mired in the political turmoil created by the Abstention movement (started in 1932). The polarization generated by the movement incited the caste/communal feelings of the people at large. The following statement of veteran trade union communist leader R. Sugathan encapsulates the predicament faced by early trade union leaders: “No. These workers won’t unite. Religion and caste won’t let them. First you have to destroy religion and caste.” (Kesavadev 337)

NC Sekhar narrates his encounter with caste as a trade union leader:

I stood calm and without the Chairman’s permission said loudly:

“Friends, comrades, I am the secretary of the Thiruvannur Cotton Mill Workers’ Union, and your Secretary has invited me as representative for this annual meeting. When I wanted to present a resolution so that your union would progress the way mine has, the Chairman wants to
know my name, only to know the caste I belong to. I represent only the workers and no one else.”(188)

M. N. Govindan Nair, the first Secretary of the Communist party in Kerala after its formation in 1956 observed that the consistent work of the Communist leaders among the different trade unions has resulted in replacing the caste and communal feelings of the workers with a powerful class consciousness. (361) He narrates his experience of encountering communalisation of the working class instigated by the capitalists and groups of vested interest. They, inorder to divide and distract the working class promoted caste-religious consciousness among the workers for which they sought the help of respective leaders from various communities.( 374) All along the Communist party was trying to arouse class consciousness over caste or religious feelings.

In his account of trade union initiatives in the cashew factories of Kollam, M.N. Govindan Nair confidently claims how the Party had an undisputed sway and could influence the workers to a realization of their undivided identity as a new class of labourers irrespective of caste and religion. (374) He then makes special mention of an incident where the union demanded ‘maternity allowance’ for the women workers, who formed a majority of the labour force in the cashew factories. It did not find favour with both the workers and the factory owners. In Hindu practice it has been traditionally considered the responsibility and prerogative of the husband to bear the expense related to child birth. It has been suggested in the narrative itself that the ‘maternity allowance’ seemed offensive and insulting to many. In one such organized protest near Kundara a group who claimed to be the members of their families argued, “If we have impregnated our women, we’ll bear the expense. The factory owners need not, nor do we want you to claim it for us.”(375) Where neither
the threats of the factory owners, nor religious-caste divides could shake the revolutionary convictions of the workers, a sudden masculinist upsurge could.

As Dilip Menon who has made a seminal study on caste, communist and national movements of the period in question observes: “The socialists conceived of a community of peasants as against landlords and that had been useful in the formation of unions. It soon became evident that such community would prove transient, as caste, class and locality pulled activity in different directions.” (1994: 47)

In the same vein P Krishna Pilla exhorted people when he was the secretary of the newly formed Congress Socialist Party, in a very famous article titled ‘Mathathinalla chorinanu poruthendathu’ (One must fight not for religion but for food), published in the Nationalist Newspaper Mathrubhoomi in 1934: “Tiyya,Nair,Pattar,Mappila and Christian-one must forget these differences and assert that ‘I am an agricultural worker, I am a mill worker and my success is the success of each worker belonging to my class’.”

The late nineteenth century witnessed community formation among the major castes of Hindu religion based on their common identities and requirements. The Ezhava, Nair, and Brahmin castes underwent the process, whereas the Dalits were only half way through it, when the Communist party was formed in secrecy in 1937 by four uppercaste activists. Subsequently the discourse of class inequality was privileged over caste inequality which got submerged in the strong current of Communist propaganda and cultural interventions, for instance the pathbreaking plays like Pattabakki or Ningalenne Communistakki. The radical youth, who were full of resentment over the caste and community based polarization of society as manifested in the Abstention movement, could be easily brought into its fold.
The communists of Kerala until recently never treated Ayyankali and Ambedkar as progressive leaders. They have not written articles assessing their role. It is argued that the Communist attempt to address the issues of caste oppression was one sided. While they tried to end caste oppression, the land reforms they initiated did not entail recognizing the landless tiller’s claim to land, similar to the peasants. Significantly, this was in sharp contrast with early twentieth-century Dalit leaders such as Ayyankali in Travancore, who demanded both agricultural land and modern education, and the social reformer Sree Narayana Guru, who advised Dalit people to engage in the “acquisition of both knowledge and wealth” to escape their plight. (Devika 2010: 804).

**Collective Mentalities of Communists**

“Social realities are a whole. One could not pretend to explain an institution if one did not link it to the great intellectual, emotional, mystical currents of the contemporaneous mentality.”(Burguire1982:424-437)

The historians of Annales School propounded a concept of ‘collective consciousness,’ called “mentalite.” As one of its chief proponents Febvre remarked, “Man cannot be carved into slices. He is a whole. One must not divide all of history—here the events, there the beliefs.” (Manickam144). A key concept of historical psychology, “mentalite” has been conceived as the collective mental and psychological structure of a group at a given period within which the individuals too felt and acted. It studies all groups and all aspects of life. (Febvre 31).

Through various political and cultural processes the Communist Party of Kerala created a collective consciousness among the people, especially its members and sympathizers. A Communist should always keep a grave face, discuss only big
issues and serious matters. The body language is very stiff. With an aura of seriousness, and a characteristic lack of sense of humour, they rarely laugh. The *parippuvada* and black tea became another metaphor of the proletarian-subaltern existence. Those days imported cigarettes were used by the affluent, the upcoming *nouve riche* and the middle class, a pervasive signifier of ‘manliness’ and status—to enter the ‘class of men’ and to get into the ‘company of men.’ The subversion of such an elite symbol with the locally made small cigarette (the *beedi*) produced and consumed by people of the working class gave another powerful cultural indicator of their collective consciousness.

Interesting parallels can be pointed out from popular culture of the times, especially the cinematic representations of proletarian masculinity. *Inquilab Zindabad*, a movie that came out in the 1960s, written by S.L. Puram Sadanandan, a former Communist, has a story line in which one of the protagonists is a newly rich man shifting his allegiance from the Congress Party to the Communist, gradually trying to associate with the Party. He joins a group of party men preparing for a function, and asks for a *beedi*. There is a striking immediacy in the response of the workers, each one extending a *beedi* to the man. Sharing a *beedi* thus becomes a significant way of associating with the Party. The proletarian protagonist of the movie *Odayil Ninnu* (written by P. Kesavadev, a pioneer propagandist of the Communist ideology in Kerala) gets identified with his special way of lighting the *beedi*, placing it on his lips and the way of smoking, all creating a masculine expression, typical of proletarian masculinity. This indeed goes along with his image of a very stiff and serious man of few words.
Conclusion

Communist masculinity was a complex blend of middle class masculinity and proletarian-subordinate masculinity. The radical youth who were brimming with anti-colonial, anti-feudal, and anti-princely rule feelings, could not be satisfied with the slow progress of the nationalist movement and its compromising posture. The bloody revolutions of Russia and elsewhere fired their imagination. Day to day repression and injustices could not be tolerated. Political consciousness was rising to accommodate any radical idea to change the world into a ‘more’ egalitarian society. But in their evidently masculinised politics, ‘Some are more equal’: like states which have historically been oppressive to women, who have often been denied full citizenship, communists deny women agency in every sense.

In order to influence the depressed castes and other subordinated sections and counter the hegemonic practices of the capitalist, feudalist, elite and rightist forces which swayed the contemporary society, they had to devise strategies of indoctrination and encounter, which was not an easy task in the dynamic historical context, a melting pot in the history of Kerala. They had to remasculinize the cadre and sympathizers through various cultural, social and economic signifiers. This resulted in the construction of a discursive terrain where a process of remasculinisation had to be blended with various dissent and resistance movements which meant empowerment and emancipation. The Party initiated diverse and damaging pressure tactics, challenging the cadre to prove themselves ‘manly men’ in the revolutionary mission. Their project of ‘en-cadreing’ required that the members were socialized or ideologically “interpellated” into a behavioural and emotional straightjacket.
CONCLUSION

This study investigated the ways in which masculinities were being constructed, and interrogated in the nationalist era in colonial Kerala, with a focus on the social reformers, nationalist leaders and communist leaders. It has confronted a variety of masculinities that jostle uneasily within the dynamic cultural-historical context, which confirms the idea of gendered identities as both constructed and lived. The study has also arrived at the importance of interpretation itself in the construction of masculinities. The many ways in which masculinities get performed in the casteist, communist and nationalist contexts has been examined. In all these contexts we could encounter masculinity as an instrument of domination, coercion, marginalization and oppression on the one hand and that of emancipation and self-assertion on the other.

In India caste, gender, and class form a unique system. A close reading of the texts reveals how the institutions of marriage, family and morality got determined by a complex interplay of these three powerful cultural constituents in the history of Kerala. In the context of the shift from a matrilineal to a patrilineal form of inheritance we have observed how the Nair social reformers sought a redefinition of the meaning and scope of patriarchy in which the nuclear family under the headship of men became a norm. A new cultural ideal was formed for men that entailed a new gender hierarchy, which was in turn a reaffirmation of masculinity. The Nambuthiri reform movement also began criticizing the conventions of marriage and wanted to confine marital relationships to its own caste.

Historical analysis has brought out the role that the access to English education has played in the emergence of modern society in Kerala. Reading of autobiographies/biographies as historical document reveals the intricate interaction between the new education and knowledge disseminated by the colonial
epistemological project, and the new society that was evolving. New expressions of masculinity, femininity and gender relations shaped the lives of the people.

Colonial modernity occasioned various reform and protest movements during this period to alleviate the miseries of the subordinate castes. The backward castes’ fight for social hegemony, religious and political rights was also a process of masculinisation, protest and resistance. The backward castes, especially Ezhavas expressed their newly acquired masculine spirit in all spheres of social, cultural and political activity. The masculinisation empowered them and made them demand their social and political rights.

The social struggle of the Dalits might appear as a classic instance of counter-assertion and public demand. Here was a depressed caste group displaying the strength to form counter hegemonic practices and identities. Thus masculinity itself became the axis of the confrontation between the hegemonic and subordinate sections of the society. As part of subaltern assertion the movement lead by Ayyankali appropriated and subverted hegemonic symbols and practices. By pursuing a resistance characteristic of proletarians under capitalism, they forced the hesitant state and dominant social groups to agree to social equity in school admission and access to public space.

Though the historians of Indian social awakening almost unanimously concluded that social reform movements and the ideas they generated did not shake the dominant structures of exclusion, and subordination, the Dalit movements led by Ayyankali and others proved that reformist and revolutionary ideas had percolated down to the lower caste people. The enlightenment notion of ‘knowledge is power’ had a deep impact on the lower caste movements in Kerala. Ayyankali and others focused their protest movements more on the educational rights of their brethren.
Moreover, Ayyankali’s mode of resistance was founded on the strong conviction that it would be futile to wait for a sense of justice to bloom in the upper caste people’s collective unconscious.

There have been attempts to explain the powerful upsurge of the backward and subordinate castes against caste oppression variously in terms of Westernization, Sanskritisation and Communitisation. This study would diverge from such conclusions and claim that the chief impulse that triggered such a struggle for the democratization of social norms was the process of masculinisation of the oppressed and marginalized that was effected during the colonial period.

Every cultural, social and political movement and social legislation kept on constructing masculinities to suit its social needs. Social legislators, reformers, national liberators and revolutionaries shared a common ethos at a deeper level, that of the denial of subjecthood to women. They would glorify, accommodate, patronize, sponsor or cooperate with women as long as they remained submitted to the preordained scheme of things. The nationalist movement resolved the women question by a subtle reworking and reaffirmation of the pre-existing patriarchal structure.

These autobiographies and biographies tell how hesitant most leaders of the period were in addressing the gender side of the story, though socially and politically these movements made tremendous changes in the history of modern Kerala. It indicates the silent and overwhelming presence and persistence of masculinist biases. The reformist zeal failed to address the oldest ‘colony,’ the women. All the reformers either upper caste or lower caste seemed to hold an insistence on women’s domestic roles and an essentially women-centric morality. They (the reformers, nationalists and communists alike) simply ignored the political rights of women. The social economy
was conditioned in favour of men as evidenced in the emergence of dowry, female infanticide, subordination of women, a general neglect of the female child and their limited social mobility irrespective of educational advancement.

The study has also ventured a reading of the dominant discourses of nationalism and communism, to unravel their undisputable masculinist preoccupations. Strategies of ideological and behavioural indoctrination were inevitable in the masculinisation of the communist cadre. These processes could forge a collective masculine consciousness which every communist could identify with. The way the revolutionary leaders have worded their discontent towards ‘others’ with violent acrimony, as in the case of Gandhian ‘effeminism’ has significant implications in analyzing the discourse of masculinity.

Nationalism as a ‘cult’ of manliness had a similar mode of transmission of the culture and values, traditionally held by the upper caste Hindus as the apparatus of social domination. It however had many contradictory social tendencies, especially that of the backward classes who were more in favour of the emancipatory space provided by the colonizer. Though nationalism as it had unfolded was a multivocal process, a male centric, patriarchal family system inspired by the Victorian world view was privileged over other pluralities during the colonial period. Therefore, despite many women participating in the national struggle it was welcomed and celebrated by the nationalists so far as it approximated the masculine tropes in play.

The autobiographies and biographies of personalities examined in this thesis can be considered real historical sources in constructing a history of masculinities. They were the main participants and witnesses of the major events that enriched the period which was considered as the most volatile of all ages. These sources provide many points of entry into the discourses of masculinity in relation to caste,
colonialism, and nationalist and communist discourses, more than what the archival or other sources could.

Though autobiography is primarily a product of individuated memory determined by the narrator’s act of self-reflection and ideological predilections, they become a part of historical memory by reproducing the historical evolution of hegemonic and contesting forms of masculinity. In other words, through the narratives of reformers, revolutionaries, leaders and activists, the stage is set for defining masculinity as the ability to take action, to justify the imposition of their will on “the other,” to act bravely, to exercise power, and to situate men in the public sphere.

As reformers, revolutionaries, nationalists and colonial elites they frequently invoked, interpreted, experimented with and revised different cultural and historical forms of masculinity, which continue to have social, cultural and political consequences in the present. It is argued that these divergent trajectories, memories and declarations that constituted the cultural landscape of Kerala have to be interrogated in terms of what really determined the process of social and political change. This study has traced the evolution of masculinity as a social construct that is always in the process of being renegotiated, even though it is usually taken for granted as ‘normal’ and ‘natural’.

Two pertinent questions need to be probed further. The first one is whether masculinisation of politics and society can really be democratic. The second is whether Indian socio-political milieu is essentially undemocratic given the potential edifice of the sex-gender system of caste. This would lead to the larger question whether masculinisation in Indian social life is organically yoked to the caste system which is the most extensive sex-gender system ever formed.