

KERALA SOCIOLOGIST
JOURNAL OF THE KERALA SOCIOLOGICAL SOCIETY



**Mobility Mobilization
&
Development**

Volume 39

Number 1

June 2011

KERALA SOCIOLOGIST

Journal of the Kerala Sociological Society

Volume 39, Number 1

June 2011

ARTICLES

- Mobility, Mobilization and Social Development
Sally Joseph 1
- Discontent: Muthanga Mobilisation - Its Premises and Aftermath
Suresh Babu P. 7
- SHGs Movement in Coastal Area: Wither Empowerment?
Lekshmi V. Nair & Reshmi M. 18
- Unveiling Freedom Through the Veil:
Social Mobility Enabled by Wearing *Purdah*
Shilujas. M 29
- Mobile Phones: Mobility, Implications and Impacts
Uthara Soman 43
- Mobilization of Women for Social Development
Andrew Michael 55
- MGNREGS: Livelihood Security and Social Mobilization
Vinod S. 68
- Development V/s Displacement: A Review
Lekshmi Chandran 78
- Annual Report of Kerala Sociological Society 2009-2010
Antony Palackal 95

Unveiling Freedom Through the Veil: Social Mobility Enabled by Wearing *Purdah*

Shilujas.M

The phenomenal increase in the usage of purdah among the Muslim women in Malabar has been a topic of great media debate and sociological interest for the last 20 years. Many studies suggest that the past two decades have witnessed a manifold increase in the donning of the purdah among Muslim women in Kerala. But most of the researchers focused on the subjugation aspect of this dress code as a sign of male domination and religious dogmatism. The paper seeks to examine the freedom and mobility acquired through the veil in a male dominated society. It analyses the individual experiences of women who wear purdhas as an instrument of hiding them from unwanted public gaze and, by way of it, acquiring their freedom of mobility and increasing their self esteem. An ethnographical study in Malabar especially in Kozhikod, Malapuram and Kannur districts has been conducted.

Keywords: Social mobility, *purdha*, Muslim women, *Malabar*, Kerala

Purdah literally means curtain or veil, and refers to the various modes of shielding women from, primarily, the gaze of men other than their husbands or men of their natal family in the South Asian subcontinent. *Purdah* can refer to the veiling or covering of the entire body or of parts of the head and face. It can also refer to the practice of the seclusion of women inside their homes. In the sense of attire, *purdah* can denote the practice of completely covering a woman's body by wearing a loose, body-covering robe called the *burqa*.

A particularly interesting aspect of Indian family life is *purdah* or the veiling and seclusion of women. In much of northern and central India, particularly in rural areas, Hindu and Muslim women follow complex rules of veiling the body and avoidance of public appearance, especially in the presence of relatives linked by marriage and before strange men. *Purdah* practices are inextricably linked to patterns of authority and harmony within the family. Rules of Hindu and Muslim *purdah* differ in certain key ways, but female modesty and decorum as well as concepts of family honor are essential to the various forms of *purdah*. In most areas, *purdah* restrictions are stronger for women of high-status families. (Wikipedia, The Issue of Muslim veiling).

Purdah wearing has centuries of genealogy, however, its relation with subjectivity (Foucault 1982) and social relations have differed significantly over the time and space or regions, as much as lexical and social meanings. *Purdah* wearing has a long history all over the world, so also in Malabar. However, *purdah* wearing culture remained within one community that is Muslim community. Therefore, this study is to discern relation between *purdah* wearing, subjectivity and place and position of Muslim women within power relations. In a socio-political discourse, identity and identification are linked to subjectivity. The question of identity and identification will become invalid without linking them with the question of subjectivity. (Here I just trying to interface Foucauldian notions with the *purdah* wearing and its implications for subjectification)

The context and the problem

Among the Muslims in Kerala, wearing *purdah* has become a common practice, especially so during the last two decades. In fact it is becoming more and more common, it is this trend that lent significance to this study. According to some media reports, the number of the Muslim women who wear *purdah* in the five northern districts of the Malabar region with prominent Muslim population had increased from 3.5 percent in 1990 to 32.5 in 2005 (Basheer 2001). *Purdah* has become more of a cultural feature rather than a religious requirement. Either way, the practice of *purdah* is integral among those who practice it. It still remains as an integral part of everyday life for some people and is a mark of their culture. It is important that the women do not passively accept the obligation to *purdah*, but actively internalize this practice by attributing personal meanings to it.

In an anthropological study in Kerala context, Mathhea Agnes (2004), who was a student of Amsterdam University, tried to seek the answer to the question as to whether the women contribute to their own submissive position. Agnes decided to study how this phenomenon of new veiling is developed in the specific context of Kerala society. The purpose of his research was to understand how local, national and global forces influence the decision of young and educated Muslim women to dress differently and how this influences her movements in the public spaces.

First, Mathhea Agnes explains how the rise in *purdah* observance is connected with a new ideal religiosity, shaped through politics, education and an increasing contact with the Gulf. By examining the changing role of women in Kerala society, Agnes argued that the recent emphasis on *purdah* reveal underlying changes in social relationships due to these modern development. Agnes pointed out that to understand how women can act as agents, we must pay attention to the limitations they face and the possibilities they have. Agnes described the importance of the family and community for the decision of the individual women and raise doubts about the autonomy of agency. The meaning-giving capacity reveal that the acceptance to dress in a certain way is by no means a passive process but instead must be seen as an act of agency (Agnes 2004: 1-5).

Even if *purdah* wearing can be a part of patriarchal impositions, there are moments when it becomes preferable by one wears it. That is, just like power is enabling, *purdah* is also enabling; this may not be the case always, but at the same time there are such moments, events, and fluid preferences. This can be illustrated with the aid of the information collected during the field work.

The intention of this study is to understand how *purdah*, the Muslim women's dress code, constitutes certain subjectivities to those women who wear it. This study probes what *purdah* permits, not so much what it prevents. In contrast with other studies, this one tries to establish the fact that *purdah* wearing is not merely offensive and subjugation, but it is also enabling. In contrast to the usual criticisms leveled against *purdah* wearing, here the main attempt is to find out the justifications for wearing it provided by those women who wear it. By narrating women's individual experiences, which allows careful ethnographical research and through personal narratives, it is attempted to establish that somebody is benefiting in *purdah*. How we, as individuals, relate with others as well as with oneself through dressing-up one's body. The focus of this study is this relation through dress here *purdah*. This study is looking at the power effects on subjectivity involved in the practice of *purdah* wearing. This is not about what *purdah* is, but what *purdah* does.

Hence the study seeks to focus on the basic question that how wearing *purdah* becomes a code that influences identification and self-identification in Kerala society? More specifically it explores the following: 1) Is *purdah* for oneself or for others? 2) What are the enabling functions of this dressing practice? And 3) Does *purdah* wearing enables power of protection and security?

Methodology

Broadly stating, this study follows the methods of ethnographic research rather than anything else. Priority is given to qualitative information gleaned through interviews. It consists of extensive and elaborate interviews and interactions with *purdah* wearing women of Malabar region. Women's individual experiences and self portrayals of narratives in the regions of Malappuram, Kozhikode and Kannur, Malabar region chosen as an area of the study. Choice of the person to be interviewed was random. Personal

narratives of 27 *pardah* wearing women are invoked as illustrative exemplars. The interviews had two modes: one, interviews with *pardah* wearing women in the presence of her family members and the second, interviewing her without others. Secondary resource materials include books, articles and other research works that discuss the practice of wearing *pardah*, although we have employed them only sparsely.

Self-identifying, Covering and Presenting Oneself

Though *pardah* wearing can be a part of patriarchal impositions, there are moments when it becomes preferable to some. That is, just like power is enabling, *pardah* is also enabling; this may not be the case always, but at the same time there are such moments, events, and fluid preferences. We will illustrate these points with the aid of the information collected during my field work. The form adopted to present the illustrative case studies is overlapping, in the sense that we may refer back to a case, which would be referred subsequently. The theoretical assumption is that no individual is monolithic and have multiple selves. In other words, one's choice need not be because of one reason but multiple reasons.

***Pardah* for Oneself**

There are several moments of preference wearing *pardah* appears to oneself as one's own choice. For illustrative purpose, we classify them with the aid of social scientific categories. Each of the categories is schematically presented in the subsequent subsections.

I. For others but for the self: The preferential field of this category is that they wear *pardah* taking into consideration of others but this consideration is her own. At least, that is one of the responses that can be termed as experiential.

Sabeena, a thirty nine year old woman and a dependent of a gulf migrant husband started to wear *pardah* at the age of thirty four. There was an 'other' who persuaded her to do so. During the telephonic conversations between the wife and husband, he suggested that as 'our children are growing old' it is better that 'you begin to wear *pardah*'. This is a moment when there is need to shift one's dressing habit to another one, although that is not alien. What comes out of our conversation is that, it is not so much an acceptance of a shift in dress code that one has to follow but shift in the habit of dressing oneself for oneself. She had been habituated to wear sari since her adulthood, but her husband's suggestion could not be responded negatively. Then she 'opted'—the question of self will is not considered here—to wear *pardah* whenever she goes out of home. Now she begins to shift her presentation of self to others through *pardah*. In the beginning with mild remorse, but later, she says, "I began to find it is fine for different reasons".

Here, we find that the beginning of a shift in the followed dressing pattern could be due to persuasion from others, but over time, it becomes self-persuasive to the recipient of persuasion. Here, by persuasion we do not mean seduction, for such a shift only enabled her to refashion herself for herself; the cause of this acceptance to shift one's dressing style does not matter in every life. Rather, she found functional use due

to such a shift in her dress. Perhaps, the origin of persuasion might have appeared to them as an irrelevant factor in the acceptance, except at the moment of beginning of making a new dress to be worn over their bodies. In short one begins to dress one's body in terms of others eye-point, but that eye becomes one's own without friction.

2. Way of Self-identification: The question of self-identification involves another question, that is, subjectivity. One identifies oneself, at times in terms of an understanding of how others identify that individual. This is one way of self-identification. That is, an individual finds one's own identity by identifying with oneself as well as with others. The concept of 'subjectivity' is used here resembles the Foucauldian conception of it. That is, how an individual gets satisfied with a dress that is worn in terms one's own appreciation and with an expectation of appreciation from others. Self-identifications are not static, there are several overlaps and intersections, therefore, we have classified occasions of self-identifications that are discernable. Although we have sub-classified them they are not water tight compartments, but there are several inter-referencing among them.

3. Self-Identification in congregation: Self-identification as a concept resonates with another concept inter-subjectivity. When an individual is among others, he/she will be positioned to think of oneself in relation to others who were congregated and with whom that individual strived to identify with. Such congregations take place at the occasions of marriage, *Qura'n* teaching, death etc. In this sub-category, there are two discernable types. First one is wearing *purdah* to identify oneself with others of the congregation. The other is, occasions in which sari is preferred by otherwise *purdah* wearing women, such as at the occasions of marriage congregations. This typology suggests that there is no one dress code of a community but there are only different ways of being with others clad in one or other robe.

Twenty six year aged Hajara wears *sari* or *salwarkameez* when she attends occasions such as wedding or house warming; that is, within an intimate congregation. She said "...when everybody wears *sari* or any other fashionable dresses in wedding functions or so, it is not proper to wear *purdah* to be with them. Apart from that, such functions are the only chance for poor people like us to show some fashion. ... I feel at odd in sari if others are in *purdah*".

Close reading of Hajara's statement lead us to make another proposition, however tentative it is, about self-identification. Unlike in the earlier instance, here there is no persuasion from outside, but a longing to be identified-with, it is this longing which influence her choice of dress. One may perhaps probe into her self-preference to know what constituted it itself. Probably there may be conditions that influenced her 'self-preference', but this issue we leave it for future. One of the observations that we can make at this juncture is that it is not the dress that matters but occasions of self-identification and subjectivity. Her desire is to be like others at the occasions of congregation.

Sameera, 38 year old woman having two daughters, belonging to lower middle class family desires to be identified herself with others of her preferred congregation of *Qura'n* class. When she started to attend the classes, all others were in *purdah*, except very few of them. She was in *sari*, within a short span of time she began to feel some kind of alienation from her partners in the class. Without no one recommending she started to wear *purdah* whenever she attended the class, to avoid isolation. Sameera said "... I and few others who were not wearing *purdah* felt total separation and inferiority among others. The *purdah*-clads lingered around the meeting place, even after the classes over, discussing many other matters of common interests. But we left the place immediately after the *Quran* classes."

Asmabi, another woman at Mughadar Beach at Kozhikode, attests the inference made above. She said: "*Purdah* is a convenience for us to cover our poverty, however I wear *sari* when I go for functions like wedding in the families of our own economic status. I had occasions in which I had to face insulting comments from others belonging to my own class for wearing *purdah*. It makes me feel inferior and isolated." The responses that have been quoted here clearly reveal that there are instances or women who are not sticky with the dress code; they can alter it according to propriety to be followed in different situations.

4. Identifying with the family norms: Dress that one chooses need not be of one's own choice, but at the same time when one identifies with a profession or any institutions such as family, then also the importance of dress wanes; what predominates is the identification. Since family or house and home are important to the existence identification with either of them or all of them becomes imperative as far as any individual is concerned. The idea that, to be among the family with which one identifies oneself makes either ways of dressing; with *purdah* or in *sari* or some other wear. The dress becomes only as a means of identification and therefore it does not infringe into self hood as an experiential problem.

The 47 year old upper class housewife named Kutsiya was on a morning walk in the jogging track of Sarovaram bio-park, situated in the city of Calicut, when she spoke about her experience within *purdah*. Even during the morning walk she was in *purdah*. Kutsiya's family migrated to Kozhikode from Muslim dominated city of Bhatkal in Karnataka. Kutsiya took the habit of wearing *purdah* right from her childhood as part of their family norm. That is she has almost inherited this dress code. She said that Muslim girls in her home village in Bhatkal begin to observe *purdah* and *Niqab* right from their adolescence. Kutsiya said..."*purdah* is an integral part of our lifestyle. No other form of attire is familiar to me. Nor anybody in her family can even think about a dress without *purdah*..." What is interesting here to note is that even after their migration the dress code continued with greater vigour, as even when she attends celebrations like marriage, she wears *purdah* as she has more unfamiliar people there than her family people.

Sujatha got converted to Islam and changed her name to Sajitha at the age of 25. She is 28 year old and belonged to lower class family residing in Bengladesh colony of Kozhikode. She got converted to Islam after marrying a Muslim youth. Her mother in-law and sister in-laws had been wearing *purdah*, although she was not following this dress code in the beginning of her married life. When she experienced isolation in her husband's family she thought of changing to *purdah*. Sajitha said...."I had no option of going back to my home because I married a man outside my caste. My sister in-laws expressed hesitation to take me with them to any function outside the colony. Two years back I started to wear *purdah* like them. With this change I became more acceptable to them, and now I feel that I have become one among them." The self-identification with family and to be one among the members of that family is explicit in this illustration. The point to be emphasised is that *purdah* played a major role in identifying her as a family member by others in the family. That means identification of Sajitha as part of 'We' by others and her self-identification with them is anchored on the dressing.

5. Covering the body: Religious dictums insist that women cover their body when they are in public places or in front of unfamiliar men. There could be non-religious dimensions to covering the body without creating any suspicion about the body. That is, since religion stipulates to cover the body with *purdah*, if a woman has a complex that some parts of body may appear ugly or is disgusting to others, then *purdah* can come to aid as it covers the entire body. Here, rather than covering the body, covering the parts which one likes to hide attains more important function of *purdah* wearing.

Purdah covers both beauty and the burns of life. Perhaps Rasiya's expressions and presentation of self elucidate this rather metaphorical statement. Rasiya was 35 years of age and a resident of Bengladesh colony in Kozhikode city. She said...."my body burnt from neck to belly. Its scars are all over my upper body. When discharged from hospital, I realised that the scars and wound of burns had made my body horrible to be seen". It was at this point of time, she decided to wear *purdah* to cover up the scars. More than anything else, what we find here is the enabling or functional quality of *purdah* wearing. That is as much as displaying the body covering the body may also become part of life.

Khadeeja (47 years old) was a lower class fishing family member dwelling at Nainamvalappu Beach in Kozhikode. She had five years of *purdah* wearing habit. She thinks that her body is fatty and dark complexioned and therefore not attractive. When attending public functions she used to get humiliated. She accepted *purdah* wearing to hide her "uncharming" body. Khadeeja said..." Now I don't care about the dark color of my skin. After I started wearing *purdah* people stare less at me. Even if I don't have good ornaments, I can travel with confidence in *purdah* without others noticing it...." Here what is more glaring is that certain lacks and disgraces of one's body become presentable in *purdah*.

6. Covering the body or covering the dress: Suharabi 39 year old and her three children live in Marad Beach, on the outskirts of Kozhikode and belonged to a lower class laboring family. Suharabi says it was her own preference to wear *purdah*. She said... "I was attracted to *purdah* when I saw others in it. It was my own decision to wear *purdah*. Since our family is financially poor, we hadn't many ornaments to wear. When we went out in sari we used to borrow some gold or other ornaments from neighbors or so. It embarrassed me. When *purdah* became a habit, ornaments became irrelevant. If we are wearing *purdah* with a *muftha*, not even an ear ring is needed."

Once again her preference for *purdah* is out of a sense of lack and deprivation. What *purdah* covers is her material deprivation as symbolized by gold. It is precisely this covering, not covering of body that comes to forefront.

34 years old Aminabi belonging to a lower class family pointed out another context. When her family buys clothes for them on Id celebrations money will be sufficient to purchase only for children. But one way to cover the fact the mother hadn't sufficient money to purchase new clothes for herself is wearing *purdah*. No one asks any question about the new dress; no one bothers about whether the *purdah* is old or new. Or at least such questions are preempted. It is such covering of displayable that makes *purdah* wearing preferable. This is attested by another poor woman named Asmabi aged 30 years; she said... "It is not possible for us to buy costly *sarees* and matching blouses for me. Ornaments are all the more unbearable. So *purdah* is convenient to me to cover my poverty".

7. *Purdah* and morality: *Purdah* comes in between family members of an extended family or even a nuclear family in order to uphold the moral codes that they collectively share. It is worth mentioning that there is no interstice between moral codes and dress codes even when intimate kinship bound individuals interact. *Purdah* enables, in this sense, retention of one's desired moral code. There are instances in which the desire for the retention of the moral code emanates from both men and women.

Asiya, who was bystanding her ailing daughter in Kozhikode Beach hospital, is 47 years old and she belonged to a middle class family. Asiya started wearing *purdah* eight years back as a result of repeated inadvertent expressions of her son in-laws' wish that she should wear *purdah*. Asiya said... "my son in-laws didn't tell their wish to see their mother in-law within a *purdah* directly, but communicated through my daughters and that when one of the son in-laws came with *purdah* as a gift I had no other way but to wear it to avoid his displeasure".

The instances and stories related to family life pointing to a situation existing in the family which is self-preventing any chance or non-moral or non-religious relation with her. Perhaps that is why Asiya had to start wearing *purdah*. If in this case the source initiation was men, there are other examples in which women are the source of persuasion.

Sulaikha was on a leisure trip in Sarovaram Bio-park, an amusement avenue in Kozhikode accompanied by her two daughters and their husbands. 40 years old Sulaikha lives in Koduvally at Kozhikode. She said... "there was tremendous pressure from my daughters to change into *purdah*. Both of my daughters suggested that it is better I wear *purdah* when I go to in public gatherings. One daughter even asked her husband to bring a *purdah* for me from Gulf." Here, skepticisms about a possible breach of moral code sprout from daughters. That means, in retaining the moral code of families there is not much difference. That is, be it a man or women, *purdah* comes as a savior. Here *purdah* is preferred because she is the savior to satisfy their desire to retain the moral codes related to sexuality. We referred to these two instances mainly to show the blurred distinction between genders at least in this specific or micro-specific instance of the culture of wearing *purdah*. Of course, the central observation is that *purdah* comes into moral, sexual and kinship codes within family structure even in the mutual relations among the family members.

What is common to the observations and propositions made in the five sub-classifications is the functionality and material repeatability of *purdah* wearing. It is one's own rationalities that led our respondents to wear *purdah*. Of course the rationalities and contexts change considerably as we have already seen. The positive, permissive and enabling dimensions of *purdah* can be exemplified with insights from different instances.

8. Women without *purdah* and gaze of men: Women get their exclusive space without the gaze of men in several occasions, the most important and frequent one is marriage ceremonies. Weddings in rich Muslim families are worth to be seen for its luxuriance and extravaganza. The marriage feast is held separately for men and women. They will be separately gathering for the function. Women, who wore *Purdah*, were not at all reluctant to wear sari and other costly attires. They found it comfortable as were among many women in the gathering. It will be revealing to address the question how women who usually wear *purdah* feel free to be without it. Here, the removal of *purdah* or being without it is to do more with the sociality and gender proximity.

Kutsiya said that "I wear *purdah* even when I attend social functions in Calicut, but at my home place I need not to wear it during marriage functions because no men other than close blood relatives are allowed into the area where only we women sit." 45 year old Fathima who is a member of a rich religious family in Madai¹, Kannur says that she used to wear *sarees* while attending family functions. But after she reached the age of 40, she started using *purdah* regularly. Sabeena, aged 39 believes that during functions, sari or *salwarkameez* can be used because in Calicut, where she stays, there is no chance for mingling with men as feasts in connection with weddings etc. are held separately for men and women. In this illustration, Shaana, aged 19 who comes from Barami² family which is economically at upper level, residing in Kuttichira, Calicut is a student of BBA in the prestigious Providence Women's College, Calicut. She said that *purdah* protect

her from ugly staring on her body. She interestingly commented: "There are many men in the teaching staff though the college is girls only. The fellow students are non-Muslims in majority. We are allowed to give up the religious dress code only in the midst of blood relatives. In all other circumstances, a sort of segregation is preferred. I don't use *pardah* in festive occasions or family get-togethers. In such functions, I choose *salwarkhameez* with hanging full-sleeves and a head scarf to conceal the hair. But one disadvantage of *salwarkhameez* comparing to *pardah*, is that, it cannot be used for *namaz* because then, additional socks should be used then"

It is not that women cannot be present in public arena without *pardah*, but there are spaces and places where they go without it. The impression that one could get is that such spaces are made use of to the maximum possible extent by the Malabar *pardah* wearing women. Here also, *pardah* does not come as an impediment to one's freedom, but as something disposable, there are possibilities of being in their community without it.

9. Display of the displayable: There are occasions for women to be present among others without *pardah*. The question of displayability comes into picture mainly because *pardah* is cover and covering of body is normal, but at the same time, presentation of oneself in celebrations without *pardah* is a celebration of non-normal occasions. Presentation of self in the realm of public visibility becomes something desirable:

Several women discussed their interest in attending festivals, wedding etc. where they get a legitimate occasion to wear sari and *chureedar* and ornaments. In such occasions, women prefer not to cover themselves with *pardah* and choose the occasion to display their pomp and prosperity. I found that this behaviour was more pronounced among the middle class women. Sakkeena, 47 year old woman of a middle class family says that women like her get rare chances to show off their good dresses and ornaments only in wedding functions. Sakkeena said: "I wear sari in family functions like weddings, but it is because others also prefer that during festive occasions." Here the moments are those which enable one to be without *pardah* in public and display one's both natural and acquired endowments.

Discussion

Purdah is not just the 'covering -up' of the body. This study finds that women consider it more as a 'dress' for her body. Thus they fashion themselves in *pardah* to be congruent with a community or occasion.

Contrary to the popular notion that *pardah* secludes and subjugates, a lot of women experience it another way. While women from the lower class find *pardah* much helpful to conceal a great deal of their insufficiencies by making it as their default dress, a few others find it as a comfortable outfit within they can hide their physical disabilities. For many women a rather offensive *pardah* makes themselves to be fit in an occasion or

in a community, it makes them more acceptable in a society or in a community and strengthens them to overcome the sense of alienation and guilt.

Within *purdah* a woman doesn't have to bother about her own appearance. To the most, within *Purdah* she can leave her worries about others' interrogating stare in to her hygiene or fashion. *Purdah* helps a woman to get freedom from others. Because she doesn't have to bother about what she has dressed inside the *purdah*.

The other conveniences shared by the '*purdah* wearing women' were that *purdah* made them feel secured, and provided self confidence in their day to day life. Another point is that *purdah* helped to save money, as women need not to spend lavishly on costly apparel and ornaments; absence of ornaments get covered by *purdah* and no one bothers about what is beneath the *purdah*.

In many cases, mother in-laws receive *purdah* as a gift from their son-in-laws. In fact the daughters want their mothers to wear *purdah*. They ask their mothers to wear *purdah* by convincing them that their husbands wish her mother to do so, may be this is because the daughters have the 'fear of incest'(Barnhart 1992: 20) within their subconscious.

Conclusion

This study sought to unravel the way a body in a particular dress, self-identification and relations with one another coincided. In other words, it was a study addressing the question, how dress becomes a code in identification and presentation of self-identity. For instance, it is not difficult to distinguish a Buddhist monk or a Christian nun from others, just because of their appearance in a particular dress which is coded. The religion is ingrained on one's dress; even if one is trans-dress code person, even then, it works as a code to identify that transgression. We could state that dressing is placed within several symbolic relations. That is why we focused more on '*purdah* wearing', rather than *purdah* in itself.

About self-identification, more than identification, we have found that it is entrenched in relations of signification, functionality and relations of power. This is because self-identification involved not only relations with others but also relations with oneself. Clothing one's body and leaving it bare can be seen as a way of dressing; that is, presenting one's body. Dress as a code of self-identification was inextricably linked to identification as well, whenever they have intersected and questions of selfhood came to prominence; in other words the central questions were anchored on the concept 'subjectivity'. Within the conceptual orientation, this work tried to trace how a word which meant 'cover' got metaphorically reduced to a particular dress belonging to a religion with gender specificity.

The information provided to me during the intimate and prolonged dialogues with *purdah* wearing women revealed an aspect about it, which is not much talked about,

pardah wearing has enabling or positive effects. Apart from covering the body, *pardah* covers many other aspects and things of everyday life. This enabling effects—its extent, intensity and variety—of course differed substantially across sections of the community. This study is more about the functionality of *pardah* wearing, instead of attempting to answer the question, what *pardah* denies or limits the one in it. We could find that, choice or preference to regularly wear *pardah* is well entrenched in economic, symbolic and power relations. This work contains the subtle details about this intricate entanglement of relations that conditions one's subjectivity, reasons of choice and presentation of self in a coded dress.

This work presumed that *pardah* wearing is implicated in a set of competing discourses with effects of power to construct the body and its presentation.

Although we have highlighted the positivities of '*pardah* wearing', we do not undermine its restrictive or compulsive aspects. Several social and journalistic works have already underscored the latter set of aspects. In our ventures to avoid repetition and project the less-talked-about, we minimized references to them. That is, *pardah* prevents and permits; it covers what can be shown and it also covers what is to be hid; acceptance of wearing *pardah* could be due to coercive force from above or non-coercive force; wearing *pardah* may involve restriction or on the other restraint.

Perhaps, it would not be inappropriate to conclude with a probably disputable proposition. *Purdah* is no more a dress alone, but an ornament, a shield, a protector, a camouflage, a sign and also a free floating signifier; perhaps the power of persuasion of wearing *pardah* is the power ingrained in the identity formations and self-presentations. The significations of wearing *pardah* are indeterminable. Though not attempted in this work, it is probable that one can conceive '*pardah* wearing' as effective and affective figures of speech that 'covers' even the soul that one beholds as the most desirable.

Notes

This is a revised paper presented at 37th Annual conference of Kerala Sociological Society on Mobility, Mobilization and social Development, held on 19th to 21st Nov.2010 at Farook College, Kozhikode and has won Dr. .P.K.B.Nayar Award for the best paper. I wish to express sincere gratitude to the anonymous referee whose comments have helped me to improve the paper substantially. For a more comprehensive work on this theme please see my M.Phil. Thesis *Dressing-up the body: Beyond covering the body with Purdah*, Submitted to School of Social Sciences under M.G. University, Kottayam, 2009.

1. Madai is one of the rare Muslim populated areas of Kerala, where the *Purdah*-clad women lead the family since their male members are mostly in the gulf.
2. Barami is a wealthy business clan of Muslim community migrated from outside Kerala.

References

- AbulA'laMoududi, MaulanaSayyid. 2006. *Purdah and the Status of Women in Islam*, Al-Ash'ari (Tran.), New Delhi: Markazi Maktaba Islami Publishers .
- Agnes de Jong, Matthea, 2004. *A Moral Dress for Modern Women: Female Muslim Students in Kerala Interpreting the Veil*, Unpublished M.A. Dissertation., Amsterdam: University of Amsterdam.
- Aslam, Reza, 2005. *No God But God: The Origin, Evolution, and Future of Islam*, U.K. : Random House.
- Barnhart, Clarence. L & Barnhart, Robert. K . 1992. (eds.) *The World Book Encyclopedia*, Vol. 7 F, Chicago: World Book International. p.20
- Basheer, M.P, 2001 .Malayalam Magazines Drive Women into Purdah', www.thehoot.org.
- Desouza, Eunice, 2004.*Purdah: An Anthology*, New York: Oxford University Press.
- Engineer, Asgar Ali, 1999.*The Quran, Women and Modern Society*, Delhi: Sterling.
- Foucault, Michel, 1982. 'The Subject and Power', in, Hubert L. Dreyfus and Paul Rabinow (eds.), *Michel Foucault: Beyond Structuralism and Hermeneutics*, Harvester: Hemel Hempsted.
- Foucault, Michel, 1990. *The Use of Pleasure - The History of Sexuality*, Vol.2, Robert Hurley (Tran.), New York: Vintage Books.
- Jeffrey, Patricia, 1979. *Frogs in a Well, Indian Women in Purdah*, New Delhi: Vikas Publishing House Pvt.Ltd.

Shilujas M., Guest Lecturer, Department Of Sociology, Farook College, Kozhikode

Email: shilujas@gmail.com