

# Conjugal Rights and Sexual Privacy among Scheduled Caste Households in Caste Settlement Colonies in Kerala

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## Abstract

Space in a household is not only a private commodity but also it has alternative uses. Scarcity and alternative uses of space compel occupants in a household to choose what they have to do with their limited space against unlimited spatial needs. A household becomes a "home", when it serves spatial needs of its occupants and helps them to realize maximum potential of their capabilities. Space scarcity is reflecting not only existing standard of living of people but also acts as a predictor of their future attainments. In this article we present spatial conditions of scheduled caste households in caste settlement colonies in Kerala. We argue that present residential conditions and space availability among scheduled caste households in caste settlement colonies in Kerala cause denial of many human rights including conjugal rights and sexual privacy to them. We suggest that housing policies of the state must give more importance to qualitative aspects of 'space' in household rather than quantitative aspects like how many number of houses we add every year.

**Keywords: Conjugal Rights, Sexual Privacy, Caste Settlement Colonies, Overcrowding**

Scheduled castes are original inhabitants of India. They were rich and had a superior culture with no caste system and social discrimination among them. How did they become untouchables in Hindu caste system is still covered in speculations and unsubstantiated arguments. Historical origin of 'untouchable castes', legally known in today's world 'scheduled castes' is totally lost in exotic theories ranging from 'mythology to theology'. Aryan subjugation of indigenous people and integration of tribal people to the hierarchical social order is the most popular one. Majumdar [2018] places untouchable castes as the lowest category of people living outside typical Hindu villages. He emphasises that 'they lived not only outside the city but the very sight of them also made Hindu people impure. Majumdar locates the origin of untouchables within the fashionable 'purity-impurity' dichotomy without further exploring why the 'impurity' emerges. Another giant in Indian history Romila Thappar [2002] also places scheduled castes as Chandalas or untouchables, occupying a social position below Sudras. She argues Aryanization and further urbanization were the possible causes of the formation of untouchable communities. She rests her one foot on pollution-purity arguments of caste system and the other foot on economic development of society. According to Thappar, denial of rights and resources and subsequent alienation and deprivation could be the major reasons of untouchability. Her economic notion of untouchability resonates with contemporary pitiable living conditions of scheduled castes

in India. Sharma [2005] shares some interesting observations on caste system. He argues that dividing Indian people on racial line is very difficult and he notes that in certain parts of India both the upper castes and untouchables share same physical features. He too tilts towards the argument that socio-economic denials and deprivations caused untouchability other than certain definite racial stock of people. Ambedkar [1916] also has put his weight in favour of this argument. Authors like Bhattacharya [1988] sees the origin of untouchability in “unproductive mentality” of tribal people who failed to pace with economic development happened around them. Jha [1977] proposes a counter argument to ‘Aryan subjugation theory’. In his opinion Aryan subjugation theory might be a regression because indigenous people were far more developed than nomadic Aryans. He has tried to prove his argument taking plenty of examples from Brahmanic literatures. When Romila Thappar [1978] writes [after four varnas] ‘the fifth order was “later” identified with untouchables’ clearly indicates the dynamic growth of caste system as explained by Ambedkar rather than a divine fixity in ‘purusasukta’. Counter arguments to Aryan subjugation theories and purity-impurity binary have led to subaltern perspectives in social history and subsequent emergence of the idea of ‘dalit’ in Indian socio-cultural space. Historically scheduled castes were known as ‘untouchables, excommunicated, depressed castes, Harijans, Scheduled Castes and Dalits. 1935 Government of India Act put former depressed castes into a legally accepted ‘schedule’ to protect their rights. Indian constitution in its article 341 places former untouchable castes into a ‘schedule’.

All ancient historical sources invariably portray scheduled castes as people who have been living in the margins of Hindu villages without any meaningful resources at their disposal and experiencing not only economic deprivations but also social boycotting and denial of even human rights. At the concluding parts of every doctoral thesis on scheduled castes in today’s India too, we see the same kind of portrayal of them as we saw them in ancient Indian history text books. Experiencing untouchability, living in barren lands, mostly located in uninhabitable rocky, marshy and mountainous regions and exposing to unimagineable

varieties of socio-economic discriminations and denials of even human rights are lived experiences of scheduled caste in India even today. In this article we attempt to understand housing conditions of scheduled castes in Kerala with a view to examine if scheduled caste couples are forced to compromise on their conjugal rights and sexual privacy due to space constraints and over-crowding in their households. Conjugal rights refer to sexual rights and privileges that are inalienable in normal conditions among couples in wedlock. It includes unconditional rights to have sexual intercourse between them. Sexual privacy refers to a person’s human right to pursue his/her sexual needs and attains sexual gratification, without violating others’ human rights, in reasonable private environment with dignity and self-esteem.

Kerala Economy popularly known as “god’s own country” has achieved admirable socio-economic returns in the lives of people across the state without much considerable variations between rural-urban folks except SC & ST colonies, fishermen colonies and plantation labour quarters [Aparna, 2019, sivanandan, 1976, saradamoni,1979]. Kerala economy with its world renowned development model and the historical bloodless land reform revolution brought happiness to all except scheduled castes, scheduled tribes, fishermen and plantation labourers. Scheduled castes were the greatest losers of land reforms in Kerala. They did not get any sufficient amount of land, though they had been toiling in paddy fields for centuries under tyrannical caste feudalism as agrestic slaves [Paul, 2021, Sanal 2015, Peruvatoor, 1995]. Scheduled castes were rehabilitated in caste settlement colonies with a homestead of about 3 to 5 cents. There are about 26198 scheduled caste settlement colonies in Kerala [KILA, 2010]. Average land holdings of Hindu forward castes in Kerala was 105 cents, forward Christians 126 cents, Muslims 77 cents, backward Hindu castes 63 cents and Scheduled castes’ was just 2.7 cents [KSSP, 2006]. As we know that Kerala economy has been growing primarily through three distinct but interconnected economic sources- bank credit, government expenditures and foreign remittances, especially from Gulf countries. A close observation of the economic dynamics of scheduled caste households in caste settlement colonies prove

that they have not been benefitted from any of these Kerala Model developmental sources. In this article we focus on space in households and conjugal rights and sexual privacy of couples.

A home is not a physical space alone. It is a place of comfort, safety, security and above all a space of identity and rootedness. It is our gateway to the society around us. It shapes our personality. It gives us peacefulness, relaxation and a strong feeling of belonging. It gives us opportunities to be independent and "better adjusted" to the outer world. A home of one's own is an abundant source self-confidence and prestige. A home is the most private space for a person where he/she can achieve maximum amount of personal space. Home is a breeding space of love, care and it helps us to have a better understanding of others. It is our first school. It is a place of seclusion, privacy and merry making too. It accommodates the needs of all, irrespective of their age and interests. Houses are not private space alone but a public display of or a trophy of one's social power and prestige. Bigger houses with extended landscapes give more private spaces and personal spaces. House is many families' largest investment. Houses are sources of national income, national wealth and national employment. Housing conditions are reflection of standard of living. It is a space of self-expression and freedom and autonomy. It is a place where we find "mental peace and comfort" in the deepest level. It is the place to which wherever we are we wish to come back at the end of a day. It is a place that makes us fearless, less anxious and well balanced and composed. A house is not only a reflection of present standard of living but also a predictor of future human attainments and possibilities of human development. A home is a treasure of safety, security, mental peace, physical wellness, hygiene, convenience, ease of living, comforts, pleasure, aesthetics, a feeling of belonging, self-identity and above all a factory human welfare. Residential satisfaction is a reflection of not only individual level of welfare but also society's welfare. A home is a critical place of human existence and expressions.

A 'house' is only a physical structure that can occupy a family but a 'home' is more than that. A house becomes a home only when it is capable of

helping members of a family to realize the maximum potential of a happy life that presupposes the presence of adequate housing facilities and reasonable amount of personal space. A home is not merely a 'dwelling arrangement or shelter' that protects people from natural calamities. A home is an integral part of a human being. In government documents a 'household' is defined as a physical space where people live and share a common kitchen. A household is conceived as something lies between "eating and defecating". A home is, quantitatively and qualitatively, far away from a standard household definition of government documents. When Abraham Maslow talks of "self-actualization", he truly means the transformation of a physical space into a "home". A home is not only a mere physical space that provides just a "shelter" for its residents but also provides all services that ensure the holistic development and attaining maximum potential of each member in the family. When Amartya Sen speaks of "development as freedom", he too imagines the transformation of a household into a "home". Space constraints and overcrowding will inevitably prevent the transformation of a household to a home.

As per 2011 census report, scheduled caste population in Kerala is 30.39 lakhs, sex ratio among them is 1057, literacy rate of them is 88.7%, child population ratio to total SC population is 14.5 % and their share in total state population is 9.1%. As per KILA report in 2011, there are about 26198 scheduled caste colonies in Kerala. Total population of these colonies is 23.52 lakhs. There are 123871 single room houses and 132378 two bed room houses in these colonies. There are 45959 unoccupied houses in these colonies. There are 25408 landless families, 15984 own land but homeless families and 67911 unfinished houses in these colonies. As per the same report, nearly 80 % of the scheduled caste populations [23.52 Lakhs] reside in caste settlement colonies. 63% of scheduled caste households in caste settlement colonies possess less than 400sq. ft floor space. 12% of the population in scheduled caste colonies have no own latrine facilities. 27% of the families face water shortage over six months in a year. 12 % of scheduled caste households in caste settlement colonies were not electrified in 2011. Space constraints in scheduled caste households in

Kerala creates a lot of socio-economic issues ranging from overcrowding and its associated problems like lack of adequate space for normal household activities to deep rooted psycho-social issues like violation of conjugal rights, lack of sexual privacy, criminal behaviour among members in the household and domestic violence against women [Hall, 2010, Makinde et al 2016]. Let us have a look at the space availability in households in Kerala in general and in particular households in scheduled caste settlement colonies for having a deeper understanding of how conjugal rights, sexual privacy and household space are interconnected.

**Table 1 Availability of Household Space – All Population- Census-2011**

No of Rooms	Total	%
Single room houses	645066	8.36
Two rooms Houses	1937119	25.11
Three rooms houses	2484792	32.20
Four rooms and above houses	2649393	34.33
Total	7716370	100

Source- Census 2011

**Table 2 Availability of Household Space – Scheduled Castes – Census-2011**

No of Rooms	Total	%
Single room houses	122242	16.27
Two rooms Houses	298352	39.72
Three rooms houses	226857	30.20
Four rooms and above houses	103714	13.81
Total	751165	100

Source: Census 2011

A combined analysis of the above two tables shows that 56 % of scheduled caste households live in two rooms households as against general population average is only 33.47%. State average of single room household is only 8.36% of total households but it is 16.27 % among scheduled castes. Total percentage share of scheduled caste households under single room category is 18.95% that is almost double of the state average. While 25.11% of general population occupy in two rooms houses, then 39.72% of scheduled castes occupy in two bed rooms category. When general population possesses 34.33% of

four rooms or above households, scheduled castes occupy only 13.81% of such category houses. In a single room household, four scheduled castes live as per census 2011. We have reached this conclusion by dividing total scheduled caste population by number of households. Actual person per room may be worse than 4. According to a survey conducted by KILA and published in 2011 stated that there were 123871 single room households and 132378 two roomhouseholds in scheduled caste colonies in Kerala. Total scheduled caste population in caste settlement colonies as per KILA Report is 23.52 lakhs. So the number of people in colonies per household is 9.17 that are double of state average of general population as well as total scheduled caste population as per 2011 census. Average person per room in a scheduled caste colony is 9.17 as compared to 4.32 among general population and 4.04 among total scheduled caste population. All these statistics clearly indicate space constraints and overcrowding among scheduled caste households in caste settlement colonies.

Studies on space and sexual privacy and conjugal rights of scheduled caste people in caste settlement colonies in Kerala are yet to come. Most of the studies on scheduled caste housing are limited within the infrastructure deprivations and they have not gone into the complex realms of right based economics. In one of our close conversations with a young scheduled caste man living in a caste settlement colony in Kerala along with his family- parents, grandparents and wife. He is newly married. Their house is just a ‘two room house’. He narrates his difficulty and mental pains and agonies in realizing his romantic life. He says that he could not pursue intimate moments with his wife without the support of other members in his family. His grandparents are so old and most times they stay in-door. Others in the family, understanding the needs of the newly married couple, try their best to provide them some quality space and time to pursue their intimate life. He said that ‘we are forced to do it simply ignoring the presence of our grandparents. Romantic life of a person must be a source of happiness and pride. In his case, his intimate moments with his wife in his own house give him a sense of shame, helplessness and self-contempt. That poor young man’s testimony

is truly reflecting that conjugal rights of many scheduled caste couples living in space constrained households in caste settlement colonies might have been violated and they might have been denied sexual privacy too. So more studies are yet to come to reflect the actual living conditions of scheduled caste people who are forced to live in space constrained households of caste settlement colonies in Kerala. Many studies have shown that space constraints will affect not only our spatial needs but also our behaviour [Tiwari et al. 2021]. Space scarcity is the actual villain behind many social issues like criminalization of youth, deviant behaviours among kids, mental illness, recurring conflicts, arguments, fist fights among family members, suicides, domestic violence against women, children and old people and poor educational attainments.

### Conclusion

Household space is a private property. It is not only a private property but also a scarce commodity. So poor people may probably face the problem of choice regarding what to do with their limited spaces in real time like watch television or learning a lesson or pursuing intimate romantic life. Kerala model is preoccupied with quantitative aspects of development. It does not give much importance to qualitative aspects of human problems like housing. Public housing initiatives in Kerala always revolve around the number of new houses we produce rather than quality of those houses with respect to space and human needs. A paradigm change in our public housing schemes including innovative understandings of space and human needs is the need of the hour. Sharing nine people a two room house in caste settlement colonies is not at all a proud achievement of Kerala. Kerala model shines only on average macro quantities but stinks in micro details. Overcrowded scheduled caste households in caste settlement colonies are nothing but graveyard of human happiness. Conjugal rights and sexual privacy are luxury goods that are unattainable for those people living in dilapidated space constrained houses in scheduled caste settlement colonies in Kerala.

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