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Gender ideology and gendered political dynamics shaping electoral fortunes of women politicians in Kerala, India

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ABSTRACT

This paper analyses the 2019 general elections and the by-elections that followed in the state of Kerala, India, to discern the changing gender dynamics that produced certain kinds of 'desirability' and 'approval' around the candidature of women politicians. By tracing the historical trajectory of women's engagement in public politics in the state, this paper attempts to identify the coordinates of evolving gender dynamics that decidedly shape women's political representation. It identifies three specific frameworks such as 'honorary masculinity, "relaxed honorary masculinity,' and 'welfarist feminine altruism' in and through which three generations of women politicians entered into public politics and carved out their niches. However, what is striking is that the framework of 'welfarist feminine altruism', originated at the local level during the mid-1990s in the context of decentralisation, is getting extended to the state level. It incorporated specific markers of 'desirability' that accommodates the current caste and religious identity politics. This has led to effectively push women politicians further towards the margins of mainstream politics. The study thus raises the question of intersectionality in women's political leadership, which is relevant to the contemporary analysis of women's political representation.

Introduction

Women venturing out into the public sphere have had to confront negative stereotypes of their public roles and eventually transform the notions of political leadership in their attempts to appeal to the voters. These revisions are mostly in line with the underlying gender ideologies shaping the political representation of women.

Paxton and Kunovich (2003), in their cross-national research on women in national legislatures, demonstrated that gender ideology affects the number of women who rise to positions of power in national legislatures. Similarly, Norris and Inglehart (2004) show, among other things, the vital consequence of traditional cultural attitudes towards women's leadership for the number and success of women parliamentarians in a systematic fashion. However, the gender ideologies endemic to the broader culture of a location impact the pattern and dynamics of women's political participation as well. While closely interpreting Hillary Clinton's 2008 Presidential campaign, Carroll (2009) observes that "women who aspire to leadership must somehow find a way to strike a balance between agentic, masculine behavior and communal feminine behavior" (p.6). The case of Margaret Thatcher is an example who maintained a feminine appearance to "complement her very masculine political behaviour"(Carroll, 2009, p. 6).

The study conducted (Dalton, 2013) among the women representatives from a particular party in Japan illuminates how the women politicians submit to the entrenched ideas of femininity. That is, the women politicians try to emphasize the 'difference' of women in a male-dominated political space by alluding to the dominant discourses of gender ideology like connecting it with motherhood or home. Dalton (2013) underscores as to how this exercise eventually fails to attain gender equality, either in politics or in society and also obfuscates alternative forms of womanhood "that stray from the normative ideal" (p.39).

A more detailed examination of the ideas of family and motherhood in American politics are articulated through the concept of "Politicized motherhood"- a cultural phenomenon with a "contemporary emphasis on and politicization of motherhood within the public discourse" (Deason et al., 2014, p. 134). Deason et al. (2014) observe that the presentation of women within the traditional image of a two-parent, middle-class family thus invokes notions of women's conformist domestic roles. It also inspires women's candidacies who can draw from their own 'motherhood' experiences to legitimize their unique capabilities (Deason et al., 2014).

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The prominence of gender ideologies is also discernible in the mappings of popular uprisings against dictatorships in Asian countries. Thompson (2003) seeks to understand the rise of women as leaders of democratic revolutions against dictatorship regimes in the "basically patriarchal societies" of Pakistan, Philippines, Bangladesh, and Indonesia (p.537). The gender stereotypes rooted in patriarchy helped to reinforce the leadership role of women in the anti-dictatorship struggles by projecting them as "the 'mothers' or 'sisters' of a suffering nation", who "promised to cleanse the soil of public realm with private, familial virtues" (Thompson, 2003, p. 538). Further narrowing down to the case of South Asia, it reproduces the image elsewhere in a different manner. Women politicians as elected representatives generally concern themselves with "women's issues" resulting in their participation to be "perceived as an extension of women's domestic roles" (Jahan, 1987, p. 861).

In India, the period of national movement was confronted with different demands associated with women's entry into the political realm. The leaders of freedom struggle pedestalled the 'emblematic, idealized woman' that resurrected a familial nation where women's role in the family was perceived as her participation in the nation (Roy, 2001). Thus, the "womanly domain of politics" was marked by "spiritual participation" that only complemented and did not compete with its masculine counterpart (Roy, 2001, p. 1444). While moving on to the current scenario, the three most celebrated Indian women politicians - Jayalalitha, Mamata Banerjee, and Mayawati – too structured their well-liked public images concurring with the gender ideologies articulated above. That is, *Amma*, *Didi*, and *Behenji* (mother, elder sister, and sister) respectively, project themselves as "near and dear relatives of their constituency" and secure "direct connectivity to people bypassing party and government structures" (Bose, 2011, p. 106).

Kerala's political landscape and gender ideology frameworks

Kerala, the southwestern state of India has long been celebrated as a model since 1970s that bestowed high status to women, which reflected in its favourable demographic outcomes. However, studies have noted the near exclusion of women from positions of power in politics while investigating the long-term trajectory of its developmental politics, and examined the historical factors that shaped such a gendered division (Erwer, 2003; Jeffrey, 2003). This paper argues that the Lok Sabha elections in May 2019, and the by-elections that followed in Kerala brought about significant changes in the gender ideology that shapes women's political participation. Therefore, there is an increasing plausibility of dubbing these elections as representing an 'evident departure' from certain long-standing gender ideologies shaping political practices in the state. To begin with, this paper attempts to interpret the milieu that backdropped and the political affairs that led up to and followed after the recently held elections to better understand this shift in gender ideologies.

The fledgling period of Communist party organization in Kerala during the early twentieth century was also characterised by the successful politicization of masses, particularly women, at the grassroots level. The women political stalwarts of this period such as Accamma Cherian,[1] Rosamma Punnoose,[2] Susheela Gopalan,[3] Gowri *Amma*[4] etc. (most of whom were groomed by the Communist party) got acquainted with the nuances of women's political participation by internalising the practice of "honorary masculinity" (Thampi & Devika, 2011). Eventually, these women carved their niches and introduced a novel narrative depicting a positive and determinant role for women in the public sphere. Despite the success of the women politicians who confirmed to the specific masculine image, the number of women who entered the political domain in this manner remained very few. This was primarily due to the high social cost they had to expend in view of their uncertain political career and secondly, a large number of women lacking the resources itself to sacrifice their very gender identity (Anitha et al., 2008).

Around the 1980s, the practice of 'honorary masculinity' was diluted following the emergence of civil society opposition to the dominant left political ideology. The transformation that symbolised this period was the result of a gradual shift from working-class politics to a predominantly middle-class politics (Anitha et al., 2008). This change offered women "flexible platforms" in mass mobilization efforts that allowed social work that is "less involved with street politics" (Anitha et al., 2008, p. 45). Accordingly, the women politicians took on a different approach to politics, that is 'relaxed honorary masculinity', that was comparatively attenuated in terms of the sacrifice of their gender identity.

The period was also exposed to the progressive social wave by streamlined development planning of the state that contributed towards the betterment of human development indices (Kurien, 1995). Later on, the 'gulf boom' that occurred during 1970–80s, referring to the mass migration of Malayalees to the gulf countries for employment, brought a significant increase in remittances that too raised the living standards of many Malayalee households (Abdelhalim, 2013). The soaring male migration to the middle-eastern countries advanced the role of women as efficient welfare managers within the space of familial relations. These socio-cultural happenings necessitated a reappraisal of the image of an 'ideal woman' incorporating further attributes to femininity. This updated image of women served as one of the starting points for varied programmes of the state, like 'People's Planning Campaign,' aimed at democratization and extensive decentralisation. Most of these schemes, along with welfare distribution, also targeted at reinforcing the agency of women at the local level. Strictly speaking, thus, the women representatives of local self- governing institutions identify themselves as "development agents" and the panchayat "as a space of development beyond divisive politics" (Menon, 2009, p. 106). The women at the local level hence perform the role of 'welfare agents' by assimilating a gendered care perspective based on the tenets of 'welfarist feminine altruism'.

The 2019 general election is widely perceived to have brought about a paradigm shift in the country's electoral politics. (Vaishnav & Hintson, 2019b), by underscoring the magnitude and other traits of Bharateeya Janata Party's victory, hint at the dawning of a fourth party system in

[1] She was a freedom fighter from Kerala. Known as the 'Jhansi Rani of Travancore', she led one of Travancore's historical people's struggles in 1938 against the then King of erstwhile Travancore.

[2] She was a communist leader who entered active politics as a member of the Congress party and the first pro-term speaker of Kerala legislative assembly. She played a pivotal role in bringing the issues of women laborers of the plantation sector to the forefront.

[3] She was a leading Communist party member in India and one of the important leaders of trade union and women's movements. She greatly contributed to foregrounding the problems of Kerala coir workers.

[4] Gowri *Amma* is one of Kerala's prominent women politicians who presented the revolutionary Land Reforms Bill in 1957 when she was the only woman in the first democratically elected Communist government of Kerala (Balan, 2019).

the country. The affirmation of a fourth party system[5] is substantiated by juxtaposing the current shift with the features of third party system (Vaishnav & Hintson, 2019a). This precisely points towards the transformation of BJP as a system-defining party and that it has "assumed the role of a central pole in response to which all other parties position themselves" (Vaishnav & Hintson, 2019a). But there are differing views, wherein Jaffrelot and Verniers (2020) point out a change in India's larger political system between 2014 and 2019 than a mere shift in the party system and vis-à-vis the assumption of a fourth party system. This is because "the current electoral scene in India calls to mind the second party system" in which one national party dominates national politics but not necessarily in all the states (Jaffrelot & Verniers, 2020, p. 145).

Decoding of the 2019 general election results clearly finds that an unprecedented Hindu consolidation around the party (BJP), comprising four-fifths of the total population, increased its Hindu vote share from 36% in 2014 to 44% in 2019 (Sardesai & Attri, 2019). On the other hand, only a small proportion of minorities supported BJP in this election. This is "clearly evident in the party not being able to perform well in minority-concentrated states like Kerala, Punjab and Goa" (Sardesai & Attri, 2019). The elucidations ratify a deepened polarization of voters along the religious lines.

Making sense of the Congress-led United Democratic Front's success in Kerala reveals the "anti-incumbency wave against the National Democratic Alliance government at the centre" and the growing disillusionment with the Left Democratic Front government in the state, particularly their handling of the Sabarimala issue, as the major factors that drove voters' electoral decisions (Ibrahim, 2019). Besides, the Sabarimala temple row[6] over a Supreme Court judgment in September 2018 allowing women's entry into the temple against the traditional Hindu custom prohibiting such entry was as significant and decisive an issue as the former two (Rautray, 2018). This is discernible in the 'The Hindu CSDS - Lokniti Post poll Survey', where close to half the respondents mentioned Sabarimala as a critical issue (Ibrahim, 2019). It also provided a footing to the right-wing Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) in Kerala politics, which was hitherto dominated by two major coalitions - Left Democratic Front, a coalition of left-wing political parties and United Democratic Front, an alliance led by Indian National Congress (INC). The ruling left coalition parties, primarily CPI(M), took a progressive stance of backing the verdict. However, Congress embraced a "soft Hindutva approach" (Arun, 2018). The Hindu right-wing parties capitalised on this issue and made inroads into the Malayalee political conscience.[7] The processions organized by BJP such as *Rath Yatra* and the *Namajapa Yatra* by mobilizing upper-caste Hindu women to protest against women's entry into the Sabarimala shrine were deduced as strategies to seize Hindu votes in Kerala (Manish, 2018). However, as election results reveal, these protests benefited the Congress party than the BJP because the former "took the line the BJP had initially taken" but endorsed a soft policy by protesting without violence, and the public resentment at the central government further bolstered Congress' position (Ibrahim, 2019). Considering that Hindus constitute 54.73% of Kerala population, forming a majority in 13 out of 14 districts, the polarization ushered by Sabarimala verdict to a great extent spelled the electoral victory of Congress (Kerala Religion Data- Census 2011, 2011; Sudhi, 2019; Varma, 2019). Parallelly, a consolidation of minority votes, that is, Muslims and Christians, stemming from the anti-saffron and anti-BJP sentiments also materialized in Congress' victory (Ibrahim, 2019; Varma, 2019).

The primary fallout of the Sabarimala crisis was the articulation of a pleasing and acceptable image of an ideal woman, the '*Kulastree*',[8] that translates to aristocratic upper caste woman. This particular image fundamentally reshaped the margins of women's political participation. Through the conceptualisation of 'Kulastree', they tried to employ a highly patriarchally designed public appearance for women with a rigid pattern for their assertion of public role. This was not confined to Hindu women community alone; rather, it touched upon the lives of all women.

It is on this backdrop that the 2019 elections in the state need to be located. The sweep of the Congress party across the state in the respective Lok Sabha election produced two outliers- Ramya Haridas, who won with a huge margin, and Shanimol Osman, the only Congress (woman) candidate who lost the election. However, the by-election for state assembly that followed marked the success of Shanimol with a narrow margin of 1955 votes. Rather than merely summing up the electoral contest and the debates surrounding it, this analysis critically observes the coordinates of evolving gender dynamics and its resultant frameworks of women's political participation to grasp the 'desirability' and 'approval' produced around these two women politicians.

This paper is the outcome of a yearlong research project that explored the domain of Indian politics and the particular modalities of women's political participation. The paper progresses by employing observations on Dalit and religious minority politics, a review of discussions, debates and responses on social media platforms during election campaign, and using an interview of Shanimol recorded prior to the announcement of the Lok Sabha election results. Subsequently, the derived conclusions are compared with the electoral victory of Shanimol in the subsequent state assembly by-election to account for aberrations, if any.

A review of the debacle: intersectionality of gender and religious identities

The reformist wave in the Muslim community of Kerala, particularly in north Kerala, can be regarded as an outcome of the oil boom of the 1970s that brought in unprecedented social change within the community. The reformist organizations, besides laying stress on the educational freedom and economic upliftment, espoused a different agenda with respect to the agency of women, for they were somewhat hostile towards a positive role for women in public (Abdelhalim, 2013).

Though the wave of reformism in the Muslim community initially ignored the question of women's public role and the assertion of their agency, with the emergence of a solid religious 'identity politics' the contours of women's public space are now clearly demarcated. This is in response to the shortcomings of the current discourse on secularism. This trend was evident in the issue of Muslim Educational Society (MES) banning face veils for girls on its campuses that was opposed by many conservative Muslim groups (Prashanth, 2019). Responding to the decision of MES, many Muslim youth wing women activists condemned the ban citing "excessive use of power" by the organization and stressing

[5] The general elections from 1952 to 1967 fall under the "first electoral system" characterised by one-party dominance, that is Congress, both at the national and state level where the opposition often came "from within the Congress" (Yadav, 1999, pp. 2393,2394). The general election of 1967 marked the beginning of the "second electoral system", lasting till 1989, that witnessed the rise of 'opposition' challenging Congress's monopoly (Yadav, 1999, p. 2394). However, the party continued to be "the pole around which electoral competition was organized" (Yadav, 1999, p. 2394). The third phase, "multipartisan cooperation", denotes the era of coalition governance (1989–2014) in which Congress lost its central role as the one defining the trajectory of electoral politics (Jaffrelot & Verniers, 2020, p. 141; Vaishnav & Hintson, 2019a).

[6] Sabarimala is a Hindu temple devoted to Lord Ayyappa in the Pathanamthitta district, Kerala. Women of menstruating age (10–50 years) were not permitted to enter the temple due to the deity's celibate nature. But on 28th September, 2018, the Supreme Court of India ruled that restricting women's entry is unconstitutional and removed it. Following the court verdict, the state government of Kerala has taken steps to implement the order.

[7] In 2014, the NDA managed to bag 10.85% of the votes. In 2019, the front's share rose to 15.20%, with the BJP accounting for 12.93% of the votes.

[8] An aristocratic woman by birth and/or who conforms to the gender norms and reinforces the patriarchal regressive practices. Hence, in no way troubling to the male patriarchs of society.

on their right to make choices (to wear niqab) in matters of religion. They also resisted the move by alleging the decision as an effort to "other the Muslim identity" (Sabith, 2019). Linking it with the contemporary political events in India, one can note that the aura of identity politics is being further intensified. For instance, the hijab, a single piece of cloth, emerges as a strong identity marker for Muslim women in the public domain. On the other hand, the markers of identity also become a determining factor to identify deviance by laying out the defining attributes of an ideal woman.

Belonging to 'relaxed honorary masculinity,' it appears that Shanimol is devoid of her community's new markers of religious identity. She began her political career in the Youth Congress, a youth wing of the Congress party. Later, she was chosen to the All India Congress Committee (AICC) and then ascended to the post of AICC Secretary, after which Shanimol moved to 'Team Rahul'.[9] She was the first woman leader from Kerala to become the secretary of AICC. She had contested in the assembly elections in 2009 and 2016 but lost to LDF candidates. Shanimol was the candidate of the Alappuzha constituency for the Lok Sabha election in May 2019, but she again lost to the LDF candidate, and became the only candidate who lost out of total twenty in the Congress swing.

Shanimol was vocal about the peripheralization of women within the party organization. She also accused the organization for the minimal upward mobility provided for women party workers. She wrote on Facebook that she was a victim of the caste and factional politics within the party, which kept her away from positions of power (Osman, 2016). Further, she added, "when I entered into the political realm as a KSU (Kerala Students Union) worker, the working atmosphere of the party was filled with secular ideologies and democratic principles. However, after 34 years of political experience, I now understand that 'merit' in the party machinery is synonymous with groupism and casteism. I worked according to the instructions of Rahul Gandhi and when Mrs. Sonia Gandhi nominated me to the post of AICC secretary, my colleagues perceived it as a shortfall" (Osman, 2016)). Shanimol reiterated that the party should inculcate a strong and experienced secondary level of leadership among the youth (Osman, 2016).

While responding as the head of the Kerala State Mahila Congress to some Muslim groups' decision to approach the Supreme Court seeking to get the marriageable age of girls in the community lowered from eighteen, she stated, "there is no reference about marriage age in Holy Quran. But it strongly advocates that community men are responsible for following laws prevailing in various countries. Misinterpretations and misquoting of the Quran can create problems" (*Marriage age row: Politicians, women outfits slam religious forum*, 2013). The statement reflects a more liberal, women-centric standpoint, nonetheless upholding the convictions of a devout believer, but it clearly lacks the popular attributes of a conforming, ideal woman.

The assumption that an ideal woman ought to be truly religious as well, closely linked to the *Kulastree* narrative, contributed heavily towards the unpopularity and undesirability of Shanimol as a candidate in the 2019 Lok Sabha election. This was because the allegations of nonconformity to the religious traditions by Muslim outfits against Shanimol blotted her reputation within the community. She also faced extensive criticisms where they reprimanded her usual outfit for not covering her head. Reflecting allegations of immorality or "public womanhood - a term that could be loaded with undesirable connotations of sexual excess", against women politicians, are the remarks of some women politicians from the Muslim community who blamed Shanimol for pursuing an unrighteous political career (Thampi & Devika, 2011, p. 1158). In short, Shanimol became an 'unfit candidate' in the current framework of identity politics and a highly 'undesirable' candidate in the Muslim community against the backdrop of the *Kulastree* narrative.

However, the Congress party, trying to make the most out of the Sabarimala issue, also sought to transform the public's perception of Shanimol's religiosity. This is markedly visible in the decision of the party to vest the responsibility to lead processions to protest the court verdict on Shanimol in an attempt to demonstrate her religiousness (*Sabarimala verdict: Congress vehicle rally in Ernakulam today*, 2018). Commenting on the Sabarimala issue, in a recorded interview, Shanimol stated that "I am a believer. Our constitution has granted us the right to protect our beliefs and the freedom of worship. The government does not have any right to interfere in such matters or take any decision solemnly without consulting the people who voted them to power. Congress had allowed me to lead a procession from Palakkad to Pathanamthitta (where the temple is located) to protect the belief of all Keralites. I consider it a blessing because belonging to a minority community, I had the opportunity to speak on behalf of the Hindu believers in the state that also reflect the virtue of plurality that we cherish" (Osman, 2018). The party considered it as an opportunity to bring Shanimol out of her Muslim identity and on the other hand, to reconfirm her religiosity, however, it failed to convince the voters.

In a close analysis, the framework of 'relaxed honorary masculinity' failed to provide an electoral dividend to Shanimol Osman due to its waning popularity. Other emergent trends of political practices are replacing it. The doubts about the 'true religiosity' of the candidate and her not-so conforming public appearances till date were magnified in the context of a widely accepted *Kulastree* image. On the other hand, the still-evolving discourse of Muslim identity politics could not completely accommodate and rightly place her within its coordinates because of the candidate's lack of intense identity markers.

Congress' sweep: reviewing Dalit identity politics and the gender ideology in politics

The term 'Dalit' appeared in Kerala's socio-cultural milieu after 1970s, the late entry of which is ascribable to the particular course of "renaissance that the state underwent, which succeeded in camouflaging and silencing many discourses besides the marginalised" (Dasan, 2011 as cited in Raj, 2013) The Dalits who were left out of the socio-political development process devised strategies that fundamentally shaped Dalit identity politics in Kerala.

Ramya Haridas, the second woman Dalit Member of Parliament from Kerala, started her political activism with Kerala Students Union (KSU) and later joined the Youth wing of Congress. She was serving as the Block Panchayath President when she was handpicked by Rahul Gandhi for the 2019 Lok Sabha general elections for Alathur constituency. She won the election with a margin of 1,58,968 votes. It was also the victory of a much-celebrated candidate of the state whose entire team opted for a unique style of campaigning. Ramya's election campaign was largely devoid of the routine rhetoric criticising events of public concern and she resorted to her singing skills and sang songs for the public in election campaigning platforms.

The election campaigning of Ramya also sparked controversies. A woman college lecturer from Kerala, a left acolyte, commented on the nature of Ramya's campaigning that "the real issue should not be candidate's singing, dancing talent or religion/ caste. It is not an Idea Star Singer[10] or temple committee selection" (*Netizens rally behind Ramya Haridas as Deepa Nisanth mocks Alathur candidate*, 2019). However, Ramya was seen assuming a forbearing attitude by dismissing it as a mere personal opinion (Haridas, 2019). Another dispute set in, when one of the senior LDF leaders made a remark while referring to her visit to IUML leader Kunjalikutty (Rakesh, 2019). Since Kunjalikutty was an accused in a sex scandal that surfaced in 1997, the LDF leader's

[9] A core team of Congress strategists who work in close association with Rahul Gandhi and function according to his regulations and directly under his superintendence.

[10] A popular music reality competition show broadcasted on a Malayalam television channel.

comment was clothed in sexual connotation (Rakesh, 2019). The statement unmistakably reflects the highly gendered nature of language and practices in the political realm of the state.

The social environment Ramya belongs to, and the insecure financial status of her family was spotlighted from time to time by the party organization. It was successful in casting an image of a benevolent and altruistic political representative who is entitled with the task of voicing the concerns of the voiceless. In an interview with a leading Malayalam magazine, she recurrently reverted to the gripping narrative of her growth against the odds in her life. She added that she had only three pairs of clothing while filing her candidature, whereas she was gifted with sixty-five pairs during the campaign by well-wishers and fellow functionaries of her party (Haridas, 2019).

The crucial weapon in the campaign that authoritatively ruled the election outcome in favour of her is the particular image of '*pengalootty*' that was constructed by the party to generate a great deal of acceptance for the candidate. Ramya was first called '*pengalootty*' - an endearing term for sister in Malayalam - by the mother of a Member of Legislative Assembly (MLA) (*Ramya Haridas explains who behind the name, 'Pengalootty'',* 2019). The image of *pengalootty* invoked memories of the familial role performed by women in a traditional family. Several other posts on social media, including that of Priyanka Gandhi's,[11] who addressed the party colleague as her 'sister', reiterated the image of *pengalootty*.

Ramya publicised her take on the Sabarimala issue in a press meet where she remarked, "I am an ardent devotee of Lord Ayyappa but could not visit the temple when I was a kid. However, I don't wish to visit by breaking the tradition....I am ready to wait until my age permits me to go there. There is no gender inequality issue here" (*No gender inequality in Sabarimala: Ramya Haridas,* 2019). Thus, Ramya ruled out the question of gender inequality in the Sabarimala issue, and she belongs to the 'ready to wait' group who campaigned for women to wait till their age permits them to enter the shrine. Her statement explicitly went against the stances of many Dalit women activists who tried to gain entry to Sabarimala following the court verdict. Despite this, an online daily compared Ramya to Mayawati[12] on the grounds of their caste and gender identities, displaying a solid conviction on her commitment and ability to articulate the gender question and the aspirations of Dalits (Chandramohan.S., 2019).

The contradictions are further evident when her statements are compared with that of the Dalit women politicians of Kerala. They are the ones who relentlessly contend with the frameworks of Hindu caste system and gendered political spaces at once. For instance, in a recorded interview, a Dalit woman political worker affiliated to the Congress party, who is also the head of the Dalit Federation of Kerala,[13] responded, "I do not support the recent developments in Sabarimala. I perceive it as a threat to the advancement of the Dalit community because the protesters have, or rather unknowingly, propagated the ideology of equality being exclusive to the category of gender even jeopardizing the progress and achievements that we have acquired up until now." Another SC/ST leader from Wayanad when asked about her view on the Sabarimala issue replied, "I think the believers and not the government should resolve this. However, it is also mandatory to highlight that we as a group are situated outside the Hindu caste system, an extension of the age-old discriminatory practice. Without appropriately understanding this exclusionary circumstance, I do not think one, belonging to the SC/ST group, can form their opinion on this question." The respective standpoints of the Dalit women politicians on the Sabarimala question signify their constant struggles to surmount the challenges posed by both their caste and gender identities in the public realm. Whereas Ramya's political stand is discernible from her taking sides with the 'ready to wait' politics of upper-caste women, refuting allegations of any kind of gender disparity and omitting the larger caste question in this context. Her victory hence casts doubt upon the affirmations such as 'a ray of hope for Dalits' and 'the lone woman MP from Kerala' to articulate women's hopes (Chandramohan.S., 2019).

An 'ideal candidate' on the backdrop of an unfamiliar course of identity politics

The sobriquet of *pengalootty* earned for Ramya Haridas the image of an affectionate sister by appeasing society's patriarchal mindset boosted by the *Kulastree* narrative. The candidate's age, who is in her early 30's, also helped her to blend in with the image of 'pengalootty' appropriately. This was an added advantage of Ramya, which was inaccessible to Shanimol Osman, who is in her 50's. Belonging to a distinct cohort denied Shanimol any characteristic befitting a pleasing sister.

While referring to the People's Planning Campaign and the women political representatives of the local self-government institutions of Kerala, Nivedita Menon (2009) has underscored that "empowerment of women and the greater emphasis on women in development programmes is explicitly linked to the understanding of women as self-sacrificing and apolitical centres of the patriarchal family"(p.106). Similarly, Ramya's sobriquet of *pengalootty* is a meticulously constructed image to appease the male patriarchs. It evokes pleasant memories of a sister, yet another role performed by women residing in the restricted space of the family. She is essentially an altruistic figure discharging the duties of a caregiver and condensing a welfare perspective. The '*Kulastree*' discourse helped the candidate to perfectly augment the '*pengalootty*' image during campaign that readily complied with the essential attributes of an 'ideal woman'. This also captivated voters to the extent of masking critical questions of political importance.

The identity of Ramya as the second Dalit woman MP from Kerala places certain liabilities on the candidate to, at the minimum, acknowledge and engage with the dynamics of Dalit politics and that of gender. Professing about the candidate being a perfect 'fit' for a time when the discourse of the nation is shaped "with a new kind of Ambedkarite language" is misleading, for the stances of the person on multiple occasions proved the contrary (Chandramohan.S., 2019).

Furthermore, though Ramya Haridas set forth to politics with a particular kind of identity that gained wide acclaim, she embarked on the emergent image of neoliberal consumerism, which is seen as a marker of successful women. An example is an allusion to the acquisition of more than sixty pairs of outfits during the election campaign. The controversy[14] that ensued after Ramya's electoral victory when the youth wing members of the party offered her a car to be bought through public funding is yet another incident. This is in stark contrast to Kerala's earlier political landscape, where political personalities remain within their humble and modest personal lives. These remarks about the material wealth of the candidate in the public domain also echo elements of 'consumer citizenship'.[15] This concept carries some inherent

[11] An Indian politician and the general secretary of the All India Congress Committee in charge of eastern Uttar Pradesh.

[12] An Indian politician and national president of Bahujan Samaj Party (BSP) formed to represent Bahujans, commonly known as Scheduled Castes, Schedules Tribes, Other Backward Castes and religious minorities.

[13] A subsidiary wing of the Congress party devoted to dealing with the socio-cultural political issues of the Dalit community.

[14] The decision of the Youth Congress to buy a car for Ramya Haridas by collecting money through crowdfunding was withdrawn after it created controversy.

[15] Conceptions of consumer citizenship emanate from the assumption of merging consumer and citizen roles in terms of the transference of civic considerations and behavior to habits of consumption. Consumption is understood as a form of political participation that can initiate or reinforce social change. Civil action turns the sphere of consumption into political terrain. Hence, consumer citizenship is a matter of looking at the consumer as a citizen (Kneip, 2012).

links with the welfare distributor role of women developed at the grassroots. This is because the event of widespread promotion of consumer citizenship in Kerala among women who belong to the lower-income groups through self-help activities by a state-led Kudumbashree programme is a significant background variable to decode 'welfarist feminine altruism'. The responsibility of enhancing consumption and escaping from poverty was handed over to poor women, thereby bringing welfare to their families. Not surprisingly, as mentioned earlier, women functionaries of local governments perform their complementary role as 'welfare distributors' within the framework of 'welfarist feminine altruism', and Ramya was serving as a Block Panchayat President prior to contesting the election.

On the other hand, Shanimol commenced her political career in the Congress party imbibing secular and democratic principles that substantially liquidated her Muslim identity. Her opinions on many recent political disputes were not very well-received within the community and party that promoted her 'undesirability' within a *Kulastree* framework and amid identity politics. Though Shanimol staunchly opposed the LDF government's action in the Sabarimala issue, she articulated her viewpoints keeping in view the prime factor, secularism, that her party upholds, and the democratic ethos of the people. It is in line with these principles that Shanimol upheld the primacy of believers in making decisions on such matters. Shanimol's stances on the religious issues demonstrate the secular and liberal value system that she maintains despite being a religious and faithful Muslim woman.

The victory of Shanimol in the subsequent state assembly by-election from Aroor constituency defeating LDF candidate Manu C Pulickal was publicised as a "do-or-die battle" by the media (Paul.A, S., 2019). The election victory is quite intriguing on account of multiple socio-political swings that occupied the period between 2019 Lok Sabha polls and state assembly election.

Aroor is a constituency in Alappuzha with a significant amount of Muslim and Christian vote banks; however, the Ezhava community is a dominant force in the constituency (Sajimon, 2019). Aroor was also the opposition front's sole sitting seat and considered as a CPI(M) bastion. The right-wing party, BJP, failed to continue to capitalize on the Sabarimala issue because of the indolence of the Central government in passing an ordinance to prevent women's entry to Sabarimala that pulled the middle-class Hindus, particularly Ezhava community away from NDA front. Also, the Sabarimala issue turned out to be less decisive overtime in the electoral context that significantly dwindled BJP's vote share in Aroor from 25,250 in Lok Sabha polls to 16,289 (Viswanathan, 2019).

During the first phase of Shanimol's election campaigning, Aroor police filed a non-bailable case against her for blocking the Public Works Department's (PWD) road repair works. Following this, the PWD Minister G Sudhakaran remarked that Aroor by-election was not for *Puthanas*[16](demonesses) to win. This controversy stoked by Sudhakaran helped UDF to gather sympathy of the voters, particularly of women voters (Rajesh, 2019). Besides, there was an element of familiarity of Shanimol to the Aroor constituency evident from the votes polled by Shanimol in the Aroor assembly segment during the Lok Sabha election itself (*Stakes high for Kerala CPI(M) in Aroor assembly bye-election*, 2019). Also, since the candidate fielded by LDF, Manu C Pulickal, was called "too young and not well-experienced" and not belonging to the Muslim community, played out in favour of Shanimol (Paul, 2019). However, Shanimol's success in assembly polls, in any significant manner, fails to modify the conclusions drawn regarding the evolving gender ideologies and her desirability within it.

[16] According to Hindu mythology 'Puthana', who assumed the disguise of a beautiful young woman, had tried to breastfeed the infant god Krishna with poison but she was killed by the infant god.

Conclusion

The analysis of two select cases of women politicians during the 2019 Lok Sabha elections underlined a restructuring of gender ideology in Kerala's political scenario. Tracing the trajectory of gender ideology shaping political outcomes reveals the succession of 'honorary masculinity' by the practice of 'relaxed honorary masculinity,' in harmonization with the emergent middle-class politics, which is now being replaced 'welfarist feminine altruism'. This current shift is taking place in the context of identity politics and the *Kulastree* discourse.

The case of Ramya Haridas, who failed to seriously engage with Dalit politics discourses despite benefitting heavily from the caste identity, is an intense backlash for Dalit identity politics. Though the caste identity of the candidate was hyped throughout the campaign she overlooked either of the concerns of a Dalit women politician, that is simultaneously dealing with and asserting their caste and gender identities. The candidate also emulated and thereby extended the 'welfarist feminine altruistic' image practiced at the grassroots to the higher echelons of politics. This is achieved through her *pengalootty* image that resonates with traditional welfare distributing domestic roles of women within families and the particular economic attributes of her image that invoke traits of 'consumer citizenship'. In other words, it reflects the 'womanly domain of politics', characterised by 'a moral intervention for sorting out the problems of society' that only complemented and not competed with the masculine domain of politics (Roy, 2001).

Interestingly, what we observe in the state currently is that the framework of 'welfarist feminine altruism' is being further extended from the local to state-level politics. The sobriquet of 'teacher amma' (teacher-mother) that K K Shailaja, the Health Minister of Kerala, earned in the context of both her recent exemplary work to manage COVID-19 pandemic in its initial stages and during the Nipah virus outbreak in 2018, is another instance of this changing framework. K K Shailaja is being repeatedly portrayed as a "calming presence amid the deaths and despair" and "inspires hope in Kerala in the time of fear" (Krishnakumar, 2020). That is, she is perceived as an ideal combination of a strict school teacher and a protective and compassionate mother, who has put her health at risk to fulfil her responsibilities, which is nothing but crafting of an ideal, self-sacrificing feminine caring role that women play.

On the other hand, Shanimol Osman entered the election arena without the popular identity markers, characterising current identity politics of Muslim women. The candidate also could not demonstrate an 'ideal woman' imagery within the rigid pattern set by *Kulastree* narrative. Being closely associated with the relaxed honorary masculinity practice, Shanimol fell short of exploiting the emergent gender ideologies of the political space. Thus it appears that the current caste/religion based identity markers and the *Kulastree* ideal that overwhelmed last Lok Sabha elections are getting crystallized within the emergent framework of 'welfarist feminine altruism' at the state level.

Women's political leadership, on account of the current shifts in gender ideologies, is at crossroads with caste/ religious and gender identities. The underlying gender ideologies, over the course of time, have produced those imageries of women that submit to the representation of women in a patriarchal family and society. The framework of 'welfarist feminine altruism' reproduced the welfare distributors/ agents underscoring the feminine caring role and *Kulastree* narrative idealized women in the public domain. Adding to this socially appealing public roles of women is the caste/ religious identities that have begun to be foregrounded in the recent elections. The acceptance and affection are earmarked for particular caste/ religious identities and those who unquestionably endorse the confirming imageries. It also depends on the manner in which the women politicians engage with the respective discourses of identity and gender ideology. Therefore, with the sweeping changes in the gender frameworks swaying women's political participation, it is the convergence of multiple identities within welfarist feminine altruism that engender a kind of 'desirability' and 'approval' around the leadership of women. Thus, the question of women's

political leadership must be grounded in a thorough reading of intersectionality of caste/ religious identities and the extended framework of 'welfarist feminine altruism' that pattern the same.

And this materialization happening at the state level carries further implications for women's political leadership. Foregrounding traits of consumer citizenship, which is decisive in structuring 'welfarist feminine altruism' in contemporary times, and blending it with caste/religious identity markers locate the women politicians at the periphery of political activism that lacks any serious engagement with hardcore politics. Thus, they develop a particular image and skillsets hinged on identity politics, bring in traces of consumer citizenship, and advocate 'welfarist feminine altruism'. This pushes women politicians further to the margins of public politics and explains their eventual failure to meaningfully address their marginalization.

Since this paper analyses recent transformations in the political realm of Kerala by mapping its history of women's political participation, the conclusions drawn are liable to be tentative. The paper attempted to focus on the changes that are presently unfolding in Kerala's public by examining two cases of women politicians. Further evidence and reflections are required to organize the hypothesis framed in such a manner as to better articulate the assumptions regarding gender ideological framework structuring dynamics of women's political participation.

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