

**Sussex
Centre for
Migration
Research**

Sussex Migration Working Paper no. 17

**Unorthodox Sisters: Gender Relations and
Transnational Marriages among Malayali Migrants
in Italy**

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August 2003

Abstract

The present paper deals with migration from Kerala to Italy and explores the way in which marriage – as one of the most important life-cycle rituals – intertwines with experiences of geographical and social mobility. Particularly it explores the way in which migration contributes to a redefinition of marriage's symbolic and material meanings – in terms of spouse's selections and marriage payments - as well as of family and affinal relations.

In the first part of the paper I will reconstruct the history of *Malayali* migration to Italy, showing how peculiar socio-political and religious relations between sending and receiving contexts have deeply contributed to the formation of a *transnational community*. Within this process women have constantly played an important and active role in developing a wide network of kinship ties and in stimulating further female migration from Kerala during the last decade. I will then turn to explore the way in which marriage becomes one of the field in which migration experiences and transnational ties play an important role in the redefinition of gender relations. I will therefore show how marriage and dowry arrangements, far from being confined to the sending country, become subject of material and symbolic negotiations between the two contexts of migration and often reflect different desires and expectations between migrants and their families in India.

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Acknowledgements

This paper is a part of a larger research project connected with my PhD in Anthropology at the University of Siena (Italy) and the fruit of a six month Marie Curie Fellowship at Sussex Centre for Migration Research, that allowed me to conceptualise the research problem and develop the research framework and appropriate instruments for proper fieldwork.

I would like to thank the Sussex Centre for Migration Research (SCMR) and the Centre for Culture Development and Environment (CDE), Dr Richard Black, who hosted me as a Marie Curie Fellow and allowed me to undertake this project. I wish to thank Professor Ralph Grillo, who acted as my mentor during my stay at Sussex, for the important advice and critique he gave me to improve my research.

I also wish to thank Dr Geert de Neve for his advice and support during my first months at Sussex.

1. Introduction

The present paper deals with migration from Kerala – a South Indian State – to Italy, and focuses particularly on women’s experiences and discourses on marriage and dowry. I am interested in analysing the way in which this important life-cycle ritual intertwines with experiences of geographical and social mobility, and the way in which migration contributes to a redefinition of marriage’s symbolic and material meanings and of family relations.

In the first part I will briefly give some general information about Indian migration to Italy and I will then turn to explore the development of Syrian Christian migration from Kerala to the particular context of Rome. The formation of migrant networks which embraces the Italian and the Indian contexts of migration is analysed in the third part. The aim is to show the active role played by women in developing and maintaining transnational ties with their countries of origin and in promoting the continuity of migration flows to Italy.

In this section I will also focus on the pioneer role played by women in “opening the way” to *Malayali* migration to Italy and on the meaning of their different marriage choices after years of migration.

Finally, I will look more generally on *Malayali* women’s experiences and discourses about marriage and dowry, focusing on some crucial points. First, I will consider the way in which migration shapes women’s expectations and desires regarding marriage, how marriage arrangements and dowry can be a cause of tension, and the material and symbolic negotiations between the two contexts of migration. Second, I will try to show how the experience of migration within the individual life cycle is partly shaped by the *Malayali* idea of affinal (related through marriage) relation, and how women can be subject to conflicting expectations between households. Finally, I will emphasise how marriage and dowry arrangements, far from being confined to the sending country, become the subject of material and symbolic negotiations between the two contexts of migration.

A brief explanation about the use of the concept of transnationalism in this context is required. This term generally refers to the process through which migrants build social fields across borders, linking together their country of origin and their

country of settlement (Glick Schiller, et al., 1992)¹. Some scholars have rightly underlined how the approach which goes under this term does not represent an altogether new theoretical framework for migration studies, but one that inherently builds upon a number of preceding ones (Vertovec, 2001), as well as the importance of contextualising the use of the concept “transnationalism” within single case studies (see, for instance: Gardner, 2002b). Studies which have focused more on the relation between gender and migration have shown how migrants’ lives put into question the assumption about the “new migrants” capacity to cross borders freely and how people’s movements are shaped, constrained and enhanced by hegemonic structures in both contexts of migration (Salih, 2001), for instance, state restrictions, economic factors and locally produced hierarchies (Gardner, 2002b).

Some recent studies about women’s migration to Italy, though they do not explicitly speak about “transnationalism”, have nevertheless stressed the importance of network relations between places in women’s mobility (De Bernart, 1995) and the necessity to analyse the different levels of the networking process - the institutional and political level, semi-informal levels such as associations, and the informal level such as kinship and other ties - which cross different contexts of migration (De Bernart, 1995). The concept of networks has been widely used in migration literature, since it emphasises the importance of ties between migrants and represents the material and symbolic channels of communication between places (Boyd, 1989).

In the present paper I will mainly use the concept “transnationalism” to explore and emphasise two different but related processes. First, as a concept which helps us to emphasise the importance of migrant networks between sending and receiving countries, following the perspective adopted by Riccio, which sees transnationalism as a dynamic process of constant networking within transnational spaces (Riccio, 2001:585). Starting from this point, I will try to show on the one hand how *Malayali* women have constantly played an active and often pioneering role in developing a kinship network between Italy and Kerala, which sustains and promotes the continuity of the migration process (Grilli, 1997²) and, on the other,

¹ See, among others, for general analysis: Rogers R., 1986; Glick Schiller N. et al. 1995; Vertovec S., 1999, 2001.

² Grilli notes how many authors have stressed the self-sustaining nature of migrant networks, which promote the continuity of the migration process even after the

how the importance of kinship ties in the case studied can be partly explained with reference to the restrictive migration roles promoted by the Italian Government during the 1990s.

Second, the concept of “transnationalism” is particularly significant in the context of the present research since it encouraged me to consider the way in which households and life-cycle rituals are influenced and change as a consequence of people’s displacement in different contexts of migration. The analysis at the household level of the performances and meanings of life-cycle rituals can represent an important key to reading and interpreting relations between places, cultures and gender among migrants (Gardner, and Grillo, 2002). From this consideration arises the interest in examining the way in which marriage and dowry arrangements are not bounded in one place, but are informed by the different contexts of migration subjects of negotiation between them.

About fieldwork and methodology

This paper draws on fieldwork experiences in Rome – between November 1996 and May 1997 – and in Kerala, in the central district of Ernakulam, - between 2000 and 2002. During my fieldwork in Rome I interviewed 149 individuals, 79 women and 67 men³. Part of the data presented below are based on the information collected during these interviews. Though I was not initially interested in collecting data in a systematic way, I decided nevertheless to organise a database with some basic information collected during the interviews. Since at the time of my fieldwork no extensive work had been done on Indian migration in Italy and little information was available I thought that a database could represent a useful framework for more qualitative and wider exploration on that topic. In addition I spent most of my time in Rome living with families, recording their stories and taking part in their ceremonies and functions. During my fieldwork in Kerala, I initially contacted families who had relatives in Rome and then established a wider network, which covered different neighbouring villages near the main city of Kochi.

Part I

original reasons for it have declined (pp. 1997). This is particularly relevant in our context.

³ For comparative reasons I dedicated part of the fieldwork to the study of the Punjabi community, from the North Indian State of Punjab.

2. Indian migration in Italy: a brief account

Indian migration flows to Italy have a relatively recent history. The presence of this community dates back to between the end of the 1970s and the beginning of the 1980s, and it has increased considerably only in the past fifteen years.

Table 1. Indian Population in Italy, with particular reference to the Lazio District.

2000	INDIAN	Male	Female
ITALY	29,341	17,383	11,958
LAZIO District	8,989	4,972	3,987

Source: Istat (Italian National Institute of Statistics) and *Caritas Dossier Statistico Immigrazione*.

The Italian National Institute of Statistics estimates the Indian presence in Italy at around 30,000 people, approximately 2.2 percent of the total migrant population in this country⁴. The central region of Lazio seems to be particularly attractive for Indian migrants, since a considerable number of them – nearly 9,000 people – are concentrated in the Rome Province, both in urban and rural contexts.

Table 2. South Asian Population in Rome Province.

2000	Rome Province	Men	Women
INDIA	5,378	2,751	2,636
SRI LANKA	5,981	3,359	2,622
BANGLADESH	6,813	5,343	1,470
PAKISTAN	1,512	1,168	344

Source: Istat

The data provided by Istat are particularly interesting in relation to the sex composition of the Indian migrant population. Among the 29,341 migrants estimated at the end of 2000, 17,383 were male, while 11,958 were female. If compared to other South Asian communities in Italy (Figure 2), namely the Pakistani and the Bangladeshi, where the male presence is strikingly superior to the female one, the Indian population seems to be relatively more balanced in its sex composition, especially if we focus on the specific context of Rome Province. In this context the Indian migrant population shares some similarities with the Sri Lankan community in the sex composition of its population.

⁴ In 2000 the legal presence of the migrant population in Italy was estimated at around 1,700,000.

The data collected during the fieldwork give us some idea about the ethnic composition of the Indian population in this context. At that time, two main communities were present in Rome: the *Malayali* – from Kerala, South India – and the *Punjabi* – from the North Indian State of Punjab. The Punjabi community was composed of a striking majority of *Sikh* men⁵, mainly employed in the agricultural and service sectors. According to my data, the majority of Punjabi women I met came to Italy through family reunion with their husbands.

A different picture can be drawn for the *Malayali* community in Rome, which is mainly composed of Syrian Christians⁶. Between the middle of the 1960s and the middle of the 1980s, Italy witnessed the increasing presence of young unmarried women who arrived in Italy alone. This tendency still represents one of the main features of the *Malayali* community in Rome, though it is counterbalanced by male migration starting from the second half of the 1980s. Among the 79 women I interviewed, only 15 came following their husbands: 31 came alone and were unmarried, 26 came initially to become nuns and subsequently abandoned their religious orders to settle and work in Rome, and six left their husbands in Kerala. Among the 67 men I interviewed, 41 came alone and unmarried, mainly in the past 10 years, and 23 came following their wives. Among the latter, only a minority came through the support of religious institutions: they subsequently abandoned the religious life, married back in Kerala and brought their wives to Italy. What is interesting is that, at the time of my fieldwork, the vast majority of the *Malayali* – 61 percent of men and 51 percent of women I interviewed had brought their spouse to Italy after their marriage. The percentage of women who had left their husbands in India is higher than that of their male counterparts. In the present case, therefore, women can hardly be described as the “ones who are left behind”⁷. Apart from a few cases of unemployment, mainly due to pregnancy or temporary problems, all the women I met during my fieldwork were working.

3. Malayali Syrian Christian Migration: women’s experiences

One of the main discourses among the *Malayali* in Kerala stresses the importance of migration in shaping households and personal identity. The fact that the “*Malayali* are everywhere” is one of the most frequent comments made by people in Kerala, who emphasise the importance of having a wide net of relations with people outside Kerala as one of the main sources of social mobility. As stated above, in Kerala migration to Italy is mainly undertaken by the Christian community, which represents 20 percent of the total population of that state. Geographical and social mobility through migration has taken place among the Christians of Kerala from the beginning of the twentieth century, thanks to the educational and work opportunities associated with mission-run institutes and in general with British colonial rule (Kurien, 2002).

Before the Gulf countries started to represent the “promised land” for an increasing number of *Malayali* (Joseph, 1988:46) and witnessed mass migration from Kerala from the 1970s, Africa, Malaysia and Singapore were the main destinations of unskilled and semi-skilled migrants (Zachariah, et al, 1999). Skilled and professional migration to the UK and the United States became a much more popular phenomenon during the 1990s (Kurien, 2002).

Though *Malayali* migration is often addressed as a male phenomenon (Zachariah. et al, 2000⁸; Gulati, 1983, 1987), women have always been involved in this process in different ways. In the context of South Asian migration, women are often described as passive subjects, whether they remain in the country of origin while their husbands are working abroad, or they follow the latter to the host country. Recent literature on gender and migration has shown, however, how women are actively involved in migration and take part in a process of deep changes in both contexts of migration. In her work about Bengali elders in London, Gardner shows how women have constantly been engaged in the process of transnational migration, playing a key role in

⁵ Though the Punjabi Hindu presence has increased during the last few years (unpublished data from the Indian Embassy of Rome).

⁶ Only a minority of the *Malayali* I met during my fieldwork belonged to the Roman Catholic Church.

⁷ See next section.

⁸ According to this study, however, migration from Kerala has become more feminine in the past decade. Interestingly, where there is an increase in out-migration the rate of increase was higher among females than among males. Similarly, where there was a decrease, the rate of decline was much lower among females than among males (p.24).

maintaining links between places and social connections for men abroad, allowing successful migration strategies (see Gardner, 2002b: 116⁹). Without denying the risk of women's positions becoming weaker within households and the wider society as a result of their husbands' migration (Chant, 1992), some scholars have underlined how this tendency co-exists with potential empowerment of women in relation to the relatively "new" activities they start to be involved with (see Gulati, 1991) and how ethnicity can contribute to shaping women's heterogeneous experiences of migration (Kurien, 2002, in relation to the particular context of Kerala).

Malayali Christian women's involvement in migration reflects the heterogeneity of experiences and the different migration stages of households. During the colonial period *Malayali* Christian women migrated mostly as nurses to Africa, Malaysia and Singapore. The majority came from the lower-middle class, and this fact was particularly due to the stigma associated with that kind of job when compared with other opportunities offered abroad (Kurien, 2002). In the 1970s, during the mass migration to Gulf countries, women continued to leave as nurses or to follow their husbands. Kurien stresses how *Malayali* Syrian Christian men became increasingly insistent that their wives should work in the Middle East, with the consequent effect of improving women's education and job-training in Kerala (Kurien, 2002: 152). The author notices however how, among this community, some gains made by the first generation may have been reversed for the second one, since migrants' daughters were progressively withdrawn from training as nurses, and high status started to be associated with non-working women. Only poor women, who could not afford college education continued as nurses abroad (Kurien, 2002).

The picture drawn above is particularly useful as a general framework in which to locate the particular migration experience of the *Malayali* in Rome. Though the majority of the village households I visited during my stay in Kerala were Gulf-oriented, Italy seemed nevertheless

increasingly popular among the population as a possible area of destination.

Most of the families I contacted in Kerala who had relatives in Italy have not directly benefited from previous forms of migration and they often come from the lower middle class, if not the poorest sections of the Christian society¹⁰. The main sources of income of these families was from agriculture and petty business in the rural area. Only in recent times have families who enjoy a better status in Kerala started to be involved in migration to Italy. Usually this is due to marriage alliances with *Malayali* who have been working in Italy in the past decade.

In this context *Malayali* women in Italy are often the first – if not the only – members of the household to migrate and are therefore the main source of family support (see for instance Anthias and Lazaridis, 2000).

4. *Malayali* women's migration to Italy and the development of a transnational kinship network

4.1 Some General Features

In the wider contexts of international migration the present flows of *Malayali* women working in Italy follow the general tendency of the feminization of migration (Anthias, and Lazaridis, 2000): one of the main characteristics of this process is women's location in the lowest levels of the employment hierarchy in the service industry. Between the middle of the 1960s and the middle of the 1980s an increasing number of young and unmarried women have left Kerala to come to Italy. The striking female presence during this period is progressively counterbalanced by male *Malayali* migration, especially from the end of the 1980s. In Figure 3 I have indicated the main strategy of arrival in Italy. The way in which *Malayali* migrated to Italy is particularly interesting for understanding the role played by kinship in migration. Unlike most other South Asian migrants, who reached Italy illegally from previous countries of migration - especially in the 1990s –

⁹ Gardner quotes the expression "kinship work" of Di Leonardo, quoted in Alicia M., 2000, "A chambered nautilus; the contradictory experience of Puerto-Rican women's role in the social construction of a transnational community", in Willis K., and Yeoh B.(eds)., *Gender and Migration*, Cheltenham, Edward Elgar (pp. 305). As we will see, the concept of "kinship work" is particularly interesting and useful in the case of *Malayali* women's migration to Italy.

¹⁰ Among the 16 families with whom I had closer and more constant relations, the greatest majority had at least one daughter working in Italy; in two cases both mother and daughters were working in Italy and had left their husbands and sons in the village; in two cases both sons and daughter had migrated and in two cases only male sons were working in Italy. None of these families had close relatives working in the Gulf States or other countries abroad.

Malayali migration seemed to take place following the legal possibilities offered by the Italian regulation laws. Among *Malayali* in Rome "having all the documents" is often considered a matter of distinction (see also Salih, 1999¹¹) and privilege in relation to other South Asian communities, such as the Punjabi.

Table 3. Strategies of Arrival.

ARRIVALS	MEN	WOMEN
Religious Institute	8	26
Student Visa	12	8
Tourist Visa	8	2
Job Nominative Call	21	27
Family Reunion Visa	15	15
Illegally	3	0
Total	67	79

Source: Field data

As I will explain later, a striking majority of the women came to Italy through a Religious Institution Visa between the middle of the 1960s and the beginning of the 1980s, and this was progressively reduced during the 1980s.

With the term "job nominative call visa" I refer to the visa obtained through the sponsorship of the employer in Italy: this means that in order to obtain a visa to migrate to Italy foreigners have to show that they already have a job contract in Italy before leaving their country of origin. With the promulgation of the "Martelli Law" in 1990¹² restrictions were adopted to regulate migration flow to Italy in accordance with EU directions. Regular permits could be potentially issued, mainly for political refugees, family reunion, and for "job through nominative call". In the last decade obtaining a tourist visa or a student visa has therefore become progressively difficult and the majority of *Malayali* have reached Italy through the Family Reunion Visa and Job

¹¹ Salih notes how, among Moroccan women in Italy, possessing the documents becomes an embodied feeling, of being in order, which pervades their identity. This feeling is particularly strong among the *Malayali*, who often stress the legality of their presence as a matter of identity and positive distinction from other more stigmatised communities.

¹² Law No. 39, 28/2 (from a Decree of 30/12/ 1989). In conformity with the Geneva Convention, the Martelli Law abolished special territorial limitation whilst making visas compulsory for those coming from "high emigration risk areas". It also introduced a minimum income level for those residing in Italian territory. National and EU citizens were given priority in the right to work (see Chell Robinson V., 2000)

Nominative Call Visa. Moreover, only rarely do Italian companies, especially in central Italy, give contracts to *Malayali* in Kerala; this is, unlike what happens in most of the Gulf countries, where companies directly sponsor migration from India through temporary job visas. This situation seems to have progressively emphasised the importance of kinship ties in migration, since, for the majority of *Malayali* I met, to have at least one relative in Italy is more often than not a basic condition for migration to the country. Relatives in Italy usually look for a sponsor and provide migrants with documents, preliminary contacts and accommodation once the latter reach Rome. The importance of kinship networks in the context of new migration is emphasised by the weakness of institutionalised migrants' associations which operate in the territory. Most of the *Malayali* I met had few contacts either with the Asian Workers Association of Rome (Carchedi, 1992) or with the *Malayali* Workers Association. At the time of my fieldwork the only activity organised by the *Malayali* Workers Association was an annual celebration during the Workers Day, which exceptionally brought together a good number of *Malayali* interested in Kerala cultural performances.

Malayali distributions within Rome's labour market also reflects the increasing difficult situations which women have been experiencing in the past decade. According to my data, the *Malayali* in Rome are mainly distributed in three sectors of the local labour market: the domestic sector, the unskilled service sector (mainly commercial activities) and the skilled health sector (mainly professional nurses, both women and men).

Table 4. Occupations

OCCUPATIONS	Total	Men	Women
Domestic Sector	45%	27%	62%
Unskilled Service Sector	25%	50%	1%
Health Structures (Skilled)	19%	13%	25%
Ethnic Business Unemployed	1%	1%	---
Total	100%	100%	100%

Source: Field data

The domestic sector mainly absorbs the female labour force while the unskilled service sector is a male dominated one. This is the outcome of more heterogeneous work experiences, especially among *Malayali* men. However the domestic sector represents for the vast majority of men almost an obligatory stage. 70 percent of men's

first occupations in Italy are within the domestic sector, and most of them maintain these jobs for some years before looking for other possibilities. Interestingly the male section of the *Malayali* population tend progressively to withdraw from what is perceived as a "female" and "degrading" occupation, to look for other opportunities. This change is often an important step towards more independence from the control and authority of a man's or his wife's relatives. For Indian women the only alternative and more attractive occupation in the new context was in the Health Sector as professional nuns. Unfortunately, job opportunities in Italian Health Institutions were progressively reduced during the 1990s¹³, and at present the vast majority of women who arrived in the past decade are working as domestic assistants.

I will turn now to what I describe as the two cohorts of *Malayali* migration to Italy. I draw this distinction mainly for analytical purposes, and it is far from being intended as a dichotomic interpretation of migrants' experiences. Nevertheless this distinction helps us to understand how migrants' experiences have been influenced by the historical relations between Italy and Kerala and by the restrictive Italian politics described above. As we shall see, this distinction seems particularly useful to underline the differences between the pioneer experiences of women who came between the end of 1960s and the 1970s - who have their own particular histories - and the more constant flow of *Malayali* who have come during the past decade¹⁴.

4.2 First cohort: 1960s – late 1980s

The first arrivals can be explained with reference to the particular relation between the Vatican State and the local churches in Kerala. Between

¹³ According to the Circolare n.900.6/IAG52/4806 prot. N.04424, 25.07.1996, of the Ministero della Sanità (Health Ministry Department), all the non-EU workers in the Health Sector who had not regularised their position during the Legge Martelli, did not have any rights to work in that sector. Generally after 1996 working as a nurse has become almost impossible for non-EU citizens. Only in the last year the Ministry of the Health Sector reserved some places for nurses of non-EU citizenship if they had been trained in Italy. A lot of *Malayali* women who had been trained both in Italy and in India were not able to find jobs as nurses in the past decade, and are mainly working as domestic assistants.

¹⁴ Among the 79 women I interviewed: 28 women came between the mid 1960s and the mid 1980s, and 51 after the mid 1980s. Among the 67 men I interviewed, 18 belong to the first cohort and 49 to the second.

the end of the 1960s and the beginning of the 1970s a considerable number of *Malayali* Christian women came to Italy with the intention of becoming nuns in different religious institutions in Rome. The contacts in Kerala with Italian religious institutions were provided by village parishes in Kerala: Italian priests were often sent to Kerala to go with local priests to visit families and "recruit" possible vocations. This is how Shamol, a Syrian Christian woman I worked with in Rome, told me her story:

The priests of our parish were looking for girls who were keen to go to Italy for the religious life ... they said that Italian people were not keen to be nuns anymore. You know that in Kerala there are a lot of Christians ... I think I was the only one ready to go ... I do not know why but I felt I had an opportunity ... what would I do if I stayed in Kerala? Get married and stay at home. My parents did not know what to think, they were frightened but the priest said that I would stay in a convent. Frankly speaking, Ester ... there were nine of us, sons and daughters ... five daughters. I did not really want to become a sister ... I go to church and pray, that's all, but it was the only way to go ... I know it is not a nice thing to say ... I am a Christian ... but I do not think I have ever had a vocation ...

Shamol left Kerala in 1969 when she was 17 years old.

Due to living conditions in Italy, perceived as too difficult and alien from their original expectations and desires, a lot of women during the middle of the 1970s – and for the following decade - abandoned these institutions and looked for education and job opportunities in the city. Shamol was very much concerned about the bad treatment she received in the convent where she lived for seven years:

The conditions were impossible to stand ... and you cannot imagine what I suffered the first seven years in Italy. In the convent, they did not know us, our customs ... we are Syrian Christians and that's ok for them ... but we are also Indian. They thought that they could simply bring us to Italy and make us good sisters. They were ignorant ... they did not know anything about our rituals and beliefs. They treated us as servants ... we had to clean everything in the convent. I used to eat once a day ... not even food was given!!! For me it was a relief to leave ...

The majority of these women were in their early twenties when they left the convent. Most of them undertook a training course in nursing, others found jobs as domestic assistants.

Mary's story – which I am going to present below - is particularly revealing of the ambivalent experiences faced by the women who came first, as well as their feeling towards their country of origin.

Mary

I met Mary during my first month in Rome. Among the *Malayalis* who often came to the Syrian Christian parish in Rome, Mary seemed to enjoy a particular popularity since she had been settled in Rome for the past thirty years and managed to "bring" to Italy a lot of her relatives. In 1980 she married an Italian man, who comes from a high class family and works as a doctor, and they now live in a residential area of the city. When I first phoned her to ask for an interview she answered in a hurried and straightforward way that she was not the right person to talk about the *Malayali* since she had left her country too many years back to still be considered an Indian. She said she was not able to tell me anything about her culture because she was not Indian anymore, and that there were "true *Malayali*" in Rome whom it would be better for me to speak with. I was very surprised by the ironic and sarcastic way in which she stressed her "difference". This is a part of our conversation:

E: Why did you leave Kerala?

M.: See, a lot of things have changed now ... better life and more possibilities, we have lots of things ... do not expect what you have here, but when I left thirty years back, you cannot imagine!!! We were living in a small house, which we could not even call a house ... a hut. And I cannot say that we were poor compared to others ... we had some land and some labourers used to come to help us. ... I do not know, I have never really felt able to adjust to that situation ... I really did not like so many things. I felt I was having an opportunity to go to Italy to become a nun ...

E.: What didn't you like in Kerala?

M.: You will think I am bad about my people but they ... how can I say, they go to church and pray all the day, then, see ... my father, the way he behaved with people working for him, and with inferior people. I could not really stand it when he acted so badly with them ... pretending and pretending, but I had to keep quiet because at that time we were not supposed to say anything!!! Now it is different: when I go back I

go to my house ... which is where my brother's family is living ... they know that they built it with my sacrifices ... the *Malayali* are like that: when they need help from you they are always ready to be nice ... but they do not ask anything, they simply pretend.

E.: Why did you say that you are not Indian anymore and that in Rome there are many more real *Malayali* than you?

M.: ... After all this time in Italy, and after all I suffered. Do you think that my family ever helped me or encouraged me when I left the convent? They did not even understand what was going on here!!! They told me to do what I felt I had to do, but I knew I was going to survive in Rome alone!! See ... the girls who come now, my relatives for example: they came here, I always pay for their ticket and help them. I could have built a palatial house with my salary in twenty years ... but all my money went on them. They do not have to worry about anything. They come here thinking that they can easily find a job, make money and go back to Kerala ... they do not have to face what we had to face!!! And they cannot adjust to the food ... and they do not like the jobs ... they think they can live here as they did at home!!! Sometimes I feel they do not even realise where they are ... always worried about marriage and money!!!

E.: Do you feel different?

M.: My life is different ... I like it here and I am also happy if I can go back to Kerala sometimes. I helped all my family so much ... and that made me feel good and at peace, but I feel I can get on better with Italian people ... they do not look at me only as someone from whom they can obtain something ...

E.: Do you have this feeling towards *Malayalis*?

E.: They did not even say "Thank you" for all the things I did for them ... of course I have always helped them when they needed my help because they are my people ... but fortunately I had my life. I also see all my relatives so often that you cannot say that I do not like them! But I still have this feeling inside ... that I was in some way abandoned ...

Mary and Shamol, like most of the women I met in Rome, rarely described their experience as the result of forced decisions, due to circumstances beyond their control (a different picture is drawn, for example, for the women described in Bujis, 1993). Their narratives rather emphasise the continual tension between restrictive households and social situations and the lack of opportunities in Kerala and women's active involvement in

taking up possibilities offered abroad, often stimulated by criticism of their society.

Mary's words are particularly interesting in relation to the role played by migration in constructing one's identity. In this context, Mills' emphasis on migration as an experience through which people engage in a process of self-construction - where people claim and negotiate different aspects of their identity - is particularly revealing (Mills, 1997). Mary was very much concerned in showing the continuity of her relations with her relatives in her village and expresses her being *Malayali* through her commitment towards her family in India, through remittances and sponsoring a lot of relatives to come to Italy. This feeling coexists with the sense of being abandoned by her family in Kerala during a difficult period of her life in Rome and with the feelings of being "too different" to go back to Kerala. Mary's criticism towards the newcomers reflects partly her contradictory feelings towards her country of origin but it also represents a way to underline her achievements in the new context - better jobs and socio-economic situation - and to differentiate her personal history and identity as a "self-made woman", who survived alone in a new context and built up a position without the help of other *Malayalis*. This feeling is common to the women who first migrated alone to Italy, who often perceive their relation with other *Malayali* in Rome as very instrumental. This is particularly due to the role they play as pivotal members (Werbner, 1981) of the *Malayali* community in Rome, as main referents to solve bureaucratic and occupational problems. These women are often able to locate themselves within a wide network of relations, which gives them prestige and relatively easier access to information. In their discourses Italy is often the place where they could find social and economic recognition - often thanks to their jobs as professional nurses and to marriages with Italians - and more freedom, which they feel would have been denied them in their country of origin.

All these considerations help us to understand the role these women play in mediating between the two contexts on occasions such as selecting a spouse and arranging marriages in India.

4.3 Marriage: new respect for "unorthodox women"

Interestingly, marriages between *Malayali* women and Italian men seem quite frequent among the women who first came to Italy. Among the 28 women interviewed who came before the end of the 1980s, eight married Italian men. According to

my data, marriage between Italian women and *Malayali* men is much rarer, if not entirely absent. In these cases the weddings took place in Italy and the journey back to Kerala with their husbands was often the first occasion for these women to meet their families after a long time. Sheila is a middle-aged woman, working as a professional nurse in a private hospital in Rome. She arrived in Italy in 1971 when she was 16 years old and in 1983 she married an Italian man. The lack of opposition her family showed towards her marriage was partly related to the difficulties she would have had to marry someone back in Kerala. Her experience was too "unorthodox":

Who would have married me after all this time away ... I was old for my country and you never know what people in India say about you when you are far away for a long time ... they invent stories ...

Despite what she describes as a difficult and "no return" experience, she helped five of her six sisters to come to Italy. She was very committed to bringing her sisters to Italy, since her father in India was not working and, according to Sheila, "he would not have been able to provide a good life for them".

I do not wish to give the impression that marriage with Italian men represents for *Malayali* women a "second choice" to compensate for feelings of exclusion from their sending society. Their marriage histories speak about the ambivalent experiences of constraints, independence and acquired power in relation to both contexts. Some women speak about their marriages as a "natural" consequence of their decision not to go back to Kerala, others as a relief, which gave them the possibility to detach themselves from their family pressures and expectations. In Kerala, the local view of these marriages is quite ambivalent. Families in Kerala often express their sorrow for being in some way excluded from their daughters' marriages, since choosing the right spouse and arranging a marriage for their offspring is seen locally as one of the highest merits and duties of a family. At the same time such marriages provide local *Malayali* families with new important contacts abroad, which can be capitalised either in terms of the geographical mobility of other household members or through the locally based processes of increased status. Prestige is often attached to families in Kerala who have an American son-in-law, an Italian brother-in law, or other foreign connections.

Unlike Mary and the other women who married Italian men, some women went back to Kerala to

be married, once they had achieved a better life and better economic conditions in the new context, and subsequently brought their husbands to Italy. The wedding was in some cases arranged by their parents in India, while in others the migrants themselves had met their *Malayali* fiancé in Italy and had decided to marry back home. In both cases marriages were celebrated in Kerala. Their marriage was often the first occasion for them to go back home after years of separation from *Malayali* society and living in Italy in a context where the presence of *Malayali* was very limited.

Generally, going back for marriage gave these women the opportunity to find new social recognition and to widen their kinship network. Besides, the wedding represented a time in which family tensions between these women and their sending society were partly loosened. The decision to leave the convent and to remain in Rome was not always well received by the family, who experienced their daughter's decision as a matter of shame. Among Christian families in Kerala it is considered a matter of pride and social status to have members of the household who choose to become a priest or a nun. Apart from increasing the "religiosity" of the family, these members are sources of contacts with clerical institutions both within Kerala and abroad, and local recognition of power is often addressed to these families. In Kerala, admission to private church-run colleges, access to job possibilities within clerical institutions and migration abroad are often "made easier" by such contacts. For families who remained in Kerala, religious institutions legitimised and guaranteed their decision to "send their daughter away". A woman's decision to turn away from religious life once in Italy was often felt as a betrayal of the family's trust. For most *Malayali* women the possibility of returning after spending years abroad alone was not considered a practical and attractive possibility. Instead, working for some time in Rome and building up an alternative way of life seemed to them both the most difficult and realistic way to overcome their feeling of being excluded from both societies.

Subsequently, the socio-economic improvements their families were enjoying in India, thanks to remittances from Italy, made them keener to accept their daughters' decisions. Moreover, a lot of them were growing older without being married. The majority of the women I met in Rome were well past their mid-twenties at the time of their marriages. Their weddings in Kerala were to some extent a time of reconciliation of conflicts between different expectations as well as

an occasion on which the women publicly legitimised their new position. As I was clearly told by Manju, who married in Kerala a *Malayali* man she had met in Rome when she was 30:

We are not so free to be far away for long time as men are. In this life we have few certainties: one is that one day we have to marry if we don't want to have troubles.

4.4 Second cohort: end of the 1980s to the present day

The women who first migrated to Italy played an important role in developing network migration from Kerala to Italy. If initially women's migration to Italy was promoted through the help and the intermediation of religious institutions¹⁵ – who were often able to find job solutions for them – the subsequent development of ethnic networks have progressively taken their place as the main tool for mobility (Lodigiani, 1994). Though narratives of first generation migrant women talk about a "rupture" with the sending culture and a sense of belonging to Italy, their role as sponsors for further migrants in Kerala has led them in recent years to be involved in a deep and continuing relationship with their sending society. Their journeys back to Kerala are often occasions to meet relatives who wish to come to Italy, to arrange documents and money for future migrations or to help other relatives to arrange marriages - after giving advice on the selection of a spouse – or other family rituals. In this phase migration reflects the solidarity between related families in Kerala and results in the formation of extended kindred-based networks in the new context.

Though the presence of *Malayali* men in Italy is increasingly large, the kinship migrant network is still composed mainly of women. Women in Kerala have been encouraged by female migrant relatives to go to Italy, and this decision is often made on the occasion of family problems in Kerala.

The possibilities offered in Italy play an important role in shaping household strategy in Kerala on who is more "eligible" to migrate within the family: migrant women can fulfil the flexible demands of full-time domestic assistants or health

¹⁵ Religious institutions have often helped women to reach Italy and find a job there, whether they came with the initial intention to become nuns or directly to find jobs in Italy. This is not only the case of Kerala migration, but also true for other countries such as the Philippines and Salvador (Lodigiani R., 1994).

carers in Italy. Indian women in Italy often encourage their female relatives in India to come to Italy because they know that in Italy it is easier for a woman to find a job, especially in the domestic sector. This is particularly evident in the first of the stories reported below.

Women's life-stories: heterogeneous experiences and self-representations

Alfonsa

Alfonsa is Mary's younger sister and is among the 35 persons who Mary and Sandro (Mary's husband) helped to reach Italy through different sponsorships. Alfonsa asked for Mary's support to come to Italy during a difficult time for her family. Her husband was working in a company which went bankrupt and he was suddenly without a job. At that time Alfonsa was mainly working with two hired labourers on the plot of land held by her family and looking after her four children. When I asked her why she was the one who decided to leave and not her husband she said that he was getting too old and that her sister had told her it would be much easier for a woman to find a job, because in Italy families trust women more than men to work in the house. Besides, she was very curious about Italy, and she felt it was a good opportunity to see different things. Having her sister there gave her the strength to leave everything.

Shibi

Shibi was 18 years old when her parents spoke to her about the possibility of coming to Italy to stay with her father's sister's family in Rome. She had completed high school and was very keen to study for a university degree in Kerala. She was attracted by the possibility of coming to Italy but she would have preferred to wait for some more years before leaving her country. She thought that with a university degree she would have been able to find a better job. When I first asked her about staying in Italy she was very straightforward in saying that women in Kerala were not like I was, since they could not decide freely about their lives. She had to marry, and that is why she had to give up her studies to come to Italy to earn money for her marriage. Her parents own some land in Kerala but at that time they did not have any other source of income. Her father had worked for a company for some years but had resigned due to health problems.

Lia

Lia came to Italy in 1992 after her marriage to a man who had been working in Italy since the middle of the 1980s. She had helped her family to build a new house in Kerala, a fact that created some trouble with her husband's relatives in Rome who criticised her for sending all her money to her parents in India instead of helping her husband's family, both in Italy and Kerala. Her husband's relatives provided her with a good job and assistance at the beginning and expected to be repaid for their sacrifice through her earnings. Lia told me that when she started working hard in Italy she paid all her debts to her husband's family but she was very keen to give her parents a different life in India: her salary in Italy was enough to do both things, saving some money for the future. She was very happy with her life in Italy and she often stressed that in Kerala there are few things woman can do:

Now if you simply stay at home people will not like it ... I always wanted to be active and work but if you do not know anyone in Kerala or you do not have money it is very difficult to find something, so I was happy when I knew I could go to Italy.

Three years after her arrival she helped Merine, one of her cousins, to come to Italy. Though Merine's family have never had "big problems with money", they started to face difficulties when Merine's father lost his job. She has one sister and one son and according to Lia they would have had difficulties marrying them. During her summer visit to her family back in India, Sheila went to visit her cousin's family and suggested they consider the possibility for Merine to come to Italy. Merine's parent were not at all keen to allow their daughter to come to Italy to work: their position was relatively higher than that of Lia's family and they felt it was demeaning for them to let their daughter leave Kerala alone. Lia told her uncle that he was not in a position to provide a good life for his daughters anymore and that having a job in Italy would help her to contribute to her family status and to make a good marriage. In giving her reasons Lia was very much concerned to show how her family had managed to build a new house thanks to her support. In the brief life stories reported above I have tried to give an idea of the heterogeneity and ambivalence of women's experiences as migrants. The story of Alfonsa is particularly revealing of the combined effect of transnational women's solidarity and the Italian flexible labour market in shaping a household's migration strategy, which

seems to encourage women's mobility. The burden of marriage and the role played by hegemonic structures in both contexts of migration (Salih, 1999) are often particularly accentuated in young unmarried women's narratives, who are keener to emphasise the role played by the future perspective of their marriage in their decision to migrate. Shibi's words stress how her sense of responsibility towards her family induced her to join her aunt in Italy, though she would have preferred to complete her studies in Kerala. One point I wish to stress here is also the crucial role women play in negotiating their earning power between the expectations of different households. This is particularly evident in Lia's experience who describes, on the one hand, the active role she played as an earning woman in improving her family's situation in India and in encouraging the further migration of some of her relatives, but, on the other hand, the resulting conflicts with her husband's family.

Interestingly, both in Kerala and Italy, high prestige is attached to *Malayali* migrant women who have managed to help a good number of relatives in Italy. In both contexts the migrant women's "power of recruitment" of new migrants proves not only the economic and social security they have achieved in the new context, but also their power to create new job opportunities for women in a context, such as Kerala, where migration has always been undertaken mainly by men.

The trend among the second generation seems much more oriented towards a future return to India, at least according to migrants's narratives. Italy is often perceived as a temporary home, a "good place for money", while Kerala becomes the place to invest capital and to build new social status. Their discourses reflect deep disillusion regarding the possibilities offered by the Italian labour market and the job restrictions in the health sector are considered as a great loss.

Interestingly, among the second cohort's migrants, the presence of mixed marriages with Italians, as well as with other communities in Rome, is very rare for both *Malayali* men and women. This could be partly explained by the particular present situation *Malayali* experience once they reach Italy. The reduced possibilities of jobs - which rarely for women occur outside the domestic sector - and the full-time jobs they take on as soon as they arrive in Rome, make the possibility of meeting people outside the workplace very difficult. Their free time is usually spent with relatives at home or in the Syrian Christian parish in the centre of the city, which is

rarely attended by non-*Malayali*. Besides, the unmarried period as working migrants abroad tends to be relatively reduced¹⁶ for women, if compared with the first cohort's migrants. Marriage is therefore one of the first and most important achievements within a migrant unmarried woman's life-cycle.

Part II

5. Dowry among the Christians of Kerala: migrant women's discourses on dowry

Before analysing the relation between migration, marriage and dowry I will give some basic information about the marriage system and dowry in Kerala, with reference to the Christian community. Dowry became illegal in 1961, with the *Dowry Prohibition Act*, where it is defined as "any kind of transaction in money, gold, and other goods given as a condition for marriage". Besides this legal definition, the meaning of dowry, especially in relation to the "traditional" concept of *stridhanam* (gift of a virgin), has been the subject of long debates¹⁷, which are impossible to discuss here. It should nevertheless be noted that the high escalation of dowry in South India in the past thirty years, including the Christian communities, has made some authors keener to address this phenomenon with the term "groomprice" (see Billig, 1992), stressing the fact that the classical notion of dowry as *stridhanam* is no longer an adequate model of marriage payments in contemporary India (Caplan, 1984).

In this context I will retain the use of the term "dowry" to indicate the part of the marriage transaction between the bride's and the bridegroom's families, which goes from the former to the latter. In Kerala, Christians are often indicated as the community with the highest rate of dowry and other communities often identify Christians as one of the main causes of the dowry problem in Kerala. This particular association is often emphasised in relation to the idea, commonly shared among the *Malayali*, of Christians as rich business people. Being a

¹⁶ Though according to my data migrant women's marriageable age tends to be higher than that of non-migrant women.

¹⁷ See, for instance, Goody J. and Tambiah S. J., 1973, *Bridewealth and Dowry*, London, Cambridge University Press. For a critical reflection on dowry see Srinivas M.N., 1984, *Some Reflections on Dowry*, New Delhi, Centre for Women's Development Studies.

patrilineal society with a strong orientation to patrilocal residence, Syrian Christian women are generally supposed to live with their husbands' families soon after their marriage, and these then become their new families.

Among Syrian Christians it is possible to distinguish between different components of the dowry. The importance of distinguishing between different components of the dowry - and the different messages which these carry - has been underlined in other studies regarding South Asian migration contexts, as one of the basic solutions to avoid misunderstandings and confusion about the meanings of dowry (Gardner, 1995:178). In the present context the importance of this distinction relies also on the possibility it offers to analyse the different attitudes and opinions migrant women have in relation to dowry, according to the components they are referring to. Among Syrian Christians dowry is mainly composed of:

- Gold given to the girl at the time of her marriage by her parents and other close relatives. Though gold is often regarded - especially in high class Christian families - as the women's personal property, practically it is often controlled and sold by her husband's family. In contemporary Kerala, gold is more often than not conceived of as a special kind of consumer item, since it can easily be converted into cash (Osella and Osella, 2000:134).
- Money given by the girl's family to the grooms', which is often conceptualised as a gift given to the new family, without any special distinction being made between the woman's individual property and that of the husband's family.
- House furniture, which can include different items such as bed linen, towels, crockery and pans and which goes with the bride. Even in this case there is no clear distinction made between the newly established couple's property and that of the family's, since most of the families I spoke to stressed that the property and the use of these items depended on the husband's family and on the husband's capacity to provide for independent accommodation.
- Modern consumer goods, which can include a car, scooter, fridge, stereo or television. These items are rarely regarded as goods which go with the bride, but rather as gifts made to the groom's family members which are often openly demanded as a condition of marriage. The majority of items are used by and

intended to be for the male members of the bridegroom's family.

Moreover, among Syrian Christians marriage expenses are completely met by the girl's family. Here I wish to emphasise that the conceptualisation of dowry can vary according to family status. Among high class families there is the tendency to emphasise dowry as the woman's share of her family's property, whether this share is conceived as a personal share or as a potential joint share within the new husband's household. Among these families dowry is often understood as a matter of family pride and something which emphasises the value of the person, especially when the bride is well-educated or has a good job. However, among lower class and lower middle class families, dowry is more often conceptualised as a burden for the family to pay in order to find a husband for their daughter. In this context dowry is often regarded as the compensation for the lack of value of the person in the marriage market and is therefore required, for example, for girls who have not been well educated. In both cases women rarely have control over their property after marriage (see also Visvanathan, 1993).

Among the families I met in Kerala, who had relatives in Rome, dowry rarely reached huge amounts of goods and cash: in most cases dowry was composed of an average of 5,000 Rs to 50,000 Rs¹⁸, some gold and other consumer goods such as a television, a scooter, and a microwave. As I said at the beginning, the families I met in Kerala mainly came from lower-middle class members of the Christian community and most would have faced a problem in providing dowry for their daughters. Women's migration in these cases represented a fundamental strategy to improve family status and to raise money for its members' future marriages.

To arrange a marriage and to provide for one's daughter's marriage expenses and dowry is usually considered a family duty. Although these duties are not particularly associated with the males of the family, in Kerala it is often the men, namely the father and brothers, who provide for most of the woman's dowry.

The ambivalence of dowry - as a family burden as well as a strategy of social mobility and providing the tools for status improvement - arises in local discourses in Kerala, where the use of dowry at the time of marriage is often criticised and denied by families. Most of them are conscious of the fact that it is illegal, but at the same time feel it is

¹⁸ Between \$100 and \$1000.

justified as one of the ways of giving property to one's daughter. It is also a matter of family pride whilst there is awareness that it is a basic condition on the contemporary *Malayali* marriage market. Women's discourses and experiences of dowry partly reflect this ambivalence, whether they are migrants or not, and their frequent criticism seemed to me often more directed towards some components of dowry than others. For most of the women I spoke with, dowry is often identified with "money", referring to the cash given by their family to the bridegroom's. It is towards this component of dowry that their criticism is often addressed, since it is taken as a symbol of the devaluation of their person and of the fact that they are "taken and sold on the marriage market", as one of my interlocutors said. However, the gold given to them at the time of their marriage seems to be much better accepted by women as a gift given to them by their parents.

My impression is that women's migration emphasises the contradictions of this practice and has different and ambivalent affects on the way in which women talk and behave regarding dowry. On the one hand, their direct involvement in migration and their role as the main wage earner of the household as unmarried women, brings them to identify their experience in direct relation to the perspective of their marriage¹⁹, as the story of Shibi clearly shows us.

In the story of most of the unmarried women I met in Rome, the perspective of their marriage emerges both as a constraining and an enabling factor in relation to their decision to migrate. Their mobility often takes place after giving up education in Kerala to take up uncertain and often degrading jobs abroad. On the other hand, this decision allows them not only to contribute to the family budget, but to experience different contexts and a certain degree of independence they would rarely have achieved in their village (Mills, 2001). As Manju, one of the young women I met in Rome pointed out:

Now if you simply stay at home people will think you are not able to do things ... then nobody will want to marry you ... Now my family have already had some proposals. We have to marry ... we have to give something²⁰... and I knew in this way I could help my family ... here I work hard and everything is more difficult and painful ... here

¹⁹ As well as the marriage or other siblings.

²⁰ She is referring to dowry, since my question was partly related to it.

there are no good things for us²¹... but I feel I am doing something, having experiences ... at least I can say that I did not fear to see some other world ... here I feel active ... I feel as if I am always growing ... this makes me feel better if I think of my family ... they can say I helped them a lot ...

Migration represents for them not only the quickest way to accumulate cash but also to gain respect from their family, to be more "active" and self-sufficient, taking up responsibilities and achieving goals which are associated with the perspective of their marriage and with the process of becoming a *marumakkal*, a daughter-in-law. Thanks to Manju's earnings, her family is "getting ready" to marry her. In their analysis about the relation between migration, life-cycle and masculinity in Kerala, Osella & Osella have underlined how migration may accelerate an individual's progress along a culturally idealized trajectory towards mature manhood (Osella & Osella, 2000b). In the case of women's migration this progress often involves tensions and contradictory experiences which are never completely resolved. If, on the one hand, women's migration is increasingly accepted in Kerala as one of the ways to improve family status and as part of a woman's life strategy towards marriageable age and adulthood, women's mobility and their direct contribution to marriage and dowry expenses are often the subject of criticism and prejudice in their country of origin. I will take up this point later.

Marriage and dowry payments are often perceived by migrants as both a constraint, as well as a matter of family pride. Besides, for most of the women I met marriage expenses and dowry were one of the few legitimate ways in which they could use and capitalise on their earnings. Exaggerated consumption in Italy, as well as in Kerala, on western clothes and other goods which are not directly related to the items required for a woman's marriage, are often the subject of deep criticism in both contexts. Young women's older relatives in Italy are often very much concerned in orientating expenses in Rome towards goods directly related towards their dowry, such as towels, bed linen and furniture, which are some of the main items imported from Italy at the time of marriage. One story is particularly interesting on this matter.

Maymol is a 25 year old newly married woman who has been working in Italy for the past three

²¹ Manju means that there are no good jobs available for them in Rome.

years. When I met her in Rome she had just come back from Kerala after her marriage, leaving Joseph, her unemployed husband, in Kerala waiting for the documents to arrive so he could join her in Italy. Keen, her aunt, who was in Rome and who was a good friend of mine, was particularly angry with Maymol since she was the only one among three daughters who had never sent enough money to her parents in India. Keen was not sure about how Maymol had been spending her money during her stay in Rome, since the job she had found for her was well paid, but she had noticed that she went out too often with friends on Sundays instead of spending time with her relatives at home, and that she often wore new clothes. When I was in Kerala, living with Maymol's husband's family – Joseph, her husband, was still waiting to go to Italy – Maymol came back to visit her family and her two year old child. Some weeks before, Joseph told me that he was losing any hope of going to Italy and that Maymol had not sent any money in the past year. Speaking about his marriage and about dowry, Joseph told me that "he did not get too much", since Maymol's family told him that he would be provided with the documents and the flight ticket to Italy. Some days after Maymol's arrival in her natal village, she told me she wanted to go to Kochi to do some shopping and asked her mother to go with us. She bought some sleeveless churidars²², one pair of jeans and some perfume for herself. After Maymol left, one month later, Joseph told me that he was shocked by the fact that his wife could spend Rs4,000 in one day for herself and then leave him only Rs10,000 before going back to Italy, "after one year's work in Italy!". I often heard critical comments in the village about Maymol after she left. People criticised the way she dressed, and the fact that she was not a "good daughter", since she rarely sent money to her family and husband. One of Maymol's neighbours in the village told me one day: "And they did not have enough money for her marriage ... so little gold! I wonder what this girl is doing with her money!".

This is not the context for an analysis of consumption behaviour among migrant women, but it is interesting to note how women, if compared to men, are often allowed a less discretionary use of their personal income (Mills,

²² Typical North Indian dress, currently worn by young *Malayali* women, made of pants and long chemise. Sleeveless churidars were a new fashion at the time of my fieldwork, usually worn by young urban and high-class women, but often considered indecent since it leaves arms and shoulders completely naked.

1997:51), and how this is often implicitly intended and expected for the well-being of the family. The importance of marriage and dowry, not as an individual matter, but as part of the household's life-cycle and status improvements, are strongly reaffirmed in the context of migrant women's consumption choices.

Though I agree with Bhachu that dowry should not necessarily be constructed as an oppressive institution (Bhachu, 1993) – and I have tried to show how women's increasing role in the accumulation of dowry amounts are also perceived as a matter of pride and active family commitment – I also wish to stress how this role is the cause of tensions and criticism in both contexts of migration. Bachu's analysis of the relations between East African Sikh (settled in Britain) women's earning power and their *daajis* at the time of marriage, shows how among the British established community the contemporary dowry has increasingly become composed of goods for the bride and the newly-established couple and much less as a gift to the woman's in-laws. Furthermore, there is no question among them of marriage payments in cash between the two families. Marriage transformation across time in different contexts of migration, says Bhachu, shows a shift from a "kinship-group orientated" pattern to a "couple-orientated" one (Bhachu, 1985). Though, as we shall see, this seems progressively true for an increasing number of married couples, dowry among migrant households in Kerala is still partly understood as something which "has to be given" to the bridegroom's family in order to marry one's daughter. And it is this particular meaning of dowry which is most subject to criticism and resistance by a good number of migrants I met. If women are much keener to use their earnings to purchase gold and personal items for their marriage, they seem much more reluctant to accept that their earnings could be used to "pay" to get them married. In this sense part of the dowry is regarded in migrant women's discourses in a negative and oppressive way. Moreover, most of the women I spoke with pointed out that they would not have benefited from most of the household goods that their families had agreed to give as part of their marriage settlement, since they were expected to go back to Italy soon after marriage. It is therefore important to show how different aspects of marriage payments can be differently understood within the women's migration experience, according also to the different stages of a migrant community's development. Continual changes in the Syrian Christian *Malayali* community in Rome may lead to

further re-elaboration of dowry practice and meaning, as Bhachu's work has shown for the East African Sikh community in Britain.

One final consideration before turning to the analysis of marriage arrangements. Though in the following section I will mainly concentrate on cases in which marriage and dowry are the subjects of negotiation between the two contexts of migration and of a considerable reduction of their amount, there are many other cases in which marriage arrangements made by parents in India are not questioned by their offspring in Italy. In some cases, women's migration leads to a considerable increase in dowry at the time of their marriage. Nevertheless, in most cases the *Malayali* women I spoke to in Italy were much keener to express their criticism towards dowry, even when they had simply decided to accept their family's decision. In this case, they were often aware that dowry cannot be completely avoided, and that that was a basic condition for their marriage. As Manju told me one day:

If after all these years in Italy we do not give a dowry, people will think that we cannot afford it...

Migration should neither be seen as a process through which cultural values are broken up and rejected nor as a way in which the new context ethnic and social identities are brought and settled down within a bounded and unchanging community. Similarly, among a good number of migrant women I met in Rome, discourses and attitudes towards marriage and dowry were rarely shaped by a complete refusal or a passive acceptance, but its meanings and contents were often subject to negotiation in both contexts. This is the subject of the next section.

6. Marriage: between desires and family loyalty

To arrange a good marriage and to give or expect a big dowry for their offspring is part of the migrant family's expectations in India. As I have noticed before, among the women who first came to Italy there is a high rate of what is often referred to in India as "love marriages" - in differentiation from "arranged marriages" - where the person actually chooses their spouse independently from the family. I have also stressed how in the past decade *Malayali* who come to Rome have relatively easier access to available job opportunities and to accommodation facilities - thanks to their relatives who have

previously migrated to Italy - and I have underlined the increasing willingness to go back to India after some years in Italy, though this initial reaction may change considerably for many reasons.

Different and stronger expectations towards migrants seem to be involved in the recent migration to Italy, if we compare the latter with the flows in the 1960s and 70s. As one of the men I interviewed in Kerala - whose daughter Shamol arrived in Italy in 1967, initially to become a nun, and who subsequently in 1993 helped her sister's daughter, Shilly, to come to Italy - pointed out clearly:

When Shamol left in 1967 our situation was not good, I could not have found her a husband...I did not know exactly what was going to happen to her in Italy but I thought that she might have better opportunities than here. Now it is different...see Shilly, my granddaughter, she arrived in Italy and she easily found a job thanks to Shamol. We know the place now...Now my daughter's house (Shilly's mother) is almost finished and next year Shilly will have a very big marriage!!!!

This statement shows how family expectations regarding migrants have increased in the past decade, and this is partly due to the widening of the kinship network in the new context and the relatively more secure conditions that the newcomers have once they arrive in Italy. In this context marriage and dowry represent one of the most important ways in which family expectations can be fulfilled. Arranging a good marriage, widening the range of spouse selection's possibilities, and giving a "good" dowry is often less understood in India and conceptualised in terms of traditional practice, and more as a way of showing off newly acquired status and one's modernity. Marriage payments often represent a relatively "traditional" framework through which a family can express "modern" achievements in terms of education, social and geographical mobility, and access to consumption market (see Osella and Osella, 2000a). As Thomas' words remind us, the possibility of choosing a good husband and of arranging a "big" marriage represents a turning point in a woman's life, which clearly contrasts with her family's precarious past. Mobility strategies achieved through migration include, for example, higher education for the family members who remain in Kerala, since migrants often pay for their younger siblings' college education. In Kerala the possibility of sending one's offspring to a private college is a

matter of family pride and a basic condition of finding a good job in Kerala as well as abroad.

I do not therefore imply that dowry is the main and unique reason for both male and female migration to Italy, but it should be understood within a broader context of social and economic mobility strategies achieved through migration. Marriage in Kerala involves not only the expenses and the dowry given or expected by the family, but longer processes of status renewal which is a basic condition for entering the marriage market. Having a newly built house is one of the main visible demonstrations of "being ready to marry" off one's children, and this is why during the first year of migration women often use their earnings to provide their families with better houses. In Kerala most families fear that if the girl's marriage takes place too soon, her earnings will be directed towards the husband's family. This is why migrant women usually marry later than if they had stayed in India.

This brings us to consider the way in which women's migration intertwines both with the household's development cycle and with local ideology regarding affinal relations between households. Since after her marriage a woman is expected to join her husband's family and to belong to it, girls' families are expected to rely less upon their daughters' help. Conflicts between households might arise in relation to different family loyalties. One's daughter's marriage is often conceptualised locally as the "last economic effort" a family has to face to send their daughter away in marriage, and after a dowry has been given – which is partly understood as women's property – women are not expected to claim a further share of their natal family's property. This puts migrant women in the paradoxical position of capitalising their earnings abroad into what at the time of the marriage is partly conceptualised as their family share.

The local conceptualisation of marriage and of affinal relations explain partly the importance that young and unmarried women's migration has for their families. During the first year of migration a young woman is expected to contribute to her family's socio-economic improvement, until the time of her marriage. At the same time, women's migration contributes to a redefinition of affinal relations in both contexts. Women's earning power and relative independence gained sometimes bring them to contest their husbands' families expectations - both in Italy and in India, as Lia's story showed us – and use part of their earnings for their families in India. Though some women spoke to me about their satisfaction

regarding the help they were still able to give to their families even after their marriage, others stressed the burden of being "in the middle" between different families' expectations.

What I suggest here is that women's migration to Italy should be partly understood in terms of a continual tension between women's temporary unmarried status, their family expectations, and the ideological representations in Kerala of female migration. In Kerala high value is associated with arranged marriage and the fact that a girl should be a virgin at the time of her marriage. The decision of a family to send their daughter away is often taken in a context where conflicting considerations are made between the aim of improving the family's socio-economic condition and the aim of preserving the girl's and family's honour. Women's mobility raises tensions and involves changes in the way in which gender roles and social values are understood and conceptualised (Mills, 2001:4; 18-19). As Manju's words expressed clearly "women are not so free to be far away for a long time as men are ... because people will invent stories about them". This becomes particularly evident in a context where migration flows are mainly undertaken by men. In this context the earning power is widely associated with the male section of society. Migrant men will give a bigger dowry to their sister and ask for a bigger dowry at the time of their marriage.

This fact contributes in my opinion to shape a criticism of men who send their daughters abroad to earn money. Local people in the village where I was staying in Kerala often used to make fun of households where mainly men were living, while their wives or daughters were working in Italy. Expressions such as: "What sort of men are they? They simply stay at home and their women provide for everything!" were quite frequent in the village where I was staying. The main role that women often assume as wage earners abroad is not always well accepted within the local society, and this tendency often reflects different class ideologies in Kerala. High and middle-class families attach high value to a non-working woman, unless the job she can have in Kerala is a skilled one. Among these families criticism and irony is often expressed towards families where a woman is the main wage earner abroad. The same tendency characterised families who came from different sections of society but who had previously started to be engaged in socio-economic mobility and status improvement, thanks to Gulf migration. Conversely, among lower-middle class families the possibility of

arranging a marriage with a family who has a daughter in Italy is still regarded with favour.

Migrant women who provide for their own dowries at the time of their marriage accomplish therefore a duty which is often ideologically elaborated in Kerala as a family duty, with special reference to a woman's parents or brothers. The changes in a woman's role within households in Kerala are not always well accepted by other members of the household as well as by the wider society.

In Kerala the opportunity to arrange a good marriage for a daughter who is working abroad assumes a renewed importance since it represents a field where parents can accomplish at least part of their duties. A woman finally becomes a *marumakkal*, daughter-in-law, and the social pressures towards her being unmarried will vanish. As Gardner, and Grillo (2002:186) noticed, through ritual performances participants are able to operationalize an ideal and perhaps normally unattainable concept of family and family relations - what a "good family" should do and how "ideal family relations" should be. These are often challenged by processes such as migration and transnationalism. This seems to be fitting for the marriage rituals, as well as marriage practices such as negotiation and payments, through which parents try materially and symbolically to pursue the reappropriation of their roles and duties.

Interestingly, however, marriage and dowry arrangements far from being confined to the sending country often become the subject of material and symbolic negotiation between the two contexts of migration. The transnational features of marriage arrangements contribute to the redefinition of the meaning of this life-cycle ritual and of the social and family expectations in both contexts. I see the transnational feature of marriage as a twofold process. First of all, marriage and dowry can be the object of conflict and negotiation between the generations, namely offspring in Italy and the parents and older members of the household in Kerala. Secondly, these negotiations often involve families in Kerala and the first generation migrants, who have been settled in Rome for a long time and to whom the former are related by kinship ties.

In some cases tensions between the family and the girl may arise if marriage arrangements are made in Kerala by the family while the woman, or her relatives in Italy, have already found a possible bridegroom in Rome. Families in Kerala often speak with embarrassment about the decision to give up contacts already established with other families. They feel they could have

found a better bridegroom locally (in India), in terms of education and social background, since the higher status of these families could have been exchanged for the prospect of the bridegroom going to Italy. "Marrying back" a daughter in Kerala is often more valued because it gives the opportunity for better alliances and gives continuity to the migration process. Some families in Kerala feel that a boy who has already migrated at an early age to Italy does not have the same education as a boy who could afford a good education in India.

Interestingly, first generation women are often critical of the great emphasis given to dowry in Kerala. They often identify "the problem of marriage and dowry" as one of the main reasons for their difficult experiences during the first years of migration. As Mary said to me one day:

Sometimes I think it is amazing! ... See, I left Kerala to avoid dowry and marriage problems ... and now *Malayali* women are coming to Italy to give a bigger dowry when they go back to marry in India!"

The first generation migrants often play an important role in negotiating between their relatives in India and the migrants in Rome. This power of negotiation, which is often carried out by the women who came first to Italy, is partly based on the problems families in Kerala have in evaluating the new context's requirements and expectations towards the newcomers. What families in Kerala might judge as a good alliance does not necessarily follow the same criteria and ideas as relatives in Italy, who might think that a snobbish and over ambitious boy who has never been out of Kerala would not be able to adjust to the new context.

First generation migrants, though they have been settled in Rome for a long time, still exercise a lot of influence towards their relatives in India and this also applies to dowry issues. In a considerable number of cases, for example, dowry given at the time of a migrant woman's marriage is reduced, and the possibility given to her husband to come to Italy becomes the main part of the dowry given to his family. While I was in India, for example, Mary came once for a niece's marriage. The girl was working in Rome, and Mary took part in the marriage negotiation. She told the bridegroom's family that she would help him with the documents necessary to come to Italy and she would find a job for him there. Finally, the dowry given was mainly gold and furniture for the house, and no money was given.

Transnational marriage arrangements are often one of the fields where first generation migrant women's power can be expressed. Their influence on the sending society is not only related to their easier access to material resources, for instance money and job opportunities, but also to the deeper knowledge they have of both contexts in terms of the bureaucratic issues and general living conditions the newcomers have to face in Italy. Their role as pioneer women in promoting further migration and the close contacts they maintain with their sending society, thanks the relatives they have helped to come to Italy, have widened the extension of their influence among their relatives' households in Kerala. They are often consulted by the latter during critical household events - such as marriage - in a way that would have been more difficult if they had not achieved this position. Interestingly, for example, some of Mary's relatives in Rome come from very distantly related families in Kerala, with whom Mary and her family in Kerala started to have closer relations after some of their members came to Mary in Italy. If migration reflects the household's solidarity in Kerala, it also contributes to reaffirming and strengthening distant kinship ties. It is therefore important to think about households, not as a bounded and physical entity, but also as a set of relationships and transactions, and to see how duties between people and place are continually renegotiated (Gardner, 1995: 121). Young migrants have often to mediate between duties to and the expectations of their parents in India and their relatives in Rome. In some cases conflicts arise between these two contexts of migration if the girl's family agree in India to give a big dowry to the bridegroom's family when the young girl still owes money to the relatives in Rome who helped her to migrate. During the first years of migration a girl should repay, at least partly, the debts contracted with her relatives in Rome, although this is not always expected.

Returning to the marriage arrangements it is important to stress how migrant women's and men's opinions on that matter are often similar. Some men I spoke with in Rome expressed the desire to find a *Malayali* woman in Rome, emphasising the fact that with an "Italian *Malayali*" they could share more experiences and ideas. Kuriachel, who has been working in Italy for the past eight years told me that:

Women here are more trained with a job and they are forward...different mentality. If I marry a **Malayali** who has never been out of her place I will have trouble to make her understand

how life is here...language problems, the food is different. You never know what will be their reaction!!!

Kuriachel married Merine, a *Malayali* woman, after they met in Rome. Merine comes from a backward area of Kerala and she did not have a college education. When they decided to marry both their families were quite disappointed. Merine's family feared that it was too soon for her to marry: they had just started to build a new house and they feared that after her marriage Merine would reduce her remittances to help her husband's family, because this is normally what a *Malayali* married woman is supposed to do. Kuriachel wanted an educated girl from a better family. But they finally agreed to the marriage. Interestingly, Merine's relatives in Rome played an important role in persuading Merine's parents about letting her marry Kuriachel. As Kuriachel said to me once:

They know that I am working hard here ... They knew me very well even before Merine came here and they see that I was sending home money regularly and I was taking care of my family there ... When a new person arrives here you never know if he will be able to adjust or what will be his behaviour! They can change, they can be violent because their wife does something they do not like ... I know some cases like that. But in our case it was different!!! Here you have to change a lot ...

See ... men in Kerala, people generally are so lazy, so lazy! They study a lot and then they do not find anything to do ... they do not know what a hard job is like we do! And they go around wasting their time and waiting for their marriage, that's what they do!

Interestingly women often expressed their worries in marrying a *Malayali* in Kerala because they feared their reaction once they came to the point of accepting a domestic job. Shilbi, a 27 year old girl who has been in Italy for the past six years, told me:

They have to understand that they cannot have the same life here as they have in Kerala! Here I am always busy with my job and I only have Sunday off ... I cannot cook and do all the work I am supposed to do, and they have to manage by themselves. One of my friends had a lot of trouble because her husband, once he came here, did not want to work as a domestic and he did not like her to go out for that kind of job ... I think that her family did not tell him that this was the kind of job you find here ...

Migrant women and men are often worried about the reaction their spouse might have once they arrive in Italy, since their expectations are in most cases in deep contrast to the real job possibilities offered locally.

Malayali migrants marriage aspirations and choices often express different expectations from those of their families. While the latter seem to be often much more concerned with status priorities and social mobility in the local context, *Malayalis* who have years of experience as migrants abroad often emphasise more their interest in finding a spouse with whom to share similar experiences. *Malayalis* who have never migrated are often described as "backward" and "traditional", not in terms of their economic and status position in India, but in relation to the difficulties and resistance they might have in accepting difficult situations in the new context. Different marriage aspirations are linked to the different knowledge people have of transnational migration, which vary according to the places people have experienced. In Kerala families are often not aware of the kind of job available in Italy, and migrant preoccupations in marrying a *Malayali* who has never been to Italy reflect the gap between expectations and real migrant daily life.

Shilbi's words, and generally the experiences of the migrant women I met, bring us to consider how the time of marriage can be an occasion in which migrants express and claim the personal transformations (Mills, 2001: 149) achieved through migration and how the migration experiences of mobility contribute to the contestation and redefinition of gender ideologies. Women's full-time work in Italy often conflicts with the tasks a woman is supposed to perform within the household. Most of the women I spoke to in Rome expected their husbands to take up tasks and responsibilities - such as household and child care - while they were working. The redefinition of gender ideology through migration plays a crucial role in the construction of women's identity. Though, as we have seen women's experiences are often ambivalent - between constraint and independence - they often stress the active role they can play in both contexts as migrants.

Finally, dowry negotiations between contexts can also therefore show the strength of the conjugal couple in the new context in relation to households in Kerala. Vincent and Beena met in Italy and decided to marry, but they both refused to give a dowry at the time of their marriage to

the great disappointment of both their families in India. As Vincent said to me one day:

Every time we go to Kerala we spend so much money! You have to be ready to go ... and a lot of us decide to postpone the journey if we do not have enough money for the gifts, for the debts and for family needs. Both Beena and me had built huge houses for our parents and nevertheless my family was expecting a huge dowry for me ... they were disappointed when we both decided not to give one ... but now we want to think of our life here, and we have a lot expenses here in Italy and they often do not realise in Kerala that we also have to survive here!

Women's family commitments during their first year of migration, and the possibility they offer to potential husbands to come to Italy after marriage, makes it easier to see dowry as an additional expense which should be compensated for by the continuity of the migration process through the involvement of the affinal household's members. Generally, the detachment from dowry practice is more frequent from couples who have met in Rome and who decide to marry back in Kerala, but who already have clear intentions to go back to Italy together and take up their jobs and life as a newly-married couple there.

7. Conclusion

In this paper, I have tried to analyse a particular migration experience in the broader context of international migration from Kerala which links this country with Italy. I was interested in showing how women's mobility can be analysed in terms of transnational network formation and how transnational ties and household processes emerge as relevant during one of the most important life cycle rituals.

As we have seen, women played a pioneer role in "opening the way" to Italy, during the first cohort of *Malayali* migration. Their experiences should be understood in terms of a dialectical relation between social and cultural constraints - for instance, lack of job opportunities for a woman, marriage as a economic burden for her family; enabling factors offered by a society which had experienced migration in many stages of its history, and the active role played by women in deciding to involve themselves in migration experiences and encourage further migration. In this context migration often reflects a female solidarity network across different households in India. This process contributes to deep changes in

the way in which women perceive their relations with their family in India . As we have seen, women often question their families ability to provide for their lives (Lia) and the hierarchical features of their society (Mary speaking about her father's attitude towards labourers) and how migration might become a way to overcome what are perceived as local limitations. Salih (2001) has correctly underlined that women's migration can be conditioned by hegemonic normative structures which they have internalised. What I am trying to suggest here is that, within this process of the incorporation of normative structures and social restrictions, women can also actively enhance the opportunities for other women as well as other men, and build up contesting strategies to relate themselves to both contexts. Lia's optimism in questioning her uncle's role and encouraging her cousins to follow her to Italy emphasize how her experience can in some way be "contagious" for other women²³. At the same time her conflict with her husband's family in Italy reveals how the latter's expectations of her were quite different from the way she interpreted her role as a migrant earning woman.

The ethnographic material and the analysis presented in this paper also aim to show how relations between women's migration and transnational movements and women's role within the household should be understood as a dialectical process of reciprocal influences. On the one hand migration and transnational movements can be influenced by the roles women are expected to perform in the domestic sphere and in the household. Ruba Salih's analysis of Moroccan women's migration to Italy underlines how their role as mothers and home carers often requires women to travel back to Morocco to visit their families and therefore forge their transnational movements (Salih, 2001:665). Gardner points out the way in which Bangladeshi women's migration to the UK during the 1980s, through the family reunion visa, should be partly understood in terms of their ageing husbands' need for care and assistance in the host country (Gardner, 2002b), though they were often kept apart from transnational movements in some important life-cycle celebrations such as death rituals (Gardner, 2002a).

I would also suggest that, inversely, migration and transnational movement deeply contribute to shaping and redefining women's roles and tasks within the household. Through migration women become increasingly and actively involved in their family's economic and social improvements: the

particular correlation between a household's development cycle, their unmarried status as migrants and earning women and the local conceptualisation of marriage as one of the most important strategies of social mobility brings women to undertake responsibilities and duties – for instance, working for their dowries - which have long been both ideologically and practically associated with senior and often male members of the household. As we have seen, the women of the first cohort have progressively established and maintained increasing contact with their countries of origin through remittances and further migrant sponsorships, - locating themselves within extended social networks – and this often allows them access to marriage negotiations and decisions in both contexts.

I have also stressed the way in which what I call a process of the "reinterpretation of women's roles" through migration is often the subject of tension and a conflicting ideology in both contexts and between generations.

In the analysis of migrant communities, the tendency among migrants to go back to their original country for marriage is often addressed and explained in terms of a "persisting tradition" and the "retention of cultural values" (Bujis, 1993b; Anthias, 2000). This kind of view often promotes a misleading association between, on the one hand, the "original country" and "tradition" and, on the other, the "host country" and "modernity", and overlooks "local" (in this case in Kerala) processes of social mobility and interpretation of modernity. As I have tried to show in this paper, for the majority of families I met in Kerala, the possibility of widening the range of spouse selection for their offspring and of giving a big dowry is much less conceptualised as the persistence of traditional custom than as a way to show off newly acquired status and socio-economic prestige. In this context, marriage payments represent a more ambivalent framework – where the contents of tradition and modernity are hardly distinguishable and in continual redefinition – through which families legitimise locally (in Kerala) their socio-economic strategies of mobility.

Besides, the explanation of "arranged marriages back to one's native country" as "persistence of tradition" overlooks the power of negotiation eventually gained by migrants in both contexts: as we have seen, a "love affair" in Italy between *Malayali* can be transformed into an "arranged marriage" back in Kerala and a dowry's contents and meaning can be the objects of negotiation between young migrants, their families in India,

and their relatives in Italy. I would not therefore see the conflicts which might arise between the two contexts of migration in terms of a clash between "tradition" and a "modern" life style and values, but in terms of different interpretations and desires regarding social mobility strategies and the symbolic recognition of renewed status. As I have tried to show, different interpretations of "modern achievements" – such as education, a good marriage, dowry, consumption – vary according to gender, generations and the different access to knowledge and material resources that migrant households have experienced according to the context.

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