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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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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

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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

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

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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*

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

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

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 ine1

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 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

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 her

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.

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

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

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,

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 m0.

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.

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

To arrange a good marriage and to give or expect a big dowry for their offspring is part

matter of family pride and a basic condition of finding a good job in Kerala as well as abroad.
I do not therefore

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 bth

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

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the way in which women perceive their relations

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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