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RESEARCH ARTICLE

'Enjoying life': Consumption, changing meanings, and social differentiation in Kerala, India

Nissim Mannathukkaren

Department of International Development Studies, Dalhousie University, Halifax, Canada
Email: nmannathukkaren@dal.ca

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Abstract

Kerala is a well-recognized 'model' of human development in the world. In this article, I look at a crucial aspect of this development, which is often approached in a positivist fashion of statistical aggregation alone: consumption. Instead, there is a need to study the meanings that surround it. I delineate the many forces, particularly the new material infrastructure, that have driven consumption in the last three decades, especially the last one. With increasing integration into global market forces through migration and investment, and cultural imaginations, I show that there is a tectonic change in consciousness about consumption, marked by fantasies, desires, and, contrarily, feelings of excess and ambivalence. I argue that the non-market sector has also played an important role in consumption. There is an increasing generalization of certain ideas about consumption as well as disenchantments across classes. But critically, I contend, there are caste, class, and gender disparities in consumption as well as differences in the meanings attributed to it. Thus, consumption is a socially meaningful, but discrepant, space. This article is based on fieldwork conducted in a town in central Kerala, supplemented with quantitative data.

Keywords: Consumption; market; collective consumption; status; Kerala

Introduction

Kerala, a state in India, is a celebrated case in social sciences and development literature for its substantial successes in human development and the construction of a democratic welfare state.[1] The role of socialism/communism in this transformation has also been well studied (see Heller 1999; Mannathukkaren 2013, 2021).[2] It is an achievement for a 'Third World' society, with low levels of income, to match the human development standards of the Global North. At the same time, I argue that it is important to focus on aspects that complicate this development success story,

[1]See Sandbrook et al. 2007.
[2]Kerala was the first sizeable region in the world, in terms of population, to democratically elect a communist government.

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especially those that are not always immediately apparent or tangible. Consumption is one such arena, for Kerala is also deemed to be a consumerist society with the highest consumption levels in the country. Although Kerala has only around 2.5 per cent of India's population, it consumed around 10 per cent of the goods produced in the country (Padma et al. 2018, 800).[3] Thus, Kerala's status as a development model in the Global South makes it an excellent case study to understand consumption practices.

On the one hand, Kerala is a part of the Indian nation-state, which, since 1991, has seen the opening up of the Indian markets through economic liberalization. On the other, Kerala is unique in terms of the impact of emigrant remittances from outside the country (which was beginning to be felt before liberalization) and transnational connections. Remittances were estimated to be 36 per cent of the Net State Domestic Product in 2016 (Luke 2018, 5).[4]

Consumption has become an important focus of studies, especially in sociology and anthropology (see Appadurai 1988, 1990; Miller 1995, 1998; Burke 1996; Ong 1999; Osella and Osella 1999; Comaroff and Comaroff 1999; Lukose 2009; Trentmann 2016; Warde 2016). In the Indian, or the Global Southern, context, it is important to understand the role that consumption plays in rapidly modernizing societies. This is because, unlike Western Europe in the post-war boom context, in societies of the Global South, 'several successive stages [of consumption] have been compressed into one' (Trentmann 2016, 354), producing contradictions, divergences, as well as challenges of a different magnitude.

In this article, I trace the many forces, particularly the novel material infrastructure, that have propelled consumption in the last three decades, especially the most recent one. The commodification of areas hitherto lying beyond the market is a growing tendency and the latest phase of Kerala's development. It is the burgeoning purchasing power occasioned by deepening integration into global capital and economic development, and the rhetoric of the market, that have aided consumption. I show that there is a drastic change in consciousness, focused on the fulfilment of material desires and 'enjoying life'. This is realized through different kinds of consumption, which range across the spectrum of short- to long-term consumption. But this is not a homogeneous story without ambivalences or contradictions, nor the only

[3]Kerala, which was in the eighth position in 1972–73 in terms of consumer expenditure, reached the second position in 1993–94, and topped the country by 1999–2000 (*The Hindu Business Line* 2003). In terms of rural and urban breakdown, in 1961–62, in the rural sector, Kerala was consuming 3 per cent less than the average for the whole of India, and was placed 11th in the country. By 2011–12, it was consuming 96 per cent more than the Indian average, and was ranked first in the country. In the urban sector, Kerala consumption was 16 per cent less than India in 1960–61, and was in seventeenth position in 1970–71. By 2011–12, Kerala consumed 28 per cent more than India, and was in the third position, after being first in 2000–01 (Padma et al. 2018, 804–5). And in 2019, Kerala topped the country overall in both rural and urban consumption (exchange4media 2019). Of course, all this is made possible by Kerala's economic base growing substantially from the 1960s. In 1960–61, Kerala was twelfth in a group of 16 major Indian states in terms of per capita income (Chakravarty and Dehejia 2016). By 2016–17, Kerala was third in a group of 21 major states (constant prices). Its per capita income was around 57 per cent higher than India's per capita income (Government of India 2018, 14). Thus, the making of a human development model was simultaneously accompanied by an economic transformation that placed Kerala among the richest states in India.

[4]The number of non-resident Keralites abroad in 2016 was 2.24 million (Luke 2018, 5). Kerala accounts for nearly 20 per cent of the remittances that India receives (Pavithra 2019).

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story to tell. This conjuncture of consumption is also one that experiences feelings of excess, across classes, when it comes to commodities. At the same time, I argue that consumption in the present cannot be understood without grasping its differentiated effects on caste, class, gender, and other social stratification contexts. Here, status is a very important part of consumption in Kerala, and aspects like luxury become a means to establish this. Nevertheless, there are some changes also. Against a simple positing of capitalism and the expansion of capitalist relations as the sole determinant of consumption practices, I argue that in the case of Kerala, the state and the non-market sector have played significant roles in the constitution of the modern consumer, long before the opening of the markets. There is a need to go beyond the market-consumer and state-citizen binary in consumption. In different sections of the article, I delineate and highlight some of the important aspects of consumption noted above, which can be interlinked in various ways in practice.

This article is located against the common (positivist or economistic) tendency to posit a consumerist society on the basis of statistical aggregation alone, without understanding the meanings of consumption and the contradictions that it can generate. Thus, the appellation 'materialist society' is easily attached without a nuanced understanding of this materialism. On the contrary, I argue there is a need to understand consumption from the point of view of the actors, as well as from the outside (Campbell 2005). Therefore, consumption is a meaningful activity, but it also takes place in a social and material context, the operations and mechanisms of which may not be entirely graspable by the actors and are also, often, beyond their control. A fetishization of the consumer and consumer agency, ignoring global forces of production and advertising (Appadurai 1990, 307), or the 'dominant understandings' of the 'sovereignty of the consumer' making perpetual rational decisions in the marketplace, as well as links to different aspects of daily social life (Warde 2016, 5) are problematic. The 'cultural turn' in consumption studies brought to the fore the creative and expressive aspects of consumption; at the same time, consumption has consequences beyond groups and individuals, and on the whole of society (Evans 2019, 504, 511).

The socio-cultural imaginaries that are unleashed by consumption, it will be seen, break the tradition-modernity binary. The march of neoliberal capitalism and modernity can also provoke an intensification of 'pre-modern' enchantments (Comaroff and Comaroff 1999), just as they can reaffirm traditional inequities. In the interaction between the 'modern' and 'traditional', both are reconfigured. Consumption imaginaries, which, as we know, have always moved away from the narrative of a seamless homogenization, or Westernization/Westcentrism (Appadurai 1990, 295), acquire new valences with heightened global cultural and economic linkages. What is seen is the multifarious orientation of modern, cosmopolitan consumption, borrowing from different sources. Here, the cultural differences that arise even when consuming the same material goods are crucial.

Method

I seek to build upon the excellent work on consumption in Kerala by Filippo and Caroline Osella and Ritty Lukose. Some of the tendencies and contradictions which I outline here were already present during the time of their research in the 1990s and 2000s, and highlighted by them. But these have become more prominent since then

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and some new material infrastructure, which was not extant before, has been created in the 2010s. The major difference from their work that I articulate is in the focus on the state and the non-market sector in relation to consumption. Another contribution that my article makes is in articulating the concept of 'enjoying life' as the one of the central motifs in present-day consumption, but which I posit is simultaneously marked by the notion of 'excess' and ambivalences.

This article is a part of a larger research project on modernity in Kerala based on fieldwork, including 150 formal interviews, in Muvattupuzha, a town in central Kerala, conducted over 24 months in various phases between July 2010 and July 2013 and between June 2016 and December 2018. This article draws upon a subset of 55 interviews with men and women, a purposive, non-representative sample, conducted mainly in the town. The interviews sought to produce an in-depth understanding of the meanings of consumption as well as probe further some of the questions that came up during research about changes in these meanings. The intention was to make sense of consumption through speaking to ordinary consumers as well as those with specialized knowledge, especially in areas which impinge on consumption. Emphasis was also placed on the dimension of inter-generational experiences, crucial to analysing changes in consumption. Since these general societal changes are played out through different social groups, the prism of the main caste, class, and religious categories informed the sample selection. The sample seeks to enhance validity through information-rich cases, rather than establish statistical reliability through a random probability sample (Patton 1990, 181–85). The informants were selected after becoming familiar with and spending time in the field.

To gain the perspective of a pan-Kerala nature, some interviews were conducted with specialized informants outside the town. This is supplemented with notes from participant observation and informal conversations.[5] Finally, the article uses quantitative data from primary and secondary sources. I have also analysed a selection of 100 middle-/upper-class homes featured (between 2018 and 2019) in the lifestyle and decor section of the largest selling newspaper in the state, *Manorama*.[6] Methodological triangulation has been adopted to overcome the limitations of relying on a single approach.

The fieldwork location has many of the socio-economic and political characteristics of larger Kerala society: a strong presence of minority religious communities like Christians and Muslims; a balance between the right and left forces in politics; the prominence of service sectors (in terms of economic worth) despite the agrarian base; the 'rurban' (rural-urban) character; and a good number of emigrants to foreign countries.[7] The endeavour is to not freeze the fieldwork location

[5] All the names of interviewees, other than the ones indicated by an asterisk, are pseudonyms.

[6] See https://www.onmanorama.com/topic/general-topics/12/decor.html, [accessed 10 November 2022].

[7] Muvattupuzha Municipality's total population was 30,397 in the 2011 Census. Hindus constituted 39.91 per cent, Muslims 38.91 per cent and Christians 21.10 per cent. Scheduled Castes (SCs) numbered 5.22 per cent and Scheduled Tribes (STs) 0.46 per cent (https://www.census2011.co.in/data/town/803291-muvattupuzha-kerala.html, [accessed 10 November 2022]). Of the 9,916 main workers in the town, the number of cultivators was 207, agricultural labourers 219, and workers in household industries 211. The remainder were 'other workers' (https://www.censusindia.co.in/towns/muvattupuzha-population-ernakulam-kerala-803291, [accessed 10 November 2022). For the whole of Kerala, according to the 2011

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(Bayard de Volo and Schatz 2004, 267), but to link social processes to the 'social structure' and locate them within the 'context of their external determination' (Burawoy 1998, 23), but in a non-reductionist manner. Thus, the data were analysed through the lens of an empathetic understanding of the actor, along with the macro economic and social forces that exist beyond the actor. For the former, elements of grounded theory, that is, the actual words of informants, were used in generating themes.

The state and collective consumption

The pervasiveness of consumption under capitalism should not make us ignore the fact that consumption is not only a product of capitalism. Various pre-capitalist societies manufactured mass consumption goods without the ideology and structure of capitalism, of which medieval China is an example (Miller 1995, 20). Similarly, communist societies of the twentieth century are another example of non-capitalist consumption laying the basis for market-led consumption patterns later, highlighting the criticality of the state in consumption. This is pronounced in the case of democratic welfare states both in the Global North and South. Here, Manuel Castells' concept of 'collective consumption' is useful in understanding this phenomenon. It refers to the public provisions made by the state, especially a welfare state, like education, health, food, housing, unemployment doles, pensions, and other social protection measures (Warde 2016, 4). Where I differ from Castells is in his reductive emphasis on the state's welfare function as a design to 'pacify the population' and produce a 'acquiescent' labour force (Warde 2016, 4). Welfare is not just about pacification of labour (even when it might have such consequences); on the contrary, the state has also been forced to perform welfare functions because of intense democratic pressures from below (which vary from region to region) (see Mannathukkaren 2021). As we will see, collective consumption is a major means for gaining mobility and overcoming historic oppression for the lowest castes.

In Kerala, because of such democracy struggles, the state has played a significant role in building the human development model, and it has also contributed to new material cultures of consumption. Here, measures like the most extensive land reforms in South Asia and other redistributive measures laid the basis for the welfare state as

Census, Hindus constitute 54.7 per cent, Muslims 26.6 per cent and Christians 18.4 per cent; SCs comprise 9.5 per cent and Scheduled Tribes 1 per cent. Among the Hindu castes, in terms of population, besides the SCs, the main communities are Ezhavas/Thiyyas at 21.5 per cent and Nairs at 12 per cent. Brahmans, the highest caste in the social hierarchy, constitute only 1.2 per cent (Zachariah 2016, 29). Nairs were ranked below the Brahmans (Fuller 1976, 12). The 'upper' (or forward) castes are known as *savarna* or caste Hindus, and the 'Untouchable' SCs (politically, Dalits) outside the four-fold *varna* (Brahmin, Kshatriya, Vaishya, and Shudra) system are termed *avarna*, or without caste. In the Kerala context, the Dalit castes were also subjected to agrestic slavery. In real social conditions, these classifications have variations. Thus, the term *savarnas* excludes not just the Dalits but also the Shudras. And Ezhavas/Thiyyas in Kerala were considered as 'polluting' and experienced Untouchability like the Dalit castes, although they were ranked higher than the Dalits (Gough 1961, 313–15). Caste is a stark reality among Christians and Muslims as well. Almost 80 per cent of Christians belong to the upper castes, who follow the Syrian rites (Zachariah 2016, 29) and were historically considered superior to the polluting Hindu castes. Muslims in Kerala (who also have caste-like hierarchies within the community) are administratively a part of the Other Backward Classes (OBCs).

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well as the consumption model. Consumption patterns have been shaped by the forces of modernization since the latter half of the nineteenth century when the Travancore princely state (one part of present-day Kerala) embarked on its 'unique nationalist developmentalism', which expanded education and health gradually (Devika 2010). Even in the 1960s and 1970s, before the inauguration of neoliberalism in India, and the effects of Gulf migration were felt in Kerala, government programmes like the promotion of family planning offered as incentives consumer goods like wristwatches, radios, and so on to the poor (Devika 2002).

An interesting facet of Kerala is the fact the rural-urban difference in consumption expenditure is one of the lowest in the country (Rajan 2011). In 1960–61, the gap was 50 per cent, reducing to 22 per cent, while the gap between rural and urban India increased from 42 per cent to 88 per cent in 2011–12. In 2019, the gap was nearly 90 per cent at the all-India level, while it was around 43 per cent in Kerala. Kerala has the highest number of people in the top expenditure category in rural South India (Talwar 2010; exchange4media 2019). Among the factors contributing to this are the faster development of rural infrastructure since 2000, the inauguration of a state-led democratic decentralization programme since 1996, which devolved power and resources to local self-governments, and the emergence of new social groups like women's self-help groups focused on poverty alleviation (Padma et al. 2018, 805, 809, 810). In 2008, the government launched a housing scheme to build homes for 5,50,000 families below the poverty line (Chandran and Ajayan 2009), again demonstrating the role of the state in consumption.

The focus on eliminating poverty as well as raising consumption levels is very evident from the interviews conducted with eight women councillors of the Muvattupuzha Municipality (August 2017). The consistent themes that emerged were the huge demand for government-provided *aanukoolyangal* (welfare benefits) from the economically deprived. These included assistance for house maintenance, house construction, 'grow bags' for vegetable cultivation, cheap loans for rearing goats, and so on. One councillor recounted how the beneficiaries keep applying for provisions like house maintenance despite prior allocations. Besides, Kudumbashree (a women's self-help microfinance network which has acquired phenomenal levels of coverage with nearly 2,90,000 neighbourhood groups and 4.3 million members) provides easy access to small loans.[8] In the women's accounts, there is huge interest in Kudumbashree because of the access to loans. Reports indicate that it has gone beyond poverty alleviation to asset building and improving of financial status through small businesses run by neighbourhood groups (Varier 2016). Again, whether in local democratic bodies or in gender self-help groups, politics becomes focused on acquiring material goods or raising material standards of living rather than on social transformational goals. This is especially true in the de-radicalized phase of the communist movement in Kerala. Ideological struggles of politics in the past are increasingly giving way to the practical considerations of the consumer.

Devaki, a 68-year-old Ezhava woman and a manual labourer, describes that while she and her family have been communists all their lives, she voted for the Congress Party candidate in the last elections because the local member of the Legislative

[8]http://www.kudumbashree.org/pages/171, [accessed 11 November 2022].

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Assembly from the party sanctioned Rs 2,00,000 for the construction of a new house (after seeing the dilapidated state of her existing home) even though she was not technically eligible for it (interview, August 2017). Thus, the success of the welfare state has contributed to the new regime of consumption. 'Public and private sources of consumption' are related, just as the relation of the state to capital needs to be understood (Warde 2016, 4; Shove and Warde 1998, 3).

Intervention in the market to stabilize prices (especially of essential goods), protect the quality of goods, prevent shortages of goods during scarcity, and prevent exploitation by middlemen has a long history in Kerala. Here, cooperatives with values like self-help, mutuality, and participation were seen as crucial to negate the effect of the market (Nair and Moolakkattu 2015, 106). In 1946 there were already 1,669 cooperatives in the state. This had increased to 11,892 cooperatives by 2018. Since many cooperatives have government representatives in their governance structure, they are quasi-government cooperatives (Kuruvilla 2019). Further, the state helps the cooperative sector with various subsidies. While initially the cooperatives were operating in the area of credit, they gradually moved into other socioeconomic activities and set up in areas like marketing, consumption, housing, health, and so on (Nair and Moolakkattu 2015, 107). One-third of the state's population are members of cooperative societies and in categories like membership, deposits, and credits secured from cooperative societies, Kerala is ranked first in the country. Again, the importance of cooperative societies is seen in the fact that while Kerala has only 1.75 per cent of the total number of primary agricultural credit societies in India, it had a share of 37.45 per cent of the total deposits (Nair and Moolakkattu 2015, 107). Despite having only 2.5 per cent of India's population, 17 per cent of Keralites are members of cooperative societies (Kuruvilla 2019). The state set up an apex body of consumer cooperatives in 1965 called the Kerala State Co-operative Consumers' Federation Limited (known as Consumerfed). It procures consumer goods in bulk and supplies them to its own/affiliated or other cooperative societies. In addition to this, the government runs other consumer outlets through the Kerala State Civil Supplies Corporation (Supplyco), which was set up in 1974. These, as well as other retail outlets of government-controlled and other consumer cooperatives, number about 4,000 (Mathew and Sany 2018; Vijumon 2020, 191).

Even worker cooperatives foster consumption, and workers' credit features, like interest-free loans, are the key in building houses (Aravind 2019). Many cooperative societies, rather than being focused on production, are oriented towards personal consumption in areas like health and education (Nair and Moolakkattu 2015, 120). Government consumer outlets try innovative strategies to reach the consumers and compete with private players. Consumerfed, for example, launched a floating supermarket under its retail brand, which it claimed was the first of its kind in the world (*Economic Times* 2009). Supplyco opened mobile stores in 'backward' and relatively inaccessible regions of the state (*The Hindu* 2015). When Supplyco was set up to intervene in the essential commodities market and regulate the price of food articles, it was a pioneering effort. As one of its successful administrators in the early period argues: it 'became established as powerful instrument of public policy, for the first time in India' (*Newsclick* 2019). Later it diversified into non-food items, and today 37 per cent of its sales come from consumer goods (Mathew and Sany 2018, 5). Therefore, it has expanded from its primary goal of controlling the prices of essential goods

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(Mathew and Sany 2018, 6). What is interesting as well as important is that Supplyco does not just sell its own products, but also those of private companies, including multinational corporations (MNCs), demonstrating the link between the state and capital, private and collective consumption. Thus, it is critical to note that the state caters to meeting basic consumption needs like housing, food, education, health, and so on, but at the same time, also to consumption desires and goods beyond basic necessities.

The government's market intervention efforts, nevertheless, have not always been successful. The financial position of Consumerfed has not been sound recently and attempts to diversify into retail and manufacturing consumer goods met with uneven results (Nair 2015). Ironically, even when it made profits, they came from the sale of liquor ((*Economic Times* 2009). Similarly, Supplyco's finances themselves have deteriorated and since 2011 the state's subsidization of consumption has come in at a loss (Mathew and Sany 2018, 24) instead of the originally envisaged 'no profit, no loss' model which it achieved for many years. The pressure to be economically viable led it to move away from market intervention only and diversify by entering fields like the production of bottled water, ironically contributing to ecological destruction (Arapurakal 2019). But the deep penetration of the state into consumption activities shows how the concept of the welfare state has become so ingrained in the public consciousness. The communist-led government from 2016 declared that the prices of 13 essential goods would not be raised (Radhakrishnan 2019). The most recent and emphatic example of the welfare state's role in the constitution of the consumer is the government's push to 'fulfill the dream of secure housing for all in the state' by building around 4,00,000 homes. To this end, 2,26,490, houses have been built by August 2020 (*Newsclick* 2020).

Thus, the above reflects Castells' 'socialization of consumption' through 'various forms of collective, communal and cooperative organization' seen in social democratic societies in the West (Pahl 1978, 311). Yet, state-controlled retail is overwhelmingly dominated by private retail (Sany 2018). Studies show that while in terms of price, the former is far cheaper than the latter, the former becomes less competitive than private supermarkets in terms of factors like customer facilities and service, quality and availability of goods, and ambience (Vijumon 2013, 414).[9] This shows the dilemmas faced by state social democratic projects which are unable to compete with the market in terms of consumption.

Nevertheless, the above discussion should make it clear that the welfare state and the non-state sector outside the market in Kerala have played a significant role in fostering consumption, especially in basic goods for the lowest classes. But it has gone beyond basic goods as well. The links between the state and the market also break the binary between them.

The market and consumption

Beyond the state and civil society in terms of consumption, in the latest phase of development, the market, of course, is the key player. The market's nature also changes at different phases of capitalism. There is an increasing turn towards neoliberal policies

[9] But state-controlled retail outlets are preferred over the private sector margin-free stores (see below).

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by governments across the world, and their consecration as the hegemonic ideology of the times (Harvey 2005).[10] Kerala is not immune to these processes. There is an unleashing of consumerist aspirations and desires through market-led processes and a weakening of the socialist imagination (see Mannathukkaren 2010). A survey in 2016 showed a significant increase in the percentage of people supporting privatization, going up from 20 per cent in 2011 to 56 per cent, even as the percentage supporting the entry of foreign firms stayed more or the less the same, at 52 per cent (Ahmed 2016). This displays the contradictions of a society in which socialism/communism is still electorally strong but its ideology is undergoing drastic changes. This also leads to a contradictory approach to consumerism and market liberalization by the Left. On the one hand, it contests the market in the old revolutionary language and, on the other, it is forced to court big capital and promote consumption.

Rather than ideological contention between the state and the market, citizens are now focused more on the efficacy of the state and the market in the distribution of goods. Thus, whether privatization is preferred, or the state is, in the provision of services and goods, depends on their performance (Miller 1995, 11). These transformations have parallels elsewhere. The Comaroffs write about post-apartheid South Africa where market ideas replace socialist imaginations and personhood becomes constructed through consumption, unlike before when constraints, especially material ones, were the order of the day (Comaroff and Comaroff 1999, 293).

Consumption cannot be understood without considering the tectonic changes in consciousness that have happened under capitalism. This is where a distinction must be made between consumption of 'pre-modern' times and the present. Although capitalist-led consumption has been taking place for a few centuries, the acceleration from the latter half of the twentieth century, with different timelines in different locations, has been significant in an experiential sense for those experiencing the changes.[11] In Kerala (and India) post-economic liberalization is a major context. Describing the huge changes that have happened in Kerala in the last two decades, Georgekutty, a retired schoolteacher, tells me:

> During the past, people thought that life was not worth living… they were suffering, and they were not enjoying life. But now the young generation is telling their parents that life is not this, you live your life only once, so you should *live* it, even with meagre resources or the little resources that you have… not live like a villager who has not seen anything in the world… Now people's thinking has changed completely, they want to enjoy life, and they want to give the best education possible to their kids… they will sell properties and send their children for the professions they like… In the 60s, it was not like that, never… [emphasis added] (interview, May 2011).[12]

[10]This must be accounted for in a non-reductionist manner, unlike in many strands of the political economy (see Ong 2007).

[11]With an increase in purchasing power and the industrial capacity to produce goods on a mass scale, drastically new private consumption standards arose in the 1950s in the United States and the 1960s in Western Europe (Warde 2016, 1).

[12]Georgekutty, in his seventies, hails from a prominent upper-caste Christian family and has worked outside India.

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Here, one can see a few tropes that are critical to our discussion: development and modernity are articulated in reference to overcoming the status of being a villager. 'Enjoying life' and not postponing pleasures, as we will see below, becomes important and is a marked shift compared to before when not only was purchasing power low, but there was also wilful embrace of restraint and simplicity, especially motivated by religion, as in the case of the above informant.[13] One can see also that it is not just consumption that is at work but also aspects like providing education. But education is also the surest means to achieve higher consumption levels. This shows the connection between ideas of progress, development, and consumption. Nevertheless, what is crucial is how this is actualized in the specificities of different cultural locations and how the market becomes an aid in doing so.

These interlinkages are reinforced in other narratives. Sunil, a 45-year-old taxi driver belonging to the Ezhava caste, wants to send his daughter for a medical education to Lithuania (which has emerged as an affordable educational destination for Indian students) and is willing to spend Rs 20 lakhs on it by taking out a loan (fieldnotes, December 2018).[14] Something like this—sending a young woman, just out of school, to a faraway land on her own—would not have been easily conceivable even two decades ago, and is made possible by the expansion of the market, easy access to credit, and the furtherance of global connections. Similarly, the 'modern' plays an important role in consumption: 52 of the 100 houses surveyed emphasized the importance of modern facilities. Of course, this is not a homogeneous or uncomplicated modern that is being referred to here. Even as there are certain trends, which have a pan-class and pan-caste character, there are differences as well. Thus, the urge to create an identity of the modern was, unsurprisingly, pronounced among the most oppressed castes and classes.

Consumption is expressed through various modes like transient consumption (fashion, focused on the body, and so on), long-term consumption (land, housing), and consumer durables, which fall in-between transient and long-term consumption (Osella and Osella 1999, 991). Unlike the Osellas, I will argue (as we will see throughout the article) that the transient forms of consumption go beyond the young and those with low-status, and consumer durables go further than just domestic life in the Kerala of the present. In addition, long-term consumption like housing and land becomes more generalized across classes as an aspiration and is more realizable for the lower class with the increased push by the state to achieve housing for all.

My interview with a senior government official, Suresh, was interrupted by a lengthy conversation he had with a friend in the United States about the latest Blackberry and iPhone models that he wanted to buy (July 2010). Similarly, an interaction with a group of middle-class youngsters involved them discussing the security issues with Blackberries (fieldnotes, July 2010). Despite the fact that they were students who could not afford expensive phones, clearly phones were an aspirational item that

[13] If we go back to an earlier period in history, we can see the changing value system regarding consumption, which played out differently in different societies. From the European Renaissance, ideas of luxury and consumption of a grandiose nature, which had been looked down upon (unless for public purposes), began to take hold and by the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, they were not seen as a 'dangerous social disease' but as necessary for human advancement (Trentmann 2016, 32–43, 54).

[14] 1 lakh =1, 00, 000.

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they wanted to purchase and that were accessible to others in society. A medium-sized town like the fieldwork location has car shopping festivals, while the whole of Kerala had an annual Grand Kerala Shopping Festival, started by the government in 2007 to turn the state into an international shopping destination. The festival termed itself as 'Asia's Largest Shopping Festival'. According to its website, 'This mammoth shopping event has transformed God's Own Country into a hub for an international shopping experience.' [15] The festival was targeted at international tourists, local producers, and consumers. It was modelled on the successful Dubai shopping festival and ran for nine editions, before it was discontinued, one of the reasons being the losses incurred by the government (Radhakrishnan 2016).

If the state constituted an important entity in the creation of the modern consumer, it is the market that has acted as a catalytic force in the acceleration of consumption. The state, again, is forced to increasingly foster market-led consumption and consumer desires (and not just basic needs), like in the example above of the Shopping Festival. What must be emphasized is that it was a communist-led government that launched the festival, in line with collective consumption that we have discussed. Again, the state versus market binary, when it comes to consumption, is bridged.

In the Indian scenario, Satish Deshpande contends that in the early years of nationalism in the first decade of the twentieth century, foreign goods were boycotted, and the meaning of consumption was subsumed under within the idea of patriotic self-sacrifice. But under market-led globalization, consumption acquires a new meaning through the 'projection of India onto the global stage'. From the Nehruvian socialist and nationalist citizen engaged in nation-building, Deshpande traces the shift to the 'cosmopolitan consumer' represented by the affluent Non-Resident Indian (NRI) (Lukose 2005a, 933, 918). In the changed context of neoliberalism, the market imposes new constraints, putting even the welfare state in Kerala under strain. The kind of pressures that this placed on the youth is exemplified in the following quote by Rajan, a senior state-level Communist Party of India (Marxist) (CPM) leader, about students being caught in the student-debt-and-consumption regime which gathered more strength in the 2010s because of the increasing numbers of students seeking expensive education outside the country, as in the example above:

> Today, there is too much of social pressure. Back in the day, nobody thought of having a car or building a house before getting a job… Now, 60–70 per cent students are burdened with debts for studying in professional courses. At the age of 22, when they pass out, they will start paying back. This problem was not there before. There was no fear that life would collapse (interview, March 2013).

Consumption itself thus acquires new meanings through various stages of history, including under capitalism. It also undergoes transformations in scale, especially with neoliberal capitalism, the latest phase of the market, which has given consumption radically new dimensions. Tracing these shifts is to understand the long-term nature of transformations, and that there are also distinctive leaps within them.

[15] http://www.shoppingfestival.in/, [accessed 11 November 2022].

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Local, national, and global capital

We have seen the role of the non-market sector as well as the market in consumption so far. In this and the next section, I further outline the different kind of material and ideational changes that have taken place in the last three decades, especially in the 2010s, brought about predominantly by the market. What is interesting is the nature of the circulation of capital in fostering new cultures of consumption in Kerala.

The first self-service department store in Muvattupuzha, called a 'Margin-Free Market' store, was opened by a struggling young businessman, Mathan, in 1997 as a franchise. This was around the time when the concept of margin-free stores was conceived of in Kerala by a private charitable society called the Consumer Protection and Guidance Society in 1994. It had the aim of 'sensitizing consumers about the food items they eat and giving them consumer products at lowest prices'.[16] It later claimed that it 'radically changed the consumer concepts of ordinary people of Kerala, giving them more control over their money'.

Keeping in line with collective consumption that we looked at, around the same time, a farmers' cooperative society called the Pala Marketing Cooperative Society Ltd. started the Sulabha supermarkets in Kerala, including one in Muvattupuzha. About its first outlet, it says, 'Sulabha Supermarket is the first ever modern self-service department store in Kerala, aspiring after world standards. Spread over an area of 4000 sq. feet, fully air-conditioned and tastefully decorated, displaying more than ten thousand different products, Sulabha has set a new style in shopping.'[17] The key words in these descriptions are about radically changing consumer notions: 'modern', 'aspiring after world standards', and 'new style in shopping'. Later, by the 2010s, these changes acquired a new character, and two of the largest retail chains in the country opened supermarkets in the town, Reliance Fresh of Reliance Retail and More of Aditya Birla Retail. The latter closed because of a lack of business, while the other is flourishing and has expanded into a much bigger space.[18] Both are owned by some of the biggest Indian multinational companies (MNCs).

Another one, the Al-Manama hypermarket, opened in 2016. It was owned by a UAE-based group established by a Keralite which has had extensive experience in setting up and running hypermarkets in the UAE.[19] In 2018 a Walmart-style hypermarket, owned by the Bismi Group, which is a Kerala-based retail chain with 14 hypermarkets across the state, was established. Chicking was started by another UAE-based group, Al Bayan. It is owned by a Keralite who started his working life in the UAE doing menial jobs. Now, Chicking stores are found in eight countries with more than 100 outlets.[20] Besides this,

[16] https://www.mfreem.com/html/The-Company.html, [accessed 14 November 2022].

[17] Pala Marketing Co-operative Society, https://web.archive.org/web/20220000000000*/http://palamarketing.com/sulabha.html, [last accessed 26 August 2018].

[18] The new location has 19,000 square feet area in the mall; the previous one was only 7,000 square feet. According to Ajmal,* the president of the Muvattupuzha Merchants' Association, the More store was small and did not stock many goods. 'They did not concentrate on the store, and as a result this branch shut down' (interview, August 2017).

[19] https://web.archive.org/web/20180815021923/http://www.almanamagroup.com/, [accessed 30 November 2022]. It was the biggest self-service grocery and consumer goods retailer for a while before it closed in 2018.

[20] See the website of the Al Bayan group: http://www.albayangroupuae.com/backgrounder.html, [accessed 14 November 2022].

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Figure 1. The first full-fledged mall in the town. *Source:* The author, 2016.

another supermarket, concentrated on food retail, was looking to open a branch.[21] The most important development was the construction of the first full-fledged mall in the town in 2016, the Grand Centre Mall (where some of the hyper/supermarkets above are located), built by a local businessman, Ullas* (see Figure 1). The first mall in Kerala was built in 2009. The Lulu International Shopping Mall in Kochi claimed to be the largest in the country at the same time (*The Hindu*, 2013). A relatively small metropolis like Kochi, in a social-democratic state like Kerala, boasts eight malls—and there are more under construction. As one of the promoters of the malls put it in 2013: 'We have selected Kochi for the project as the city has much potential for shopping malls' (Krishnan 2013). Ullas points out:

> After Kochi, ours is the first mall in a 3-tier city in the district. Two might come up in Thodupuzha [neighbouring town]. 35 malls are being built in 3-tier cities. Our mall has an area of 1,65,000 sq. feet. Actually, we don't need so much space in

[21]One of the retail stores in the town owned by a prominent business family has a shop with three floors of the latest home appliances.

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> a small town. We need only 80–1,00,000 sq. feet…We have 5000 walk-ins on weekdays, and on weekends, 7–12,000… The idea was to target the catchment area of surrounding small towns. We have enough population… (interview, August 2018).

The new material realities, including malls, sought to be ushered in by the activities of local, regional, national, and multinational (and non-resident Keralite) capital. One of the most significant changes in the 2010s compared to the 2000s and 1990s is that regional Kerala capital has expanded to become global (like its presence in the Middle East and also its collaboration with foreign capital) and non-resident Kerala capital is being used in the inauguration of new consumption spaces. This also shows the linkages of Kerala with the Persian Gulf countries, which has been a reality since the 1970s, and the significant role they play in the movement of people, ideas, goods, and capital. In the period 2014–15 to 2017–18, Kerala was second in the country in attracting foreign direct investment (FDI) from Non-Resident Indians, and the Rs 902 crore that came in constituted 18 per cent of the total investment in the country (Jadhav 2019).

Small local business is also facing pressure and is being pushed out by bigger capital, as Ajmal states.[22] But it is important not to homogenize local businesses either. The Merchants' Association has different categories of businesspeople and, as Ajmal states, the bigger ones are able to go to places like China to procure goods. According to Ullas, 'Reliance Trendz [a clothing store owned by big national capital] in the mall sells Rs. 75–80 lakhs monthly [quite a substantial amount]. It will affect local businesses, and readymade shops.' Mathan, the owner of the first department store, Margin-Free, also contends that he had to close after being in business for 12 years as he could not compete with the big department stores, their corporate strategies (even unethical ones), and their economies of scale:

> People began to move away from buying only cheap goods. With Reliance, people's concept began to change. Margin-Free was a concept based on cheaper goods. That changed to a concept based on a corporate lifestyle; prices were not important; they were looking for a setup like AC [air-conditioned] stores. Reliance used strategies like '3+1 free offer', but charged for 4 items (interview, August 2018)!

The pressures faced by small shops are further highlighted by Ajmal who points to the irony of small shops buying goods from Reliance and stocking them in their stores because it is cheaper than procuring them from the distributors! According to him:

[22]This does not mean that the expansion of department stores automatically leads to the decline of small family-run shops and cooperative store. This must be assessed empirically in every location. In the early twentieth century when numbers of department stores increased, small shops also multiplied (Trentmann 2016, 205). According to Avaran, the owner of a local family-owned grocery, the opening of the More store (opposite his shop) has not necessarily affected his business (fieldnotes, December 2018). The USP of these shops is the fact that you do not have to pay for the goods you buy immediately. Many of them also deliver the purchases to the customers' homes. Many other shops selling construction material, sanitary ware, and electrical goods, all offer credit and still work on face-to-face interactions.

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'Everybody is looking at profit… It has changed our consumer style and culture.' In the new conjuncture of consumption, it is not only about prices, as Mathan suggests above, but also about factors like the shopping experience itself. Here the critical words in his account are shoppers wanting a 'corporate lifestyle'. As we saw, state or cooperative-led supermarkets are unable to compete with big capital-owned supermarkets because the latter are able to provide customer-friendly services like parking, seating, water and toilet facilities, speed in billing, cleanliness, attractive displays, and space (Vijumon 2013, 365). And all these spaces are a distinct product of the 2010s when air-conditioned supermarkets emerged.

New trends emerge, like dedicated stores for children, again unprecedented, when a national chain opened an outlet in the town in the early 2010s. This reflects the changes that are happening in the national space post the opening of the economy in 1991. Thus, small towns are increasingly constituting a significant part of the national market. As a report puts it: 'Some years ago, the kids-wear market in India was disorganised with local retailers serving the masses in back-alleys. After the entry of foreign players, family-owned stores, denim makers and casual apparel makers diversified into the kids wear to capture the market's share' (Kaur 2011). But local capital, again dependent on its size, has different kinds of relationships with foreign or national big capital, rather than just a contradictory or hostile one. Ullas welcomed big capital (despite low rents and it dictating terms) in his mall because of its ability to cope with losses, long-term security, and brand value, unlike local business.

The criterion here is who can offer the better terms, rather than local versus the outsider. At the same time, there are (rare) instances of local capital aspiring to become global. This is demonstrated by the example of Dentcare Dental Lab, a manufacturer of dental prostheses (which itself becomes a part of cosmetic consumption as well), located in the town, and which, according to the owner, John,* is ranked number one in Asia and number two in the world. He proudly describes the process through which a small enterprise 30 years ago has now become one of the well-known Kerala brands which has over 3,400 employees. He constantly emphasizes the clinical precision, rivalling any capitalist firm of the West, with which his products are made (interview, August 2017).

Here, one can see echoes of the informants in the Osellas' (2006, 582) account, who do not see themselves as 'passive objects of global forces' but agents 'within the global story of modernity and progress'. But, I argue, it is important not to valorize this agency, including in consumption regimes. While the actors in the research location are agents and participate in global processes, it does not mean that the agency of different individuals/groups is equal either within the nation or with that of others in centres of global economic production. The accounts above of Mathan and Ajmal show the inequalities of the small retailer even vis-à-vis big national capital. And the accounts in the following sections will tell us about the differentiated nature of agency in consumption.

Thus, there is no homogenous capitalism or a simplistic global versus local in capital activity in consumption, but a layered context in which different types of capital are at work which collaborate or contest with each other, and with different kinds of power. New material infrastructure for consumption becomes reality through such operations.

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Multi-directionality of consumption

If different forms of capital have ushered in the present material conjuncture of consumption, the discourse of consumption has been influenced by a variety of cultures: local, national, and global. This shows that the increased interlinkages between cultures made possible by the market are one of the main features of consumption in the present.

In Kerala, as in India, consumption of a particular kind of aesthetics already fashioned by the West has a huge impact on the organization of the material. Thus, with increasing penetration of the market, new material and spatial experiences of modernity and consumption emerge, like hypermarkets, malls, fast-food restaurants, even in a three-tier city like the fieldwork location. The analysis of 100 middle/upper-class homes gives an indication of the impact of Western, especially North American, standards—like big houses, upper-middle and upper-class houses having both formal and informal living and dining rooms, two cars, and so on—which are a new development in the last two decades or so. This applies to having two kitchens as well. The formal kitchen, living rooms, and dining rooms are for entertaining guests and for display, while the informal ones are for daily use. Italian marble is a common feature. Spanish roofing, tiles imported from Portugal, classic European kitchens, colonial-style homes, French-style mansions, Scandinavian interior art, Mexican grass, novel ideas like gazebos, gated communities, and walk-in wardrobes become a part of the vocabulary of architecture in the present. We are greeted by descriptions like 'Yes, this elegant house is indeed in Kerala, not in Europe', 'The American House is grabbing eyeballs', and how the home builder 'instantly fell in love with the suave colonial houses in Europe during a tour' to inspire his choice.

The names of some new commercial businesses which have come up in recent years in the town again demonstrate an imagination that aspires to be a part of global/Western modernity: 'Cafe Browni', 'Canton Mall', 'Girl', 'Dress Up', 'Oven Fresh', 'Chicken Chicago', 'Cowboys', 'Dental Horizon', 'Glitzy Girl', 'La Moda', 'L'ame', 'Hail', 'Just Look', 'Chaplin's', 'Casanova', and so on.[23] Hardly any of these would have been named in the native language or something that resonates with its own cultural background. That would connote inferiority or a lack of hipness, at least in this context (see Figures 2 and 4). There is thus the influence of the Western imagination. But crucially, it is interrupted and complicated by other foreign imaginations, and also local and regional ones.

Because of the close connections between Kerala and the Gulf states, and because of the large numbers of Keralites there since the 1970s, many Western ideas of a material modernity initially came through the medium of the Gulf. The proximity of Kerala to consumerist centres there fuelled a consumerist revolution, and things like plastic carry bags were introduced almost simultaneously to when they began to be available freely in high-income countries. Gulf migrants are the 'consumption vanguard', and 'the most conspicuous consumers' who introduced commodities and styles into the

[23]In the bigger cities and metropolitan centres of Kerala, this trend is accentuated further. Thus, the names of apartment complexes of private builders are almost universally in English: 'Bellevue', 'Ocean Grove', 'Casa Grande', 'Picasso Palette', 'The Portico', and 'Patio' are a few examples.

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Figure 2. A boutique's name plays on the word 'days' and calls itself a 'pitstop'. *Source:* The author, 2018.

village space (Osella and Osella 1999, 1007). Vijayan, a 53-year-old architect from a well-to-do Ezhava family, tells me that he did contract work for the Dubai Terminal Airport. He used to go to Dubai for the work while still being based in the town (interview, December 2011). Work experience in the Gulf comes up regularly in the accounts of young lower-class men who go there to work as drivers, barbers, mechanics, and in other working-class jobs. But in the era of expanding global interconnections, the ideas around consumption are not just Western or those of the Gulf but span different regions. China, given its status as the emerging superpower and its proximity to India, emerges as a major source of consumer goods and ideas. A few of the houses studied had furniture imported directly from China. But there were also items from other developed nations of East Asia, like Malaysia, Indonesia, and South Korea. Thus, there is a multi-directionality to consumption, rather than just a Westcentric one.

Many commodities are based on the 'free-floating signifiers of the global culture industry' and are not always referring to particular cultural imageries of the West (Lee 1994, 29). Yes, of course, in certain aspects, as we saw, the West is still idealized as the epitome of development and modernity and is the most preferred destination for

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emigration (and new locations like the English-speaking, 'white' countries of Canada, Australia, and New Zealand) for the upper and middle classes, while the Gulf countries have become passé (despite the substantial numbers of immigrants there) in the present as many informant accounts emphasize.[24] Thus, there is a drastic shift from the Gulf as the main imaginary of consumption. In the field, when it comes to retail food spaces, there are fast-food outlets styled on iconic American brands like KFC which have emerged in the town from the late 2000s.[25] These are expensive outlets when compared to traditional restaurants and are more accessible to the middle and upper classes, but remain as a source of aspirational modernity for the lower classes. The ergonomics of these is distinctly borrowed from the West/developed countries, with features like play areas for children which are not a part of traditional eateries. The new department stores in Muvattupuzha also have the same global features, such as shelves to keep belongings, acceptance of credit/debit cards (quite a shift from before), uniformed staff, and so on.

The emergence of fast-food outlets is also a reflection of the changing food habits from traditional nutrient-rich foods to modern processed foods (Rosemma 2012 in Padma et al. 2018, 801). Further, there is a shift to frozen foods. As Ajmal explains: 'earlier, you would not get meat after 7–8am. Now, after the emergence of malls, you don't have to worry; 24 hours, and even in the night you can buy. Earlier, the meat was sold fresh. Now it is stored for 3–4 days.'

As noted, it is important to understand the material infrastructure of new retail spaces of shopping built in the last three decades in the town. The organization of the outlets is again standardized and reflects global trends. Items like olive pickles (quite a novelty in the area and imported from outside) and frozen food items arrived with these trends. The distance travelled from the mid-1990s when something like Maggi tomato ketchup was a new item in the fieldwork village of the Osellas (1999, 1007) can be observed. Then there are new items like Christmas trees which were not available before. The oldest bakery in town has moved from a traditional format to adding a coffee shop. Or there is the adoption of styles from outside like the serving of Arabian/Middle Eastern-influenced food items like grilled chicken (*Al Faham)* or shawarma.

The new material cultures brought about because of heightened consumption are a mélange of different influences—foreign, Western, national, and so on—rather than a simple homogenization across spaces (see, for an early statement in the 1990s, Appadurai 1990).[26] The cultural specificity that emerges in consumption is one marked by the combination of modernity and tradition. The emphasis on the modern that we saw before in the building of homes, for example, is accompanied by the simultaneous adoption of traditional motifs and practices like *padippura* (arched gateway), *thulasi thara* (sacred stone platform in front of upper-caste traditional houses on which the

[24]In the last decade, increasing number of non-elite migrants are also travelling to Western countries through professions like nursing or for education. This also affects the former exclusivity of American/European emigration.

[25]The outlet called Chicking set up two branches.

[26]In the Kerala context, the influences are not just global, but also national, whether in regard to dresses that come to Muvatttupuzha from other Indian big cities like Mumbai or Bengaluru, or the home builders who go to other Indian states to source material from there.

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holy basil plant is grown), *naalukettu* (quadrangular shaped-house with a central courtyard of the upper-castes), and *vastu shastra* (traditional Hindu architectural science). Thus, we find descriptions of the houses surveyed like 'blend of traditional charm and modern facilities', 'modern luxuries', 'syncs modernity with traditional charm', and so on. The combination of a variety of cultures and traditional and modern elements in consumption shows the mixed nature of modernity, while the different kinds of capital and the new shopping infrastructure built in the current conjuncture of consumption demonstrate the nature of material convergence that is taking place.

Despite some parallels between Kerala and the national sphere in consumption, the transformations are not entirely similar for nationalism-inflected (especially Hindutva or Hindu nationalism) consumerism; this does not have much of a purchase in a subnational region with a different linguistic identity to a Hindi-language dominated national culture as well with a different political culture.[27] The strong fusing of (Hindu) religion and consumption, which Sanjay Srivastava observes in North India, is also not particularly salient in Kerala, even when religious consciousness is still strong. There, neoliberal capitalist consumerism is not opposed to religion, but the latter provides the grounds for consumerism. He calls this 'moral consumption' (Srivastava 2017, 111). Ironically, there is no emphatic evidence of a consumption moulded by Hindu nationalism even in the state of Gujarat, one of the centres of Hindu nationalism in India, as Wessel shows about middle-class consumption in Baroda. She argues that, in contrast to the theorists who propose 'the nation as middle class/the middle class as the nation' theory, the nation did not play a role in the imagination of middle-class identity (Wessel 2004, 110).

Similarly, when it comes to other locations of the Global South, like Nepal, middle-class consumption, on the one hand, wants to save a traditional morality from its corruptions by the urban poor and, on the other, wants to establish a modern lifestyle with Nepali characteristics of restraint in contrast to the elite consumerism marked by excess and foreignness (Liechty 2003, 61). Again, while there are elements of the combination of tradition and modernity, and the selective borrowing from the West in the imaginary of upper and middle-class consumption in Kerala, there are no substantive dilemmas about foreignness or attempts to bring about restraint in consumption.

Thus, just like the circulation of capital, the ideational aspects of consumption are sourced from multiple cultures caused also by increased mobility, and there are unifying and differentiating elements with consumption imaginaries elsewhere.

Material security and 'excess'

If there is a shift in the materiality and the culture of consumption and its sources, we now turn to some of the important ways in which informants further experience these shifts. As I have argued, rather than a simple transition to materialism or consumerism, the meanings of these changes must be understood. The shift to a wide availability of various kinds of goods has been crucial. In fact, this is a fundamental feature in the narratives. While consumption has always existed, the informants themselves feel an

[27] Hindi-language films from the 1990s exemplify this melding of global capitalism and nationalism, and commodification and diasporic nationalism (see Rajadhyaksha 2003; Basu 2010; Mannathukkaren 2022).

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enormous shift in the way they relate to consumer goods now, compared to a time when goods were scarce. But this is also experienced differently according to caste, class, and gender categories, even when there are some features that cut across these categories and are experienced in the same way.

Values of thrift, sharing, reusing, and conservation have been upended by a use-and-throw-away culture. As Geetha, a 45-year-old working woman from a middle-class Nair family, explains:

> When we were young, our parents used to only buy stuff that we need badly. We never used to waste. Now, it has become a fashion that after we get the salary, we go and buy a lot of stuff. So much is wasted. Earlier, waste was less. There was no fridge. We only made food that was necessary, so never stored it… Rice, etc. are wasted now; earlier you gave them to the cow or some animals at home… (interview, December 2018)

Although consumer durables like refrigerators have been around for a long time, as we will see below, their use was limited in the past. The idea that food was never wasted, with leftovers fed to animals, emerges in other narratives as well. There was a tone of loss in Geetha's account, despite her well-to-do status:

> Both my parents had jobs, yet we lived modestly. Besides, we lived in a joint family, if we bought something, we had to buy for everybody. We used to buy clothes, etc. only once during Onam [the biggest regional festival of Kerala of Hindu origin]. Then the young children used to wear second-hand ones handed down from the older children. My sister used to wear my clothes. But my younger daughter refuses to do that.

The circular economy again features here where goods are reused. And the constraints on consumption imposed by living in a joint family are removed with the nuclearization of families.

Benny, a 40-year-old Christian man from a well-off background who works in low-status and low-paid jobs, says, in a critical tone, 'today children play "five-star model games," they would not even know what marbles are. My small children are already on cycles whereas I did not get to ride one even in the 10th [grade]. Kids are happy with bikes and cars now, and mobiles' (interview, May 2013) (see Figure 3). What is interesting is that both Geetha and Benny are in their forties and yet have experienced drastic changes, showing the importance of the recent period.

The shift in consumption is, unsurprisingly, more consequential for those at the bottom of the hierarchy. Radha, a 50-year-old Dalit woman who worked as an agricultural labourer and who lived in grinding poverty in her younger days, recounts:

> Then, we used to eat anything, mostly tapioca. There was no order like now of breakfast, lunch, and supper. Snacks were also very rare. Now children eat only snacks, drink tea etc. Fish was plenty, especially dry fish. Father used to catch fish from the river. Only later, sea fish came… There is so much of improvement

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Figure 3. New forms of entertainment for children in the town. *Source:* The author, 2018.

> economically. Those days, I used to suffer a lot. It was a daily struggle to meet ends (interview, August 2018).[28]

Here, the advancement in human and economic development confers some degree of material security and respite from suffering on those who were oppressed economically and socially under feudalism. Yet, even for the upper classes, despite the absence of any prior difficulty in material circumstances, there was not an abundance of goods. Elsamma, a 65-year-old Christian woman from an upper-class family, recounts that

[28]She was part of a family of eight children, and the parents died early. She experienced the remnants of feudal relations in land and worked during a time when wages were paid in kind.

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many items, like bakery products, despite being affordable, were such a sought-after thing, looked forward to in visits to others' homes. The market had not intruded into many areas of consumption. As a result, all the food was prepared at home, and many items were grown at home (interview, August 2018). The same was the reality for the well-off Georgekutty and Biji, a 40-year-old middle-class woman of the Nair caste, working in the finance sector. Georgekutty emphasizes: 'It is not like the present generation who have good meals and enjoy good food. It was not like us in the past.' And Biji, despite being only 40-years-old, remembers never buying chilli powder as chillies were ground 'on the traditional stone at home'. The present era emerges as distinct in an experiential sense. Biji wistfully says: 'Now, we have to go to the market' for everything (interview, December 2018).

Subsistence consumption predominates in the narratives about the past, more so among the lower classes, whether from Devaki[29] or Mariamma, an 80-year-old Christian woman from a lower peasant family (interview, April 2013). It was all about cultivating everything at home, including vegetables and fruits like banana, tapioca, jackfruit, yam, eggplant, sweet potato, and so on. As Devaki puts it: 'It was only when I was married and came to my husband's house here in the town, I saw snacks [bought from the bakery] for the first time.' The fundamental shift is from the reliance on an agrarian economy in which substantial consumption was from subsistence production. The fast-paced development under capitalist modernity is unmistakable. As Mariamma points out: 'Compared to the past, there are a lot of conveniences, there are roads, hospitals… Today's is the "computer age," there are phones, mobile phones, internet, etc. So those things are good, and standards of life have gone up.' Here, again, for a person belonging to the lower economic strata of society, there is a satisfaction at the availability of certain material comforts, unlike before. But the appreciation of these comforts comes with the caveat that 'people also have changed a lot' with a focus on material acquisitions leading her to the conclusion that 'the world has become an artificial place'. And that, possibly, 'the olden days were better despite the fact that there were no amenities'.

The theme of exploding meat consumption is one that is universal, and across informants and classes. Elsamma says that her upper-class family used to eat chicken only once a month and there was no broiler chicken. As Beevi, an 85-year-old Muslim woman who was born in a small peasant family, puts it, 'those days, we never used to eat meat regularly. Occasionally, when there was a special occasion, one calf was killed for a few families, and each used to get a *panku* [share]. Now, there is meat aplenty…' (interview, December 2011).[30] But, again, Beevi's account, like Mariamma's above, while noting the improvement in material standards ('Those days, there were severe economic difficulties. Now it is better, it is better, and there are all kinds of facilities') is ultimately of the opinion that the olden days were 'undoubtedly better'.

[29]Her father was a toddy-tapper from a lower peasant family who owned small amounts of land, and worked for the big, landed Christian and Nair families in Muvattupuzha. She did not see any poverty in childhood.

[30]Rising meat consumption has parallels to earlier developments in Europe (Trentmann 2016, 339), but this is also a characteristic of Kerala society where, besides Christians and Muslims, even upper-caste Hindus, unlike in other parts of India, already used to consume the meat of cows.

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For, she poses the question, 'what is economic betterment if there are no values attached to it?' She sees the explosion of consumption being accompanied by a rise in selfishness and changes like excessive meat consumption leading to diseases. The availability of frozen meat makes it easy to buy it at any time, but there is a constant anxiety and fear about its 'artificiality' (this time not about human relationships) and contamination, besides dissatisfaction with the changed taste and lack of freshness.

The new cultures of consumption also bring forth new socialities. As Ajmal explains: 'Before you would have everybody gather and make food. Now on weekends, you go to malls. Even children are adapting to that: go to Chicking, go to a theatre.' With the availability of prepared food to buy or the option to eat out in restaurants, the amount of time spent on making food together has decreased. The most drastic change has been in the preparation of food for weddings and family events, which used to be done at home even until the 2000s. Now, it is almost completely catered out, even by lower-income households.

Then, there are other aspects like 'Gulf Syndrome' in which the aspirations for mobility, commodities, and so on put pressure on people to migrate to the Gulf for work. This leads to the breaking apart of families and the separation of men from their spouses and children, with severe psycho-social consequences (Lukose 2009, 52). Even without migration, new consumption trends like big houses influence family relationships. As Usha, a 40-year-old woman who is a political activist and local councillor, comments, 'my friends who have big houses with two-three floors say that it is better not to have a big house as people do not see or talk to each other' (interview, August 2017)! These demonstrate the ambiguities of heightened consumption and the complex interactions between the modern and traditional.

Goods are bought not only for the comforts that they afford or the labour they save, but also because of social pressures on consumption. As Geetha puts it:

> we have washing machine, grinder/blender, fridge, television, now we have everything. It is only one year since I started using the washing machine. But it is better to wash on stone. It is only because of a physical ailment that I do not use the stone. I have a vacuum cleaner also; but have never used it. It is easier to clean without it!

There is a recognition that the older, more labour-intensive modes of household work, while physically taxing, are better in ensuring quality of work. The structural changes in society, including the breakdown of the joint family, feudal relations, decline of agriculture, and related activities like raising animals, and so on, which produce new material conjunctures of consumption, are evident here. But these are not experienced in a linear fashion as unmitigated material progress or development, demonstrating the need to understand the meanings of consumption and the contradictions inherent in them.

Increase in purchasing power and the 'loss of value'

There is one fundamental sense in which the new consumption regimes have been experienced, and I term this the concept of 'excess' (*amitham* is the Malayalam word

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used to mean 'more than what is necessary or desirable') and we saw glimpses of it above.

If expenditure on non-food items was 30 per cent of income in the early 1970s (Nithya 2013, 3522), it had increased to 59–64 per cent of income by 2007 in both the rural and urban areas of Kerala (Government of Kerala 2012).[31] Along with other factors, like the state- and non-market-led collective consumption that we noted, the most important factor here is the explosion of purchasing power following the economic and human development of the last three decades, transnational migration, and the opening of markets.[32] As Rajesh, a 55-year-old owner of a small mobile services shop from a Christian peasant family with reasonable economic security, put it, there was no access to money in his childhood, save for the occasion rupee received for the church festival, and which would be spent with one visit to the cinemas (interview, August 2017).

A restraint on spending, even in economically sound households, was common, as we saw in the narratives above. A sense of the value of money has been lost, as described in many accounts. According to Mathan, who speaks as a seller as well as a consumer, if his generation counted every item in a shopping receipt, the 'new generation' does not care to even look at the receipt. This is affirmed by the youth. As Sahir, a young Muslim and the owner of a boutique for women, states: 'Nowadays, customers don't bother about money' (interview, August 2018). Therefore, this places a lot of pressure on those who do not have enough economic resources to match up. Mustapha, a 40-year-old Muslim man from a poor family who worked in the Gulf for a few years, contends: 'When I left the Gulf, I was earning Rs. 20,000, but this is nothing for any family now in our place… For people who are doing better off, even Rs. 50,000 is not enough' (interview, May 2013). By giving me a breakdown of his monthly expenses, Rajesh concurs that for an 'average and decent life' a family would need at least Rs 70,000 per month.

Both these accounts also speak of the pressures faced by males who must conform to the role of 'breadwinners' in a patriarchal society. There is also the pressure exerted by the children on the parents not necessarily to emulate economically higher classes as much as to be on the same level as their peers in school (as in Geetha's and Benny's accounts before). As Rajesh points out:

> Now, children have a lot of money. We have to give this money to them. We cannot refuse. Once, I said to my daughter that your expenditure is increasing… She replied: 'why did you not send me to the local government school? Why did you send me to private school? That is why the expenses are more. Because my friends here are like that.' What she says is a fact. For the 'range' [*one's class and status position*] has changed. If we go to school here, you will see a lot of NRI [Non-Resident Indian] kids, vehicle businessmen's children, etc. Farmers do not

[31]To give a comparative perspective, in the mid-1950s, the Norwegians and the French spent around 45 per cent of their income on food. This had decreased to just 10 per cent in 2007 (Trentmann 2016, 339).

[32]The increase in disposable income has been cited as one of the most important factors in shaping consumption historically in the early stages of capitalism (Campbell 2005, 24). In cities of the Global South, like Kathmandu, between the 1960s and 1980s, foreign aid and trade led the city being 'drawn into a fast-growing cash wage and consumer economy' (Liechty 2005, 8).

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> have that kind of money… My son [for example] he uses only branded shirts. He wanted a motorbike after 6 months of college; so, I had to buy one… I cannot afford to send my children to Bangalore to study like many others.

The consumption that was undertaken only by NRI parents before now becomes generalized across groups of people who are not migrants (especially farming classes) and who do not have the same spending power. Rajesh then goes on to describe how one of his customers who works for a mere Rs 250 a day came to buy an internet connection with a monthly Rs 999 data plan for her son in Grade 12. Since he did not want to profit from her poverty, he counselled her that they did not need such an expensive plan. But they came back again: 'the children tell their parents that everything happens through the Internet'.

If Lukose focuses on the segment of the college-going youth and their engagement with consumption (see Lukose 2009), here, the role of children in shaping the new regime of consumption is evident. With the nuclearization of the family and with most families having two children, the social valuation of children has changed significantly compared to earlier generations. These processes are not just about consumption but are also bound together with modernization and development. Zelizer (1985, 11) has shown the dramatic changes that took place in the early twentieth century in the United States regarding children. If in the rural, agrarian economy, children were economically valued as labour, gradually there began to take place a 'sacralization' of children's lives in which they were valued for sentimental or emotional reasons, not economic ones. Thus, children essentially became 'priceless' (Zelizer 1985, 15). The same processes have taken place in India, especially Kerala, where a faster transition out of agriculture has taken place and which leads the country in human development. Rajesh's words above that 'we cannot refuse' the children denote this change, whereas in his time or that of other younger informants that we saw, it was possible to reject the demands of the children.

In a child-focused culture, considerable attention is paid to crafting the future of children as competitive, highly educated, and high-achieving individuals. But caste and class shape children and consumption. Thus, Radha points out: 'My aim was that my son should not suffer the way that I did. So, I have tried as much as possible to give him the basic things, not very luxurious stuff. He has not faced any difficulty like I did. But he never insisted on anything because he knows our circumstances.'

The pressures of the changed consumer culture to consume more than necessary or indulge in superfluous consumption are also highlighted by the narratives. As Ajmal explains:

> In the olden days, if we go to the grocery, we make a list and go. We buy those exact things and return. Now, if we go to the mall, it is not like that, we buy what we see. Even if go with a list, we don't just buy that. If we see an offer for two shirts with one shirt free, then we buy that. So, somebody who has no intention of buying a shirt will end up buying three shirts! With Horlicks, you get a comb free. Malayalis get attracted to things like that. You go with the intention of buying for Rs. 500, but end up buying for Rs. 5000… your budget is all screwed up. You will not be able to pay fees for the school after that. It is changing the mindset of the consumers.

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The lack of control or agency over shopping in the changed circumstances is a theme that is common to several narratives, showing that consumers do not always make rational decisions about choice. Mathan, like Ajmal, points out the exponential growth in customers' budgets since self-serve departmental stores came about, and he recounts how he once went to Al Manama 'to buy a bottle of sauce worth Rs. 70, and came back with Rs. 2000 worth [of] goods'!

Prices and discounts are still critical, but they are also complemented by the new aesthetics of the act of shopping itself, which we saw before with air-conditioned self-service supermarkets. This does not mean that people are always unwittingly duped into consuming more and more, and are mere automatons when it comes to shopping. It only shows that phenomena like consumption can only be understood by paying attention to both structure and agency.

Peter, who is 63-years-old and has worked as an office bearer of the Kerala Chamber of Commerce, links the rise in purchasing power to prosperity in the commercial agriculture sector, especially the boom in rubber in central Kerala from 2003 to 2013 (interview, February 2018).[33] According to him, this is more significant than the remittances of non-resident Keralites: 'In North Kerala, remittances made a difference, but remittances are mostly deposited in banks, or spent on houses. But if farmers have money, they will buy jeeps and so on.' Mathan also attributes the recent purchasing power rise to the real estate boom: 'Till 6 years ago, real estate was booming in Kerala. People started earning money without sweating a lot. During speculative booms, money becomes worthless. Money is valuable only when you earn it the hard way.' It is the tectonic shift to 'excess' that is experientially significant for the actors of the middle and upper classes.

For the lower classes, this operates differently. Razak, a 59-year-old Muslim man who grew up in a poor household with 10 children, contrasts then and now: 'we had no food, no clothes, I had to put a leaf on my head while it rained to go to school. Material conditions have improved very much' (interview, July 2013). Again, this is a marked change which affords some sense of dignity and security compared to the excruciating poverty experienced before. The same is narrated by Subeida, a 57-year-old Muslim woman from a low-income cluster in the town, who as a child, 'used to crave for a toy', but now 'every house has TV, internet, laptops, etc' (interview, June 2013). Remya, a 62-year-old Dalit-Christian woman whose parents were agricultural labourers who toiled under feudalism and had a family of nine children, is relieved to say: 'It is now that I am eating something decent…' (interview, February 2018). But the changing culture has an impact on the working classes or those cast out of mobility as, even when their lives have achieved a modicum of respectability, consumption standards continue to rise. This is because the saturation of conspicuous consumption items among privileged social groups or the ones that have acquired substantial mobility leads to rising inequalities with socio-economic consequences. As Radha puts it, because many people have modern standards of life, 'they don't necessarily like those

[33]He is a successful entrepreneur from a landed Christian family and is the owner of one of the first shops selling consumer goods (like refrigerators) in the town. In a similar vein, a new class of millionaire farmers/entrepreneurs who cultivated other cash crops like ginger came up in a short time (Munster 2015).

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who don't have these things'. By 2009–2010, Kerala had the highest levels of inequality among the Indian states (Sreeraj and Vakulabharanam 2016, 368, 381).

Thus, for the lower and poor classes, 'excess' is significant because even when they do not personally experience this excess in their own lives, they are hemmed in by a society in which aspirational standards have changed drastically. As Razak laments: 'But now there is economic and material excess, just too much. People are very self-sufficient and very well-to-do.' Here, 'questions like volume of consumption and distribution of access' (Evans 2019, 511) are especially important given the linkages between consumption and social stratification, and the restriction of still significant numbers of people to basic levels of consumption. The excess amount of goods consumed by particular groups of people thus have an impact on the common good.

Kerala, as noted, has similarities as well as divergences with other regions in India. It does have elements of moral discourse about consumption, which term it as 'debased materialism'. Wessel (2004, 95) refers to the fact that even when people see consumption as absolutely important to their culture, they reject its criticality to the making of their own personal lives. As Rajesh puts it, 'We are going towards this materialism stage' and Abdul laments: 'That is why society might degenerate.' For Georgekutty, it makes people 'look at everything with the mindset of "what can you bring back to me?"' But, in contrast to other locations in Kerala, the ambivalence is not just about consumption, but about modernity and development itself.[34] If in other locations in India, like Bangalore, the youth go in for 'particularly flagrant and visible forms of consumption', the older middle classes are less likely to do so, and the established middle classes are likely to look down upon the materialism of the nouveau riche (Nisbett 2007, 944). In Kerala, despite the generational differences and ambivalences, the older middle classes are not averse to visible consumption as we will see below.

Excess also produces other anxieties about consumption, this time regarding the practical problems generated by it. Mounting garbage is the one of the biggest problems that Kerala is facing in its development, as attested to by one of the leading environmental activists (C. Jayakumar,* interview, December 2010), as well as by women municipal councillors. Kerala generates 480 tonnes of plastic waste every day (Arapurakal 2019). We saw in Geetha's account how she contrasted the present and the past in terms of sharing, reuse of goods, and waste. As Usha Sasidharan,* the chairperson of the municipality put it, the government has made 'the liberation from garbage' its fundamental priority and has linked it with fostering good health (interview, August 2017). This is further evident from fieldwork where people face tremendous difficulties in disposing of non-compostable solid waste.

Through the discussion in this section, I have argued that the experientially significant breaks felt by informants in a couple of generations, or even one, demonstrate the need to understand the specificity of new consumption regimes under present-day capitalism and their meanings, whether it is excess or material security for the disadvantaged. These are shot through with dissonances. Both the upper and lower classes experience ambivalences about loss of community, artificiality in human relationships as well as food, and so on.

[34] I deal with this in detail in the larger research project of which this article is part.

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Consumption as a means for class and caste equality

Along with the material and ideational shifts in consumption, we have seen how consumption impacts on various social locations differently. The critical point is that the phenomenon of consumption cannot be unlinked from caste, class, and gender aspects. Mobility is a means to overcome poverty and is tied to aspirations for equality. This is especially prominent when it comes to caste-based discrimination and abjection.

Sebastian, a young driver who lives officially below the poverty line, dreams of building a house. For a house that would cost Rs 2–3,00,000, government assistance is about Rs 75,000 (interview, December 2010). In a house that government regulations dictate cannot be more than 450 square feet, he hopes to have two bedrooms, a living room, a kitchen, and so on, reflecting wider societal aspirations of what constitutes a basic living standard.[35] Aspirations such as owning property or a house and long-term consumer durable goods become generalized in a society in which there is such a high emphasis on consumption. The welfare state has played a huge role in this, as we noted, regarding the project of housing for all.

Rajan, a 50-year-old Christian sanitary-ware shop owner who started at the lowest levels as a menial worker and who hailed from a very poor family, built a four-bedroom house with all the standard fixtures, big rooms, shower cubicles, and so on. When someone commented to him that the space is accentuated because the house is on one floor, instead of the standard two, he replied, 'everybody says that; wonder why' suggesting that he was not involved in the planning process and went by what was fashionable (fieldnotes, September 2012). On the one hand, there is an emphasis on keeping up, to attain the standards necessary for a bourgeois life. On the other, in Kerala's historical context of severe caste discrimination and exclusion in terms of material circumstances, unquestionably consumption and materialism can act as a leveller and as an egalitarian impulse. Rajan's rise was looked down on by the elites in the town even though he was not from a lower caste. Thus, the objectification of human relations and the 'use of objects to generalize human characteristics and values' can also be seen as 'a progressive rather than a regressive tendency' for the 'use of persons to objectify moral projects often takes the form of essentialism and racism' (Miller 1995, 21–22). We can add caste discrimination to this.

Just as with the upper and middle classes we have seen before, the lower classes, who have worked or continue to work in the Gulf, have brought back ideas of consumption. Many of the informants have had some experience working in the Gulf, even if it was for a short period of time. Vinu, a 30-year-old Ezhava plumber, recounts how two of his siblings, despite their family being from a lower-class background (their father was a barber), made it financially because of their high-paying jobs (Rs 85,000 per month) in the Gulf. They have now built big houses (interview, July 2012). Rajan, the senior communist leader, describes the story of a comrade in his village who came from a poor family. He did not have enough land to cultivate and food to eat, and he had eight children. Yet as the children were able study in government schools, some of them managed to go to the Gulf. As he puts it, 'Now they have three cars, and are doing

[35]It is interesting to note that in the 1920s, the US Bureau of Labor Statistics had estimated that 2 bedrooms, a kitchen-dining room, and living room were considered the bare minimum for a decent and healthy lifestyle (Trentmann 2016, 246).

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well.' Here, one can see both the contribution of a welfare state, with a functioning public school system, and non-elite, subaltern migration to the Gulf to creating new consumption contexts.

In caste-governed patterns of mobility, Ezhavas have tried to emulate the leaders above them in education and consumption—Christians, as well as Nairs—while distancing themselves from the Dalit castes below in the field. Ezhava attitudes towards Dalits, barring a few exceptions, are extremely deprecatory. This is as much true of Ezhavas who are active members of the Communist Party of India (Marxist), despite the ostensible anti-caste agenda of communism. In other middle-status groups like Muslims, the same desire to distinguish themselves from the 'lower caste' Pulayas is overpowering. Koya, a 65-year-old Muslim who grew up in the low-income Muslim cluster of the town, states: 'Earlier, the Pulayas [a Dalit caste] would never dare to come in front of Christians, and Muslims, but now they will ride roughshod over you' (interview, June 2013).

The kind of styles of luxurious and 'modern' houses that rich Ezhavas have been able to build in the town and the impossibility of Dalits achieving the same indicate the distance that Ezhavas have travelled and the role of caste in modern development. This is clearly evident outside the town as well, in state-wide survey figures. In 2014, 52.6 per cent of Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes (SC/ST) and 45.9 per cent of Dalit Christians lived in 'poor' houses compared to 16.4 per cent of Muslims, 17.9 per cent of Nairs, 21.2 per cent of Syrian Catholics, and 23.5 per cent of Ezhavas (Zachariah 2016, 42).[36] In terms of other economic indicators like poverty measures, possession of household durables, fuel for cooking, remittances per household, educational level, and employment in government, upper-caste Syrian Christians were at the top followed by Brahmans and Nairs. At the bottom were Hindu Dalits, Christian Dalits, and other Hindu OBCs (Zacharia 2016, 48).

Thus, caste and class locations are hugely consequential when it comes to consumption. Remya, the Dalit-Christian worker, even now finds it difficult to raise funds to fulfil her dream of building a small house. She lives in a dilapidated and tiny rented house.[37] Radha, the Dalit worker, explains:

> We are living in a colony on a 3-cent land given by the Panchayat. House construction expenses were also given by the Panchayat. We built the house 20 years ago. We had got Rs.18,000 then. Now, you can get Rs. 2–3 lakhs from the Panchayat. But I cannot get that amount as it is only for people without houses. I can get only the maintenance amounts. Probably, it is around Rs. 75,000. I have to put in the rest, which is a steep amount. In the colony, many houses are with asbestos or sheet [for the roof]. My house has only 2 rooms and kitchen.[38]

This account demonstrates the criticality of 'collective consumption' and the state for the mobility in consumption of the lowest rungs of society. Even those Dalits

[36]Houses with mud walls and floors, and thatched roofs are classified as 'poor' (Zachariah 2016, 42).

[37]Dalit Christians and SCs and STs have the highest incidence of poverty, upper caste Christians and Nairs have the lowest, while Ezhavas are in the middle (Zacharia 2016, 21).

[38]An overwhelming number of Dalits in Kerala are segregated in government-built colonies with tiny plots of land. There are around 27,000 Dalit colonies (Semmalar 2018). Most of the Dalits in the colonies have daily-wage or small income jobs (Geetha, interview).

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who live outside colonies have modest houses built on tiny homesteads given by their erstwhile feudal lords, as is the case with Thankappan, an 80-year-old retired agricultural labourer, whose father was an agrestic slave (fieldnotes, October 2012). Generations of servitude do not make for easy mobility as his sons and daughters too have been employed in blue collar or lowly white-collar jobs. This is reflected in other Dalit accounts as well, like that of 40-year old Ammini, a local-level communist worker, whose grandfather was an agricultural labourer under feudalism, and Shashi, a 45-year-old from the Kerala Pulaya Mahasabha (a Dalit organization), whose parents worked in a feudal Nair household (interviews, August 2017 and December 2018). Fieldwork clearly demonstrates that it is only the present generation of Dalits that has been able to secure some form of higher or professional education and thus cut a path to mobility. But, as Shashi asserts, this is precarious as Dalit youth face immense difficulties in coping with higher education and thus drop out and take up manual jobs or low-end service jobs like catering at weddings to earn quick money.

Thus, despite the significant breaks and shifts in consumption that I have outlined, including the notion of excess consumption, it is important to recognize the continuities between feudalism and capitalism, tradition and modernity (not just in consumption imageries) when it comes to the lowest tier of society and the lowest castes in the social hierarchy and their abjection. Consumption thus has afforded different kinds of mobility for different social groups, and with varied consequences. The determination of class, to a large extent by caste, can also be considered a major lacuna of Kerala's famed social welfare and development model and as evidence of the incompleteness of its collective consumption.

Gender and consumption

Consumption is irretrievably marked by gender differences, just as gender interacts with class and caste. Despite the burgeoning consumption of modern goods and the incursion of material modernity, many pre-existing cultural norms of patriarchy and gender subordination persist, even when they acquire new forms. This is line with the admixture of the modern and traditional seen above and is one of the main features of consumption.

Of course, there is some expansion of women's freedoms through consumption. As Matthew and Goyari (2011, 127, 121) demonstrate, women's participation rate in the labour market is a big factor in the rising consumption of time-saving goods and services. The ownership of durable commodities like mixer grinders, washing machines, vacuum cleaners, and microwave ovens was higher among (middle and upper class) households where women worked outside the home. Non-durable goods, including 'ready to eat food', 'instant breakfast mixes', and 'semi-cooked' and 'frozen' food, are a part of this phenomenon, and their growth is seen in the field as well. As we saw before, with regard to Geetha's story, many kitchen consumer durables are bought not because they save labour time but because of social fashion, and older labour-intensive technologies of cleaning are preferred in terms of quality. But the gender angle is that the latter could also stem from the expectations of a 'good housewife' in a patriarchal society. Although this does not apply to Geetha herself as she lives in a nuclear family with her husband and children, such expectations are not an outlier, especially when younger couples live with older parents. This is seen, for example, in

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the household chore of cooking. While kitchen styles expand to include two kinds of kitchens, some of the informal kitchens incorporate traditional ways of cooking that use wood, demonstrating again the mixture of Western and traditional forms. These consumption patterns also have gender implications. A survey of 3,929 households found that a large percentage of them own both modern LPG stoves as well traditional wood stoves. While gas stoves are becoming popular because of convenience, their time-saving features, and status, traditional stoves are maintained for cultural reasons and taste preferences (Nielsen India 2016). Here, cultural norms of patriarchy also operate in which traditional expectations of women to be 'good daughters-in-law' who are adept at making food using time-honoured ways of cooking are prevalent.

The widening of consumption through the higher incomes of working women also comes with contradictions. The upper-caste Geetha (as with many others, across castes, in the research narratives) bears a disproportionate burden of being saddled with household work along with her white-collar job. With lower class and caste women, this acquires a more intense tonality. For Radha and Remya, Dalit workers, the entire burden of taking care of the household, bringing up children with certain basic standards of living and consumption, and trying to build houses fell on them as their husbands were not working either due to alcoholism or illness. Both have also been working from their childhoods outside their homes as well living through a prolonged period of the 'double burden'. While they have some access to non-durable personal consumption, even now they are largely struggling to acquire long-term consumer/capital goods like land and housing. Similarly, for the Ezhava worker Devaki, the entire burden of domestic and wage work fell on her as her husband had been rendered immobile because he had suffered loss of vision. The disproportionate burden is seen also, as noted, in migration-induced male mobility to Gulf countries and women remaining at home to bring up the children on their own.

There is expansion of freedom in certain aspects, like what women can wear and so on, which also shows the multi-directionality of consumption. As Divakaran, a senior government official, explains, while Western fashion trends like jeans have become popular among young women now, before that there was already a shift from traditional Kerala dress to North Indian ones like *salwar kameezes* for women (interview, November 2013).[39] Similarly, Biji points out: 'We always used to wear *saris*, and blouses and traditional skirts. It was only in the final year of my [Bachelor's] degree that *churidars* [*salwar kameez*] came.' Now, *salwar kameezes* are ubiquitous among the younger generations and the early middle-aged, and are considered to be much better in affording mobility and maintainability than the cumbersome sari, while conforming to older standards of modesty required of women. But there are trends which go beyond this as well. Sahir, the owner of the women's boutique, tells me, showing a single-piece dress for women, that it is very popular as 'party-wear'. This development in the last decade can be seen as an advancement in terms of what women can wear. These dresses, while originating in Western designs, come from Mumbai (or other big Indian cities like Bengaluru).

As noted, even when there are differences, there are features that unite Kerala and the national space. Like the national area in Kerala as well, consumption marked by

[39] *Salwar kameezes* are loose trousers paired with long shirts.

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global linkages is still governed by the framework of tradition/modernity, which has different implications for young women and men (Lukose 2005a, 931). This is seen in the field where male aspirations for mobility and consumption are also marked by fears about the 'loose morals' and sexual promiscuity of young women made possible by their move to big cities for education and jobs. In this narrative, middle-aged male informants talk about how women students acquire lots of money to buy clothes and make-up by 'going out with men' (fieldnotes, August 2017). Such travels accelerated in the 2010s with more and more students, including women, moving not only to bigger cities within India, but also abroad for studies. Thus, the 'consumerist sense of agency' that Lukose (2005a, 930) articulates as a part of the new identity of young women in the early 2000s is now accentuated further with the expansion of gender freedoms. Thus, one can see women students migrating on their own to new education destinations like New Zealand and adopting new living practices like mixed-gender housing, which would have been unthinkable even two decades ago (fieldnotes, December 2018). This is seen in other aspects, like the increasing adoption by women of 'modern' and 'Western' clothing that we saw above, thus denting the still largely masculinist framework of capitalist development in Kerala which seeks to constrain gender rights within traditional patriarchal norms.[40] Ironically, and in line with the discrepant embrace of modernity that we have seen so far, those groups or subcultures that are in the forefront of ushering in hipster fashion and consumption, borrowing many elements from Western cultures, might be in an antagonistic relationship with gender equality (Prakash 2014). This can be termed as the 'radical disjunctures between different sorts of global flows' (Appadurai 1990, 308).

Thus, again, there is no homogenous consumption when it comes to the meanings of consumption. Gender becomes an important terrain upon which consumption and contestations around it play out. It reinforces the point that consumption must be located in specific contexts like that of gender, caste, class, religion, and age.

Status consumption

Much of the consumption that we saw in the preceding pages, especially in the section on collective consumption and consumption as a means of gaining equality and basic necessities, is about ordinary consumption. Thus, it is not just about seeking high status through conspicuous and expensive consumption. And there is also no universal urge to consume excessively or superfluously. It depends on the larger socio-economic structure of a society (Campbell 2005, 24). Yet, we need to account for the role of status consumption as a marker of distinction. Of course, in the context of consumption, class is important in having high social status.[41] Often, luxury consumption itself becomes

[40]Thus, a bride (settled in a Western country) wearing a sleeveless wedding gown, apparently the first time this was seen in the main church of Muvattupuzha, led to serious disapproval among not just the older attendees but was a matter of talk outside the confines of the wedding (fieldnotes, July 2010).

[41]In Nepal, middle-class consumption is more about the means to establish class solidarity and class practice (Liechty 2003, 116) which is not necessarily the main characteristic of middle-class consumption in Kerala. Upper- and middle-class consumption takes a more individualist tenor in establishing status. But as noted, caste is critical, and conspicuous consumption aids lower-caste elites to establish status. Class mobility of the lower castes is contested or resented privately. The attempts to establish status

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a means to achieve status. At the same time, there are trends, even if not dominant, of luxury consumption becoming important for its own sake.

The amount of money that is being spent on houses and so on in Kerala is staggering compared to the past, especially by those who are employed outside the country.[42] Pointing to the upper-class penchant for big houses, Gopalan, a cartoonist in his sixties, argues, 'Our main aim is to build houses' (interview, May 2013). The shift to a collective societal craving for home ownership in Kerala was effected through many decades of transformation of consciousness, which cannot be reduced to only an advancement in human development. A study assessed that in 2011, 41.3 per cent of the houses of non-resident Keralites would fall into the category of 'luxurious' or 'very good' (Abdulla 2014, 41).[43] Informants clearly identify that the significant increase in purchasing power is due to so many people living in other countries. There are houses that have bathrooms with fixtures costing upwards of Rs 2,00,000—an exorbitant sum by any standard in India. According to Vinu, the plumber, the number of houses where they install fancy and expensive items like shower cubicles is going up steadily (even for bathrooms that are small and have no space). The interesting thing about this is that many of them are not there for the purposes of luxury. They remain unused and are only installed as a marker of status. The defining element is that a good number of these houses are owned by people who are residents abroad and who only visit home once in a while. In his words, 'The Malayali attitude is to have more and more things like these. If you have some money, you will spend it on buying better stuff than the other person.' He contrasts this with Tamil culture and attitudes, which are entirely different. There, in his view, people do not indulge in extravagant consumer goods as Malayalis do. In contrast, they would try to install the least expensive fixtures in their houses. Even when they move up the economic and social ladder, they would not splurge on their houses. He gives the example of people having modern beds, but who still prefer to sleep on the floor and leave the beds to the guests. This is seconded by Peter:

> One Tamil person who I know has 800 acres of land and 2,000 cows, yet he drives a Maruti Swift.[44] But even if we have Rs. 10, we would like to show off…We are good at that…When people come from outside, they see our houses and are shocked. Houses are very important in Kerala; we spend a lot of money on them. There is only one life; in Gujarat, people keep their money close to their chests and do not spend.

distinction is seen to be worked out to the minutiae in the field, where even minor differences in occupational profile can have an impact on status. This is also manifested in aspects like very high uneducated unemployment figures stemming from a diffidence in taking up manual jobs even if one is unemployed.

[42]This is reflected in larger economic figures about the state. Some sub-sectors have lopsided weightage in Kerala, like construction within the secondary sector which contributed more than 12 per cent of the secondary sector to GDSP compared to 8 per cent in all India in 2012 (Government of Kerala 2013, 46, 62). In 2016–17, this had reached 13.49 per cent (*Live Mint* 2018). In 2008, it was estimated that growth rates in the construction industry were to the tune of 5 per cent globally, 9 per cent in India, and 15 per cent in Kerala (Chekutty 2008). In 2012–2013, it was 25.4 per cent in Kerala (John 2014, 371).

[43]Syro-Malabar Catholics, who rank first among communities in terms of housing quality, had 42.2 per cent of their houses in the 'luxury' or 'very good' category (Zacharia 2016, 18).

[44]A middle-class car.

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Both informants have had work experience in other states. Of course, these individual experiences about the differences in consumption between various states and the importance of 'display' in Kerala can only be confirmed with more substantive comparative studies.

A survey conducted on consumption practices pointed out how the culture of housing had changed, with increasing numbers of rooms: around '91.4 per cent of the houses… surveyed have more than 7 rooms' (Abdulla 2014, 43). Thus, as with societies that have transitioned to the stage of high consumption, in Kerala too commodities, among the elites, have to satisfy not actual needs but those that are stimulated by means of advertising and marketing strategies (Haug 1986). The 100 houses that we studied were a minimum of 2,000 square feet, some reaching up to 10,000 square feet.[45] Words like 'expansive', 'spacious', and 'vast' describe 63 of the 100 houses. According to the owner of a prominent consumer durable store in the big city of Kochi: 'In the last 15–20 years, every home has changed…Very few homes will have old technology, old television, old cooking methods… even if they can afford to or not, aspirations grow' (Mathrubhumi 2019). This has an impact on subalterns as well who aspire to social mobility and end up constructing large houses with borrowed money and experience difficulties when faced with downturns like a lost job in the Gulf (Slater et al. 2020). We already saw the emphasis on the modern when it comes to features in homes, but there is a focus on elements like 'grandeur', 'lavish', 'regal', and 'majestic' in a majority of the 100 houses.

While studying consumption, the nature of real consumption can be misunderstood by focusing on the ideas of 'conspicuous consumption' formulated by theorists like Thorstein Veblen writing in the 1890s 'when people spent more on clothing than housing' (Trentmann 2016, 339). Veblen did make substantial progress in seeing consumption as more than an economistic process reduced to production by bringing in the question of motives in conspicuous consumption (see Friedman 1995, 1, 3). But he also reduces consumption to an equally mechanistic, 'single and simple "drives" or innate tendencies which are assumed to be common to the species' (Campbell 2005, 24). We have sought to question such reductionist arguments so far. There are commonplace 'myths' that consumer societies are intrinsically more hedonistic, individualistic, inegalitarian, and given to emulation, conspicuous consumption, and competition (Miller 1995, 24), which ignore exceptions.[46]

Trentmann (2016) makes a cogent argument about deriving theories about consumption from actual consumer expenditures. But at the same time, he ignores the still-powerful notion of conspicuous consumption which can also play a big role in housing as well, as in societies like Kerala which may be different from those of, say, Europe, and can follow a different trajectory. Consumption is a part of cultural meanings and involves practices about identity in which social status is a part. But social status might be constituted differently in different societies (Friedman 1995, 16). Consumption in Kerala, with regard to housing for the elite classes, is largely not

[45]These averages are the same as those of the new houses in the United States, Canada, Australia, and New Zealand (the highest in the OECD countries) (Pinsker 2019).

[46]An example is Norway which, as an economically developed society, has broken these myths, showing that we cannot ascribe these characteristics to any society *a priori*. And it is not just hedonism that drives consumption, but also thrift (Miller 1995, 24, 25, 34).

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just about necessity or even material comfort. Mathan recounts from his own personal experience as a business retailer that middle-class consumption is now explicitly focused on display, and when it comes to high-end consumption, things have changed to 'there being *no limits*', with people willing to spend even Rs 50 lakhs on furnishing bathrooms! But Mathan is also a consumer building a house on his own. He self-critically looks at his own experience:

> People are fools in Kerala compared to other states. Take my own example: the house I live is in the biggest mistake in my life. I did not need such a big house. It is just me and my wife. My two children will move out of the town for their studies. We leave at 9 am and come back by 9 pm. We hardly spend any time at home. Almost all rooms are unused. And it is difficult to maintain the house. It is a waste of money and space. The money is not being used for productive investments… But if I say this, then people will not accept it as they think I am saying this to stop people from building a bigger house than mine!

This feature of building large homes which remain largely unused (and the inability to maintain them without paying for expensive domestic help) is a theme that emerged in many upper-class narratives. Thus, this is again something that goes beyond the aspect of luxury. Surendran, an Ezhava tile-layer, maintains that now everybody wants to have a big house: 'That's the main thing, to show your *prathapam* (grandeur) to others.' Rijo, a 45-year-old upper-class Christian businessman dealing in house furnishing, describes from his experience the drastic changes in the aesthetics of the style of homes. He specifically refers to how rich Muslims are now constructing huge houses that are glitzy beyond imagination. These are houses that look like 'palaces'. Earlier—10–15 years ago, in his view—no Muslim woman would come to select material for the house, only the menfolk would do that. Now even women come. He himself had to construct a 'posh' office to impress the rich, especially women, customers (fieldnotes, June 2013).[47]

The same attitude exists towards other goods. Of the 232 emigrant households surveyed in the study cited above, 76.72 per cent had cars and 41.8 per cent had air conditioners (ACs). Interestingly, only 2 per cent of the latter thought that ACs were a necessity (Abdulla 2014, 43–44), showing elements of conspicuous consumption. Yet, in accounts like that of Peter:

> ACs are the largest growing commodity in the market. You would need only one refrigerator. But you can install an AC in every room. Now, AC is a must as it has become very hot, and also because of mosquitoes. It is not a luxury item

[47]This is a part of a larger trend in which the Muslim community has benefitted the most in terms of emigration to economically wealthy countries. Among the emigrants, 41 per cent were Muslims despite the fact that Muslims comprise only just over 26 per cent of the population (Zacharia, 2016, 17). This also evokes envy among the old Christian elite in the town who talk about lands being increasingly bought by Muslims (Annie, a woman political activist of the Communist Party from a prominent Christian family, interview, August 2018). There are elements of Islamophobia in some accounts which go along with an uneasiness about the emergence of new elites within the Muslim community who occupy higher status than the old elites in terms of wealth. For an understanding of religious communalism in Kerala, see Mannathukkaren (2016).

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> anymore. It gives you sleeping comfort. One of the janitors working for me has an AC.[48] She does not have a washing machine. But without an AC, you cannot manage… You can get a basic model for Rs. 20–25,000. We sell around 800 ACs a year, and in Muvattupuzha around 5,000 are sold [in 2018].[49]

Here, it is important to recognize that consumption practices, especially of the wealthy, have consequences beyond those that the actors or subjects perceive as important, such as on the environment, for example. Elsamma says: 'Times have changed. People have 3–4 cars now, like for example, our neighbours. They have a BMW, a Benz, and an Audi. And they presented a Jaguar to their daughter.'[50] This is said with some resentment at their higher status than her own upper-class Christian family which cannot compete with them economically.[51] As Divakaran, the senior bureaucrat puts it, 'whenever Western companies come [to sell goods], they come first to Kerala, because it matches western parameters, Kerala is no. 1 in that undisputedly… For example, BMW first came to Kerala.' This assertion is corroborated by the quantitative statistics. Kerala is supposed to account for 13 per cent of Indian sales of luxury cars. From 2008 to 2015, the demand for luxury cars went up 10 times.[52] Again, it shows the acceleration of the consumption of luxury items from the later part of the 2000s. A Toyota showroom in Kochi touts itself as the largest showroom in Asia (Sanandakumar and Krishnakumar 2015). As Peter puts it, 'In Kochi, in clubs, you can see 20 Mercedes Benz cars at a time. Aspirational levels are high.' Similarly, the city houses a nine-floor silk store of 1,25,000 square feet, considered to be the world's largest silk sari showroom (Talwar 2010).

As Abdul, a 60-year-old Muslim man hailing from a rich family who worked in the pharmaceutical business, argues:

[48]Nisbett (2007, 944) notes that in Bangalore, one of the most common anecdotes among the upper middle classes would be about how their cooks, drivers, and maids have acquired social mobility. There is a 'dual discourse'—'the marvel and pride that these people could have acquired something so symbolic of India's (assumed) hi-tech future, mixed with the disquiet that they have rapidly caught up in a hi-tech sphere considered the preserve of the elite'.

[49]Despite this exponential growth, it is important to note that large numbers of people do not have consumer goods like cars and motorcycles. Thus, in 2014, 55.4 per cent of Keralites had refrigerators, 17.7 per cent had cars, and 36.7 per cent had motorcycles (Zachariah 2016, 44). Thus, consumption is continuously marked by stratification.

[50]I was later invited to the wedding of the daughter, and the family (which belongs to an *avarna* caste and had acquired immense wealth despite their low-class origins) prominently displayed the car given as dowry on their house porch. But there are ambiguities as well: conspicuous consumption can also express affection and love (Evans 2019, 511), as in this case, by the parents for their daughter, and the persistence of practices like dowry which reaffirm some dominant gender inequities that we have seen already.

[51]Upper-class homes tend to have two cars, but, again, not out of necessity. The more expensive, luxury car is used as a formal car for travelling to events and occasions like weddings, and so on, and for display, and the other less expensive car for daily use such as work. The scale of the transformation can be understood by this figure: in 1960, there were only 24,000 motor vehicles in Kerala; in 2018, this had reached 11 million (Manorama 2018), an approximately 46,000 per cent increase. The relatively small geographical area of Kerala also has to be kept in mind.

[52]Malayalis owned 5,000 tons of gold in 2006 (of the total 140,000 tons in the world) (Jacob 2006, 46). A predominant part of savings in Kerala has been invested in unproductive entities like gold and real estate. Kerala tops the gold jewellery business in South India which in turn accounts for 45 per cent of the business in India (Talwar 2010).

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> In our times, we didn't have the sense of being high and low or a hierarchy; everyone was equal. Now it is about the car in people's houses, and the 'weight' of the vehicle [*meaning the status that you want to convey through it*] one travels by. Although we were from an upper class, we didn't have that kind of a culture then. I used to go to college by a bicycle. Most of the students, even from landed families, came to college on a bicycle. Scooter was rare. Although there was the means to buy a scooter (interview, February 2018).

In this narrative, there is definite idealization of the past, especially in the denial of hierarchical relations at a time when feudal relations prevailed. Yet, it also shows some fundamental shifts in the attitude towards wealth among the privileged classes and the abandonment of moderation, which we have seen in other accounts as well. Among businessmen, it was felt that with the arrival of television in the 1980s, there was a substantial increase in awareness among people about consumer goods. Further, the biggest shift is in the increase in the number of brands with the opening of the markets in the early 1990s. Ullas, the owner of the Grand Centre Mall, explains to me: 'We have got good brands: Reliance Trendz, Jockey, Wrangler, Safari and other international ones like Al Manama.'

What counts as luxury goods changes over time. In the mid-1970s, a refrigerator was a luxury item. In Muvattupuzha at the time, only 50 refrigerators were sold in a year—it is 50 a month now (Peter, interview, February 2018).[53] If the Osellas noted that by 1995, the value of televisions as a social status marker was reduced (just as the refrigerator lost its status in the 1980s) and it was VCRs, cable-TV connections, and cordless phones that had captured people's fancy (Osella and Osella 1999, 1010), in the present, it is smartphones, laptops, and flat screen televisions.[54] While ordinary mobile phones themselves have seemingly become obsolete, smartphones have become ubiquitous because of the sudden availability of cheap internet data.[55]

Even before economic liberalization began to unfold, a 1991 study by Sooryamoorthy on 320 households showed status aspirations as key in consumption (Padma et al. 2018, 800). Post-liberalization has seen items of conspicuous consumption 'on proud display on the bodies of young middle-class people' throughout India

[53] According to P. Sudheer, regional head of LG Electronics, there is an increasing move towards high-end consumption, for example, 10 per cent of double-door refrigerator (a high-end item) consumption in India takes place in Kerala (Mathrubhumi 2019), and the premium fashion brand Allen Solly grew by 25 per cent in three years (Talwar 2010).

[54] What is more important is the pace at which this consumption is growing. Thus, within a three-year period of 2011–2014, there was a substantial increase in various consumer durables, again pointing to the importance of the decade of the 2010s. In 2011, 14.6 per cent of emigrants and 8.6 per cent of non-emigrants had cars, while had increased to 22.3 per cent and 15.9 per cent respectively by 2014. For some other items, the increases are the following: refrigerators: 62.8 and 38.1 (2011), 72.5 and 48.5 (2014); motorcycles: 30.4 and 23.2 (2011), 41.8 and 34.6 (2014); computers/laptops: 16.5 and 9.3 (2011), 20.5 and 18 (2014); microwave ovens, 4.2 and 2.8 (2011), 11.1 and 6.9 (2014) (Zacharia 2016, 45).

[55] The availability of data has increased manifold because of price drops. You can now get a month's data at a cost that would have paid for a single day a couple of years ago. The amount of time spent on smartphones has increased drastically because of popular social media applications like WhatsApp (fieldnotes, August 2018). As Shamsu, a 24-year-old Muslim youth from a working-class family, puts it: 'smartphones were not there in 2011 when I was in school, but now, everybody has it' (interview, August 2017).

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(Nisbett 2007, 943). In the houses in Kerala that I studied, there were references to how homeowners 'wished their home stands apart from all the houses in the neighbourhood' or how a particular house has 'become the talk of the town'.

But there are also assertions that status consumption might be showing some shifts as well, which points to the multiple motivations behind consumption. Eldho, the owner of one of the oldest stationery and gift shops in town, suggests that the 'biggest change in last 20–30 years is that people want quality stuff. Earlier, if an item was not there, they would wait for days and come back to the shop and get it. Now, they just go to another shop. There is no loyalty' (fieldnotes, August 2017). Peter agrees: 'the new generation has no brand loyalty. But for one's ego, you have to own a brand.' This shows that it is not just conspicuous consumption or ordinary consumption at work, but also other kinds of consumption, like defining oneself through the commodities one possesses and shows to others. Consumption becomes an element in identity formation (and not just as a part of caste/class identity) and 'the sense of self and personality' or it could be a means to explore novelty through 'new material objects [and] new tastes' (Shove and Warde 1998, 5).[56] Thus, we see expressions of contentment in consumption in the analysis of 100 houses, shown in these comments: '[he] wanted his house to reflect his incredible successes in life', 'they are thrilled when their friends shower praises on the brand-new house', the 'new house has given unique and special meaning to his life', or 'his mansion truly resembles a work of art, which makes him immensely proud and happy'.

Further, other factors like luxury can become important in its own right, even though luxury items are themselves used more as a means of achieving status. And stat s well. As Joseph, a 52-year-old middle-class Christian man, puts it: 'Now people do not spend money to show status. Everybody has an excess of goods. So, there is nothing to differentiate. Therefore, they focus on personal comfort and luxury, rather than only on status consumption. Status consumption was 10–15 years ago' (fieldnotes, December 2018). Peter reiterates: 'In Kerala, almost everybody has the basic stuff. Now it is about upgraded stuff. Now people check things like warranty and want more quality. The new generation checks online and [is] very aware of trends and prices.'

Despite these changes, and the incursion of new values regarding consumption, status remains an important cog of consumption in Kerala. And it becomes even more important in a society suffused with caste distinctions, showing yet again that there is no homogenous consumption.

'Enjoying life'

We saw the tectonic shift of consciousness, leading to an abandonment of restraint and simplicity, as the marker of the latest phase of consumption, and the concept of excess that is felt across classes. Here, one of the central motifs that recurs in informant narratives, which we briefly introduced before, is the idea of 'enjoying life'; this can be considered the flip side of excess. Of course, the concept of enjoyment is also premised on having the material resources to do so and is thus linked to stratification.

[56]The latter can become a key part of 'enjoying life', which I will explore below.

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If attitudes towards material possessions have changed with the spread of capitalism and its values, attitudes towards property have also changed drastically. From being a source of security to be preserved for later generations and a marker of status, it has become something that can be used for present enjoyment and to create further wealth. As Georgekutty puts it:

> People in those days never sold their land. It was considered to be below your status, to sell land away which you got from your ancestors… it was a kind of prestige symbol: 'I have one acre of land there' kind of thing. These days, things have changed, my wife has been telling me, sell twenty cents [of land]—I got good money, I got [Rs.] 40 lakhs. My father would have never sold it. Even the big mansion that he built, after his death, I sold it. But he would not have allowed me at all to do that.

Osella and Osella (1999, 1013) pointed out how long-term consumption of land and houses granted the most prestige and cultural capital: 'a house is all that stands after a man's death to bear witness to his wealth and prestige', which is reflected in Georgekutty's account above; in the present, however, the middle/upper classes are willing to monetize a part of their immovable property for transient consumption. Thus, again, a distinction must be made between consumption of long-term consumer durables/capital goods, non-durable goods, and transient consumer services. The money derived from selling land/a house would be used to fund previously unaffordable consumption like foreign travel. Thus, even when the economically lower classes aspire to mobility through acquiring long-term forms of consumption like land and houses, there is an increased tendency among the middle and upper classes to expend more resources on transient consumption, facilitated by new instrumental notions about land. This instrumentality also means that the buying and selling of land based on religious and spiritual notions about it (Osella and Osella 1999, 1020) recedes to the background, even if it is not absent. This is in accordance with the discussion above around exploring new avenues of consumption and experiencing a wide variety of goods and practices.

Transient consumption is again visible in the amount of resources now spent on events like weddings, engagements, and baptisms. Upper-class weddings are now invariably organized through event management companies and has Western features like bridesmaids in gowns, or wedding gowns (across religions), and new seating arrangements like sitting around circular tables rather than people sitting in a line. Baptism ceremonies among middle- and upper-class Christians used to be simple affairs. But commodification has pervaded all spheres. Baptism ceremonies now have the look of mini-weddings. The baby is placed in a decorated cradle, the parents and family are introduced on stage, and the proceedings are conducted in English. Even ceremonies like Christian marriage confirmations, which used to be held at home with a small number of guests, are now held in hotels. English announcements feature in these too, an oddity because English is not the lingua franca. They are also increasingly commodified with the initiations of new practices like gift exchanges between families, or introducing the bride and the groom by describing the (prominent) families they hail from, (elite) schools they went to, and the (MNC) jobs they hold, and so on. (fieldnotes, December 2018). Most of the time, the main subjects in these are either

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working or are settled, especially in the West, and are thus influenced by hegemonic notions of Western cultural practices. Of course, these practices also involve a reconstructed notion of 'tradition' or 'native culture', but in a commodified fashion (this is especially so because it is not just class that is on display but also family status and its ancient heritage, as above). Hence, we cannot have a static notion of locality. Locality can be any place on the spectrum from local to global, or it can be 'a flow or a field' (Comaroff and Comaroff 1999, 294).

Transient consumption, as described above, can denote different things: status, luxury, and novelty. They are not always mutually exclusive. The growing hegemony of market ideology since the 1990s is the background to these transformations. Stephen, a journalist, talks about the explosion of choice in the market: 'If there were two models of cars, now there are 400 models, the thought processes have changed' (interview, May 2013). In other accounts as well, the motif of changed consciousness to a focus on enjoyment is seen. Even the working classes recognize this. Radha, the Dalit woman worker, feels:

> People's needs have increased, even if you get everything, 'it is not enough' kind of feeling. It is because you want excess, robbery, etc. has increased. People want to earn money without working, they are not afraid to even kill, or rob for that. The feeling that 'I have to enjoy life' has become strong.

The changes in consumption focused on enjoyment happen, again, without necessarily always supplanting traditional modes of life. Instead, they find a niche within the new consumerist modes and practices. Thus, in a local art exhibition, the chief guest, a young player of a traditional temple musical instrument, arrives in a chauffeured BMW and carries an expensive smartphone. He lives for a large part of the year outside the country, performing on stages across the world and in collaboration with Western artistes. Thus, global interconnections and marketized art allow a small minority of practitioners of 'traditional' art forms to become part of an international cultural elite, a remarkable transformation from their earlier frugal existence.

Similarly, such expansion of opportunities marks other fields. Georgekutty tells me proudly, 'my son who is just 35 bought an apartment in Ernakulam worth Rs. 85 lakhs without anyone's help', something that was unthinkable in his time. He is happy that his son can enjoy the comfort of a large apartment at such a young age. Here, the expansion of purchasing power happens because of transnational migration (his son works in the Gulf). While this allows the acquisition of goods of long-term consumption like houses at a much earlier stage in life, it also affords consumption of a transient nature, which itself can be luxurious or expensive. Thus, Georgekutty himself is able to use expensive smartphones sent by his son or indulge in travel to the Gulf paid for by his son.

The high consumption patterns are fuelled greatly by remittances, but when coupled with low levels of production of food and non-food items within the state, it becomes very vulnerable to global and national flows (*The Hindu Business Line* 2003). Yet, for businessmen, or others who have benefitted from the opening of the markets, the new conditions are better. For Ajayan, from a Nair family, who specializes in the business of supplying school uniforms to the government, the business climate has changed drastically in the last two decades. There are a lot of opportunities now,

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unlike before, and both the Left and Right are pro-business. And in a material sense, things have changed drastically. According to him, people take flights between the two main cities of Kochi and Thiruvananthapuram even though the distance between them is only 205 kilometres, something that was unimaginable and unaffordable before (fieldnotes, December 2011).

Consumption as the new aesthetic experience of enjoyment and also as an arena of fantasy translates into mall culture and the proliferation of malls, as we saw before.[57] A good example of this is that when the Lulu International Shopping Mall in Kochi opened, many people from the fieldwork town used to travel to the city to visit the mall without necessarily having the intention to buy anything (fieldnotes, June 2013). As a newspaper report described about one of the earliest malls (opened in 2010 in Kochi): 'just a few years back, people had to make a choice between shopping, movies or simply hanging out. But with the coming of the malls all these can be done at the same time, in air-conditioned comfort. They have become a one-stop entertainment arena' (Pradeep 2010).

The interplay between local and global, and aesthetic and cultural imaginations are evident in the description of one of the malls, H & J, built in another town, Karunagapally: 'Most of all, visiting H & J Mall is a way of paying tribute to Karunagapally's native son, Mr. Hameedu Kunju. Despite succeeding in several ventures in the country of Botswana in Africa, he never forgets his hometown by expressing a desire to build a world-class shopping district.'[58] Here, the shopping mall promises more than just a shopping experience, but also participation in the cultural project of taking pride in a local 'son' making it big in the global arena.

Ullas elaborates about his ideas on inaugurating a new cultural experience of fun at the Grand Centre Mall:

> To attract major brands, you need to have a food court, game zone and cinema theatre. This is what we did.... I think that 50 per cent of Muvattupuzha has not entered the mall. People have a feeling that it is a place for the rich. Within five years, that will change. In our town, the culture was such that people go home 7–8 pm, except for the night shows of cinemas. Mall culture will change that. Our time is 10 am to 10 pm.

The manifold effects of new spaces like malls are evident here in terms of changing the consumption culture and providing a venue for the middle and upper classes to gather socially at night, which was not possible before, beyond the male-dominated bars, in the small town. It also shows class stratification. It is not just malls that are proliferating, but also small stores, especially clothing-related ones, which also act as a place for the youth to hang out (see Figure 4). When asked to explain the mushrooming

[57]Ravi, an entrepreneur in his fifties who runs a study abroad education agency and is from an upper-class Christian background with many family members in the West, comments: 'it is good to see mall culture growing' (fieldnotes, June 2013). Of course, this is much more salient for the youth, especially for the middle- and upper-class youth, as their responses reveal. The fascination for bigger metropolises outside Kerala, like Bangalore, or outside India, like Dubai, is because these places have the big shopping malls, among other things (fieldnotes, July 2010).

[58]http://www.hnjmall.com/, [accessed 15 November 2022].

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Figure 4. Clothing stores in the town. *Source:* The author, 2018.

of such short-lived stores, Mathan pointed out these shops are a result of speculative money from property sales and are a means to have status (as a businessowner) in society.

Commenting on the skewed nature of Kerala's development in the present, a senior journalist, Ramesh, points out, 'I can understand malls coming up in Bombay and Delhi; they kind of generate revenue… in Kerala it is about adopting the latest fads' (interview, November 2012). Thus, the town has bars which sell drinks at quite exorbitant prices. A three-star hotel on the outskirts of the town has all the trappings of a modern hotel and wants to project itself that way. There is a disjunction between the projected modern material culture of the hotel and the 'traditional' culture of the people who come to use it (fieldnotes, December 2011).

This is seen in other examples as well, for example, in the first four-star hotel that opened in the town which has features like cocktail lounges (fieldnotes, December 2018). And in other places—in private clubs, parties held at homes—certain aspects of the modern are imbibed at the expense of the other.

Both the Osellas (1999, 1019) and Lukose (2005a, 931) contended that the lower caste/lower class, unable to afford land and houses, focused on the body and extreme fashion.[59] What my research shows is the rise in consumption standards is pushing long-term consumption aspirations like land and housing to all classes. And there is increasing pressure on the state to provide the basic necessity of shelter to those who

[59]This does not mean that some forms of extreme fashion are not associated with the lowest of castes even now, as the Osellas described in their research (1999, 999).

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have been excluded from it, as we saw in the discussion on collective consumption. Further, if the Osellas (1999, 1019) noted that transience, considered by many as the central feature of modern consumption, is 'widely devalued' in Kerala, the devaluation of transient consumption is no longer a pervasive phenomenon in the present. In fact, 'enjoying life' is a package that focuses on both long-term and transient consumption. It is not dichotomous. There, trends like the opening of men's beauty parlours and the aspiration to match global beauty standards denote transient consumption.[60] As one of the employees of such an outlet put it: 'there are more men frequenting beauty parlours than women now'. There is increasing awareness of beauty and grooming. And there are 'facepacks' worth up to (an exorbitant) Rs 8,000 for men (fieldnotes, August 2012). Vast amounts of money are also spent on things like wedding attire. Style and fashion are no longer only restricted to the lower classes who cannot afford long-term consumption. Fashion, like personal grooming, is an area where, other than the lower classes, middle-class and upper-class individuals invest a lot of time. This is especially so, and visible in the field, with the youth population. But again, some of these styles of grooming and accessories, part of personal consumption of a transient and non-durable kind, require considerable monetary resources (Jayan 2018) which make them available only to a certain class of youth.

Thus, there is also a combination of factors at play in consumption. With increasing purchasing power and the wide availability of goods, status consumption, with its hierarchies and distinctions, gives space also to consumption based on novelty, self-identity, and so on. Enjoying life is connected to it. Further, the new forms of self-fashioning (Greenblatt 1980), made possible by the emergence of social media like Facebook and Instagram, are important examples of transient consumption. As Selina, a 16-year-old upper-class Christian girl, says on her Facebook post (2016):

> had a bomblasting day with ma dear buddies…love u guyz soo much…we are friends … most loveliest friends who live in 3 bodies with a single soul…friendz 4 ma lifetime… they accept me 4 who I'm but also help me to become who i should be…had an extra ordinary day 2 day…caught fishes. ate lot of fo o o o o d. went 4 boating like 10,000 times. climbed many trees like monkeys. and with clothes full of water and hearing rockin music we are returning 2 our home. i really really luv ma rockin cousins. thanku 4 makin this day so o o o superb. thanks 4 givin such a very special day. we are really rockin!!

The usage of mobile texting language and what the youth consider to be hipper versions of English are interesting features here. Further, other kinds of leisure consumption are unleashed by the new material conjunctures. Shanthamma, a female vice-principal of an English-medium school, with largely middle-class students, tells me about the new kind of desires: 'Earlier children did not have any exposure outside home. But now, they have seen malls and shopping. They demand regular picnics, etc. Senior children are taken to national tourist spots like Agra, Jaipur, Hyderabad, Delhi, etc.' (interview, August 2017). These trips used to happen three decades ago as well, but

[60]This is similar to trends seen elsewhere; see Green and Mesaki (2005, 372) for Tanzania. Lukose (2005, 928) mentions the 'proliferation of beauty parlours' for women.

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they were to nearby places or provincial spots. And now, upper-class private schools will send children to foreign locations. As Comaroff and Comaroff (1999, 293) observed in the South African context, from the early the 1990s, with the end of the apartheid, there was an explosion of desires, which could not be fulfilled under it, for luxury goods and 'extravagant self-fashionings and the flamboyant sense of independence' brought about by the availability of mobile phones.

Thus, in Kerala, in the latest phase of consumption, 'enjoying life' becomes one of the main aspirations. This is, of course, as I have stressed, differently realized according to different social locations, caste, class, gender, and so on.

Conclusion

Kerala's present conjuncture of consumption exemplifies more acutely many dilemmas and paradoxes of capitalist expansion and global interlinkages because it is different from many developing societies in the successes that it has had in moving away from development models based only on the market. But, as I have argued, the welfare state and collective consumption have had a major role in constituting the modern consumer. Therefore, different forces of the state, civil society, and the market have come together to make the present consumption regime in Kerala, which has the highest consumption levels in the country. The unleashing of market-led desires under creeping commodification is more paradoxical because of the strong hold of the socialist/communist imagination in Kerala society, which has not been completely eroded, even when it has undergone various transmutations and dilutions (Mannathukkaren 2010; see also Mannathukkaren 2009). Thus, there is still substantial public support for labour organizations like trade unions as well as increasing acceptance of privatization (Ahmed 2016).

I have argued that consumption practices cannot be understood without linking them to structural conditions and, at the same time, seeing them as a meaningful social activity. They must be linked as well to the wider political economy in a non-reductionist manner. The further integration of Kerala into various circuits of national and global capital is one major context. The impact of transnational migration from the 1980s and market liberalization from 1991 constituted significant moments in inaugurating the new consumption regime. But the decade of the 2010s, compared to the 1990s and 2000s (the period of research of the work of Osella and Osella, and Lukose), shows some important shifts as well in the expansion of regional capital and global non-resident Kerala capital in the construction of novel spaces of modernity and consumption, like malls and the acceleration of self-service department stores. These shifts are also seen in the substantial increase in luxury goods, consumer durables, the style and scale of houses, and spending on transient consumption.

The new consumption spaces like malls denote that it is not just about buying more goods, but also about buying goods symbolic of global modernity right in one's own locale, like the three-tier city of the fieldwork location, and not only by travelling to foreign locations or importing foreign goods. One significant consequence is that the special charm and rarity associated with the foreignness of consumption items (and their inaccessibility [see Appadurai 1990, 302–03]) is lost. They also introduce new impersonal spaces and sociality which even the lower classes can access without

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buying anything, unlike the personal, face-to-face shopping experiences of before. The various ways in which local capital and culture have responded in inaugurating these new spaces reaffirm that there is not a simplistic and one-sided global versus local, cultural homogenization or Westernization, but a complex interplay of modernity and tradition, and the foreign and native. This does not mean that all actors across the spectrum of the local versus global binary have the same agency or power as the accounts that we have seen of the small retailers in the face of big capital. The 'foreign' itself becomes reconstituted as a diverse imaginary, going beyond the United States/Western Europe and the Gulf to incorporate new locales—the New 'Wests' such as Canada, Australia, and New Zealand (which are not geographically in the West), and China, Southeast Asia, post-Soviet states, and so on.

There is a shift in consciousness in views about property and towards 'enjoying life' among the middle and upper classes. While ideas of conspicuous and status consumption are strong, there are also new tendencies towards consumption based on self-identity and novelty, which is itself an indication of the ability to spend on goods. And the links with consumption culture from various parts of the world, and the wide array of goods from them, all herald a new conjuncture. This not only challenges extant imaginations and ideals of socialism and communism, but also of 'those days' in the past, which seem so drastically and overwhelmingly different for the subjects who experience these changes. These cannot be understood without understanding the meanings, the intangible aspects, and the cultural imageries associated with consumption.

But what is critical to my argument is that the aspirations of consumption are differently realized and there are still significant disparities of caste and class, just as there were before in the 1990s. Despite the much-heralded welfare development model, Dalits are still at the bottom of the socio-economic hierarchy, and for them, consumption still means ordinary consumption and a means to escape the material and social abjection of the feudal past. But even in the present, many are confined to tiny plots of land or segregated colonies, and are dependent on the state and democratic contestations for the provision of housing and improvement in consumption, which shows continuities between the past and the present, as well as the failures of the famed welfare state. And the excess consumption of the elites has an impact, not just on the environment, but also on the lower classes by the furthering of inequalities. Ezhavas and Muslims have attained significant upward class mobility in consumption, the latter, especially, through migration. Yet, their claims to equal status with the upper-class Syrian Christians and Nairs are privately contested. They, especially the former, want to hold onto their position as leaders in consumption and practices in modernity, but sometimes without the economic wealth of the new elites. Similarly, we have seen the contradictions regarding gender and consumption.

Even in this stratified context of consumption with differences, there are also meanings and values, beyond consumer desires, which cross class, caste, and gender boundaries. And these are the ambivalences and disenchantment with excess consumption or a feeling that money has lost its value. The upper and middle classes of the older generations hark back to the days of restraint and moderation, but even the lower classes, while grateful to the present context of minimum material security, are ambivalent about the societal shift towards the valorization of consumption at the

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expense of human and moral values. The disenchantment with the decline in sociality and the rise of privatism and selfishness is an illustration of this.

Despite the expansion of capital and the pressures of neoliberal policies, even on Left political projects, there are no predetermined outcomes towards a full capitalist embrace, either in politics or consumption, for that depends on the kind of agency that is exercised and the kind of social and political movements that emerge. Further, capitalist development is constantly interrupted by counter-logics and breaks. The ecological crisis is one such dimension. Consumption levels can decline as well, with phenomena like reverse migration and a decline in remittances. For example, the Covid-19 pandemic saw an unprecedented return of around 5,00,000 Keralites from the Gulf (Pinsker 2019). If the past is a pointer, how Kerala negotiates the latest phase of capitalism and development is bound to throw up important problematics and questions.

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