

The Vassareddy succession dispute: female agency under the Company Raj

An exploration of south Indian womanhood.



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Appendix:

Glossary

The definitions taken from the Vassareddy Glossary are marked by ‘ ‘.

achareyetvum	-‘The state, condition, or office of an Acharaya; a spritual guide or teacher; he who invests the student with the sacrificial thread, and instructs him in the Vedas, in the law of sacrifice and religious mysteries.’
annaprasana	-Feeding the child with rice in the sixth or eights month, or when he has cut his teeth.
bhakti	-Devotional Hindu worship
Brahman	-The highest ranking caste of the four Varna castes: the only caste sanctioned to read and study the Vedas.
chuda-carana	-‘The ceremony of tonsure, performed in the second or third, and not later than fifthyear after birth, and consisting of cutting of the hair,except one lock, called the chuda. This ceremony is generallyheld to determine the family of the child; so that a boy cannot be adopted after it has been eprformed in the family of his natural parents.’
cumankali	- An auspicious married Tamil woman
devadasis	-South Indian temple dancers who enjoyed a high social and ritual status in the late medieval period.
devaloka	-The world of Gods
dharma	-The cosmic order of things; correct moral
dharmastras	-Ancient Hindu laws of dharma
farigh-kutti	-‘A deed of release or discharge.’
foujdar	-‘A military officer under the Moghul, next to the nazim in

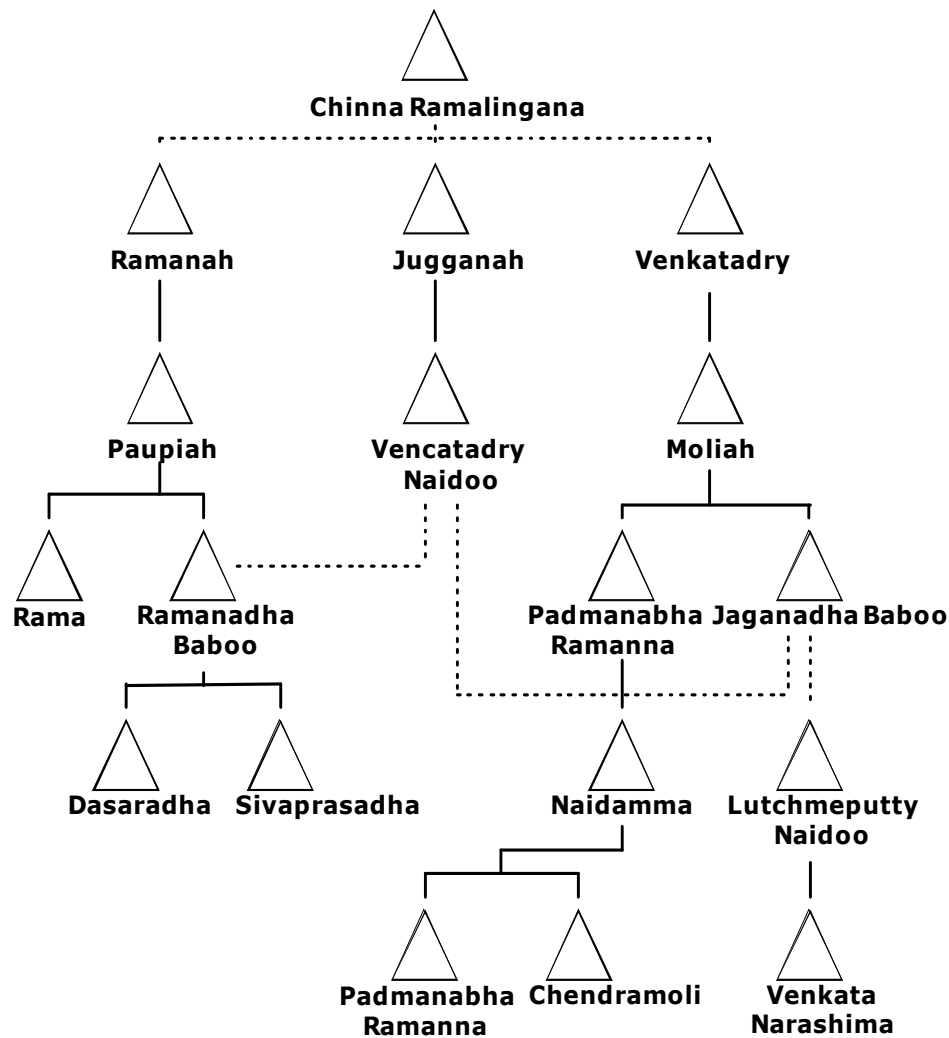
rank, who was charged with the care of police in his district. ‘

gotrum	-Family, lineage, kin. The term is applied to kindred of the same general family, who partake in offerings to deceased ancestors.
homam	-‘The casting of clarified butter (ghee) into a sacrificial fire as an offering to the gods, accompanied with appropriate prayers and invocations according to the object of the sacrifice. A ceremony performed by the family Brahmins at marriages, adoption, and other solemn occasions.’
karar-namah	-‘A deed of agreement or acknowledgement, a contract, an engagement.’
Manu, law of	- A religious commentator; one of the nineteen dharmasastras
Mitakshara	-A legal treatise of inheritance written by Vijñaneshwara in the 12 th Century
nagaloka	- The world of serpents
panchayat	- Village council
poligar	-‘A person holding lands under the condition of watching and protecting the country.’
praktri	- The basis matter of which the Universe consists
pundit	-‘One learned in one or more sastras; a lawyer, and expounder of the Hindu law.’
puranas	- Hindu sacred writings comprising popular myths and legends and other traditional lore
purdha	-Seclusion of women from the public
ryots	-‘A hereditary cultivator of the soil; a peasant; a subject.’
ryotwari	-‘An account or assessment of revenue, settled with each Ryot or cultivator individually’

sakti or shakti	- Sacred force, power or energy; the divine feminine aspect
samuts	- ‘A division of a district.’
smriti	- ‘Recollection, remembrance, memory, law. The body of law, as delivered by Menu and other legislators considered inspired, to their respective pupils, and committed by them from recollection, to writing. A law-book; a code of laws’
stridhana	- ‘(Sans. ‘Str’, woman; ‘dhana’, wealth)-The peculiar property of a woman, possessed and transmissible independently of her husband.’
subahdar	- Chief Indian officer of a company of Indian troops in the British army
Sudder Adawlut	- ‘The chief or supreme Court of justice.’
sudra	- ‘The fourth, or servile tribe, of the Varna categorization.’
talook	- ‘A fiscal division of country, being part of a zamindari.’
vakil or vakeel	- A native attorney or agent
vedas	- ‘The generic name for the sacred writings of the Hindus, supposed to have been revealed by Brahman; and, after being preserved by tradition for a considerable period, to have been arranged in the present for by Vyasa. The principle Vedas are three in number: the Rick, Yajush and Sama; to which a fourth, the Atharva, is usually added; and the Itahasa and Puranas, or ancient history or mythology, are sometimes considered as constituting a fifth. Every learned Brahmin is required to be master of at least one of the Vedas; and Brahmins have often the name of the Veda which they possess added as a surname or name of designation.’
yova-raja-pattabishekam	- The ceremony of anointing the 'young king', or heir to the Raj or principality, in recognition of his title to succeed.
zamindar	- ‘A person who pays into the Government Treasury a stipulated sum annually on account of the land-revenue of a district, according to the terms of his sunud from the Government, or the settlement made with them.’
zenana	- The women's apartment
zillah	- ‘A district under the revenue management of a collector, and constituting the jurisdiction of a Court.’

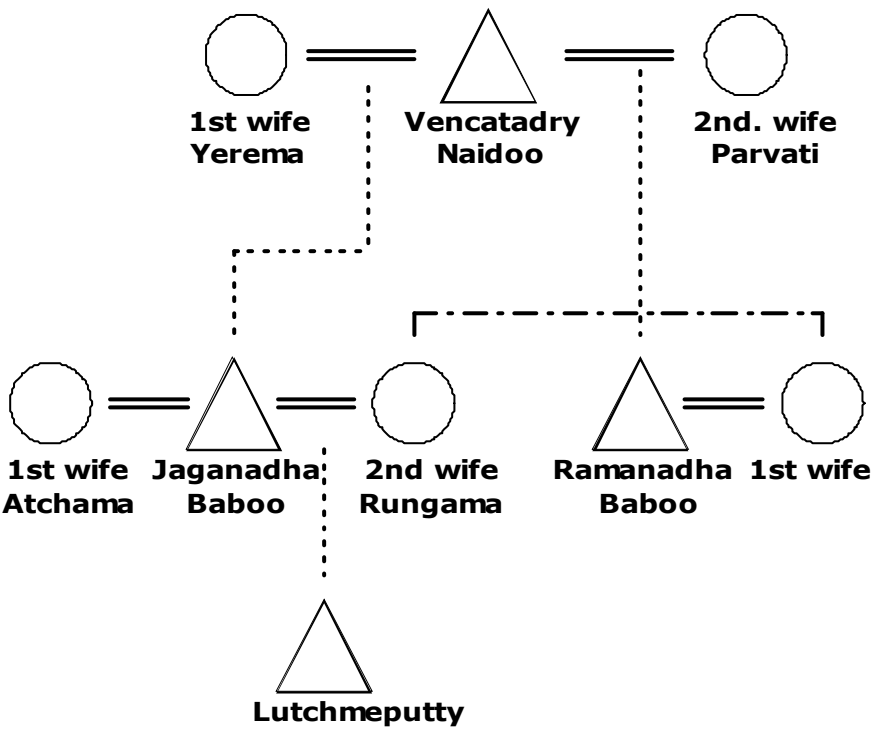
Table I

Kin-relations between central male members
of the Vassareddy family.



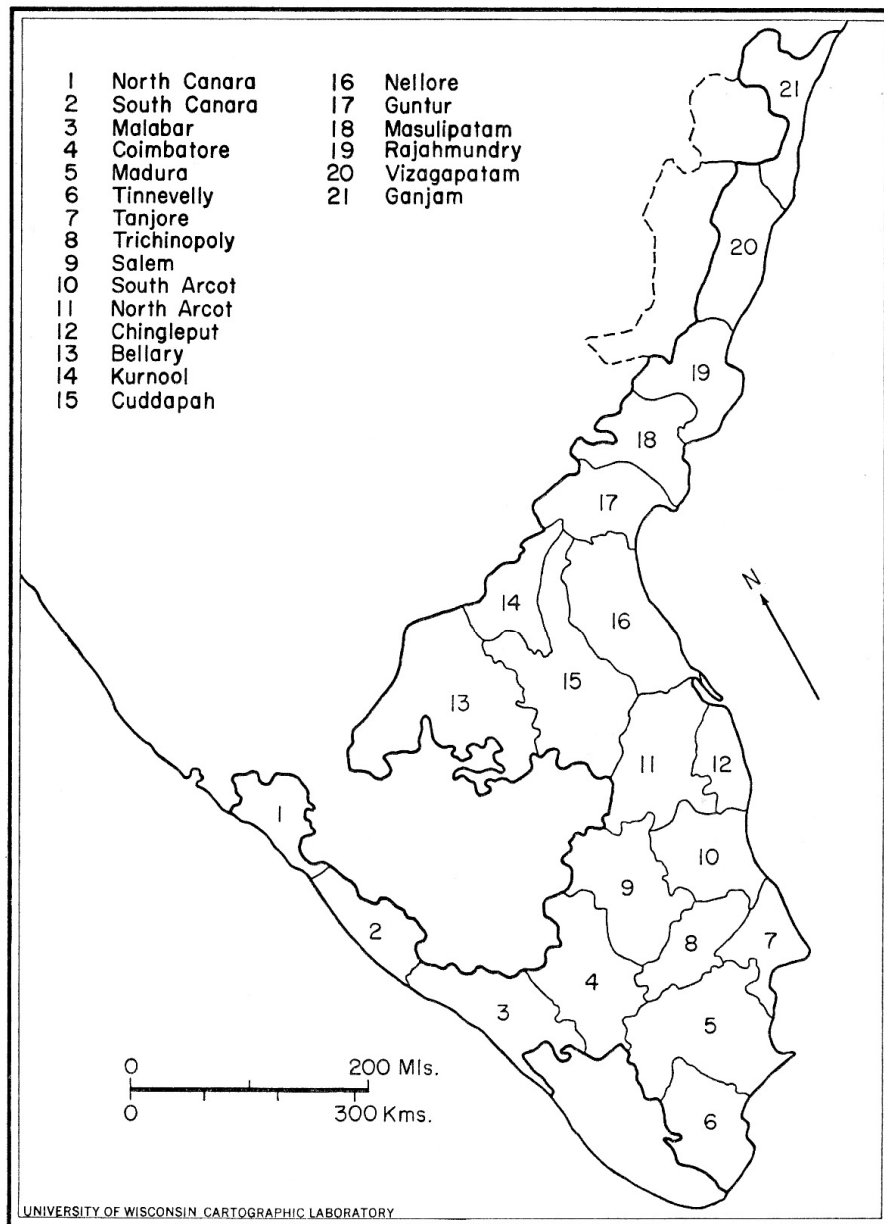
..... indicates adoption
This is not a total genealogical table but an illustration of the relationship
between central male family members.

Table II:



- ==== Indicates marriage
- Indicates adopted son
- - - - - Indicates biological sisters

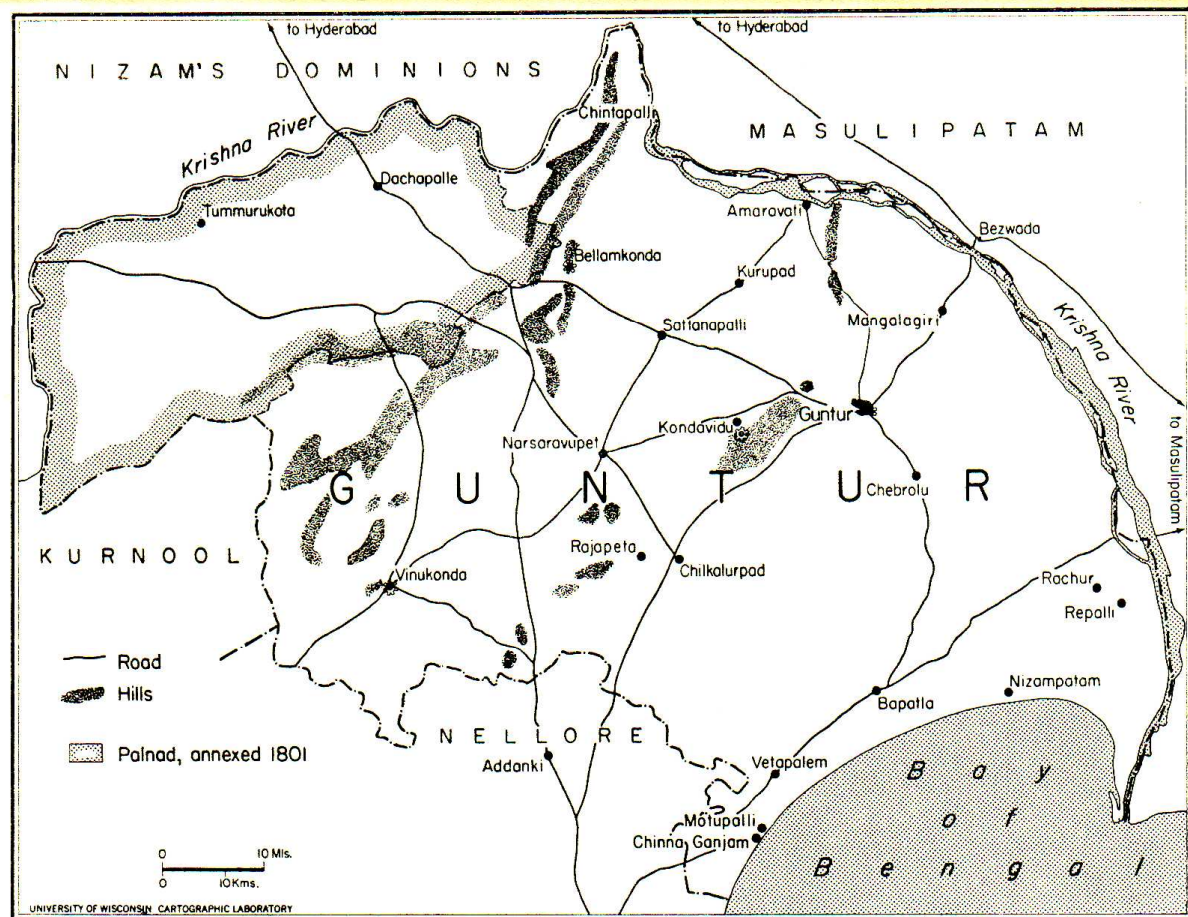
Map I:



Map 2. Districts of Madras Presidency.

[from Eric Frykenberg, *Guntur District*, Clarendon Press, London 1965 p. 278]

Map II:



Map 3. Guntur District, 1788-1859.

[from Eric Frykenberg, *Guntur District*, Clarendon Press, London 1965 p. 279]

Illustration I: Illustration of Vencatadry Naidoo¹



¹ Copied from the home page of 'the Vasireddy dynasty': <http://www.vasireddy.us/history.asp> [entered 1st of October 2008]

List of Vassareddy zamindars

1. Veerapa Naido
2. Pedda Ramanah [son]
3. Chinna Pudmanaboodoo [son]
4. Chendra Mooli [younger brother]
5. Pedda Ramalingana [relation unknown]
6. Soorannah [eldest brother's son]
7. Chinna Nursunna [son]
8. Chinna Ramalingana [youngest brother]
9. Jugganah [adopted son]
10. Ramanah [brother and manager on behalf of his brother's minor son Vencatadry Naidoo]
11. Vencatadry Naidoo [brother's son]

[] brackets indicate the relationship to the previous zamindar

Part I

Introduction:

This thesis is concerned with female participation in a zamindari succession dispute from early 19th Century Madras Presidency, south India.² The object of my study is two-fold. Firstly, I want to conduct a case study of the Vassareddy dispute. This conflict was concerned with an estate of extraordinary value and ended with the similarly extraordinary eradication of the material assets of the Vassareddy family. Even though the case has been well-known among historians of colonial south India, it has never been subjected to detailed study. It is only by studying all of documents from the different courts that one can get specific knowledge of the true complexity of this conflict.

Secondly, this thesis is concerned with the women of the landowning Indian elite in the colonial period. Through different ethnographical sources, I approach the topic of distinct south Indian views of womanhood. My main objective is to establish what was considered as appropriate behaviour for women from landed families, zamindari women, in early 19th Century Telugu country. I wish to explore the display of and opportunity for female agency which appears through these women's testimony in the course of litigation. Agency, in this context, is defined as 'the capacity, condition, or state of acting or of exerting power'.³ The relationship between agency and power has been much debated. One objection is that some scholars have uncritically equated agency with power. This is a complex subject as 'power' is not a given category either. This challenge is explained by the words of Fruzzetti and Tenhunen:

Research which overlooks the agency of actors, who do not have authority, strengthens the dominant discourses, whereas the conflation of power with agency leaves us unequipped to examine and assess power disparities, to examine critically which groups are more successful in enhancing their discourses through which processes.⁴

I will in this context thus use the term agency as the capacity, condition and state of acting.

² I will refer to these women with different terms; zamindari women; elite women, noble women and royal women. These terms may hold slightly different meanings in different contexts; not all elite families were former little kingdoms and consequently were not royal. I however use all these terms generally to describe the women of the indigenous political elites.

³ <http://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/agency> [entered the 24th October 2008]

⁴ Lina Fruzzetti, and Sirpa Tenhunen, , 'Introduction' in *Culture, Power and Agency: Gender in Indian Ethnography*, ed. by Fruzzetti and Tenhunen, STREE Kolkata 2006, p.xix

A brief introduction to the zamindari settlement in Madras Presidency

This early colonial period is often referred to as the period of Company Raj as the Indian subcontinent was administered and ruled by the East India Company⁵; the trading company which during the late 18th Century established an extensive colonial administration in India. The authority of governing India was only transferred to direct rule under the British Government, the British Raj, after the widespread mutiny of 1857.

During the 18th Century, the British presence in India took on an increasing number of functions that extended far beyond the tasks normally associated with a trading company. In Bengal, the East India Company's control was established faster and more firmly than in the southern regions. In order to secure a steady income of revenue, the East India Company made alliances with Bengali 'landlords' and appointed them as *zamindars*, or landlords who had their land assessed and was committed to paying a set revenue to the colonial government. The Permanent Settlement was concluded in Bengal in 1793 by the Governor General Charles Cornwallis. In south India, the British authority was not as firmly established. In pre-colonial south India the political landscape was made up of many kingdoms of varying size and influence, and political authority continued to be divided and unstable in the late 18th Century. Furthermore, the French, the Dutch, the Portuguese and the Danes were all competing to establish dominance at some level in the south Indian peninsula. The south Indians demonstrated great resistance against the Company forces, and British dominance was not achieved until the third Anglo-Mysore war saw the end of the last resisting Raja, Tipu Sultan, who was eventually beaten by the British forces in 1792. After dominance had been achieved, a settlement after the Bengal model was settled with the local kings or *poligars* as they were often referred to by British administrators. The goal was expressed as

that the possession of property and the sure enjoyment of the benefits derivable from it, will awaken and stimulate industry, promote agriculture, extend improvement, establish credit, and augment the general wealth, and prosperity.⁶

The permanent settlement in Madras Presidency was finally concluded in 1801. The Company administration was certain that the little kings would cease with the continuous warfare and struggle for dominance that had characterized the political landscape of pre-colonial south India.

⁵ In the text I will hereafter refer to the East India Company only as 'the Company'.

⁶ Dead of Permanent Settlement, art. 9 in Letter from Board of Revenue to Collector Lushington, 4 September 1799, in Correspondence between Mr. S. R. Lushington, Collector of Ramnad and Poligar Peshcush and the Board of Revenue and the Special Commission on the Permanent Settlement of the Souther Pollams and of Ramnad and Shevagungha Zemindaries in the District of Madura (Madura: Collectorate Press) Tamil Nadu Archives Madras, in Nicholas B. Dirks, 'From Little King to Landlord: Property, Law, and the Gift under the Madras Permanent Settlement' in *Comparative Studies in Society and History*, Vol 28 April 1986, p.316

Instead, the newly instated zamindars would according to Governor General Cornwallis come to appreciate their newfound private ownership over their land and redirect their energy into maximizing the land productivity and profit. 1/3 of the land of the vast area that comprised the Madras Presidency was settled as zamindari estates.⁷ The settlement was resisted by administrators who believed that the settlement from Bengal could not be used as a blueprint for a settlement in Madras. These agitators rather wanted a more direct settlement, termed as the ryotwari settlement, which implied a more direct contact between farmers, the ryots, and the Company. The zamindari system was not a great success and the ryotwari settlement became a reality a few decades later.⁸

Madras Presidency covered a large area in the southern part of India, and included the Tamil cultural region of today's Tamil Nadu and north towards the Nizam's territory around Hyderabad, which remained as an indirectly ruled princely state throughout the colonial period. Today's Andhra Pradesh, consisted of three distinct sub regions; the southern Rayalasima region, the interior Telengana region and coastal Andhra. From this point on I will collectively refer to these regions as Telugu country. In the coastal region of Telugu country the permanent settlement allied the British with a number; of royal houses. One of these was the Vassareddy zamindari situated in the districts of Guntur, Rajamundry and Masulipatam.⁹

Zamindar litigation and the origins of the project at hand:

Nearly all zamindaries were involved in one or several suits in the Anglo-Indian courts, an extremely costly affair that has been assigned as significant contributing factor in the financial devastation that many of the zamindars experienced in the colonial period. I will not elaborate on this debate here, but merely emphasise one consequence of the many zamindar disputes.¹⁰ The bureaucratic regime of Company rule contributed to that these cases were tried and retried in the colonial courts and often ended up in the Judicial Committee of the Privy Council after having been appealed from the *Sudder Adawlut*, the High Court of Madras. Decades could elapse before the initial suit was finally decided, and as a result many conflicts survived the original participants. There was no limit as to how valuable a disputed property had to be and as a result suits

⁷ Nicholas Dirks, 1986 p. 313

⁸ Burton Stein, *Thomas Munro: The Origins of the Colonial State and His Vision of Empire*, Oxford University Press, Delhi 1989, p.131-133 deals with the contemporary debates among the Company administrators regarding the different possible settlements.

⁹ See Map I

¹⁰ I will discuss the establishment of the Company courts in greater detail in the next chapter.

concerning property at a value of 6 rupees could be pending in the court system for decades.¹¹ One common conflict filed in the Anglo-Indian court was the zamindar succession dispute in which different kin or family members claimed the right to inherit whole or parts of ancestral estates.

I was introduced to the subject of zamindary succession by my supervisor Pamela Price, and instantly found the subject fascinating. I was informed about different suits that had not been studied in great detail and started researching some of them. The initial idea was to conduct a case study with an emphasis on how kinship as an integrative factor of indigenous political rule changed during the colonial period, partially as a result of ruling families' participation in the Anglo-Indian legal system. After looking at different cases, I decided to study the Vassareddy succession dispute more closely. One particular reason for this choice was that this dispute has been well known to the scholars of colonial Telugu country, and has been referred to in several publications, though it has not been studied in detail. On a more personal level, I found the case very intriguing after reading only the first few pages.

However, after I had read through all the 1400 pages of court documents, my focus changed. What had initially been a study of kinship in an early colonial zamindary was overshadowed by the fascinating female testimony in this case. My curiosity was activated as the zamindary women in this case did not act and communicate according to my presumed knowledge about Indian royal women in the colonial period. After reading different studies conducted on the issues of womanhood under colonialism, I realized that although several important contributions had been made, there were major holes in the totality of studies, both geographically and chronologically. Most studies on elite women during the colonial period had been conducted on the late colonial period and on northern India, particularly Bengal. Also, a great part of these studies was concerned with the colonial social reforms and the nationalist movement, both of which contributed greatly to the public discourse on women.

Price has similarly used the court files from zamindary succession disputes to contribute to our knowledge of the lives of royal females.¹² She has, in accordance with others, concluded that indigenous forms of rule in south India of which the royal household was an integrated part, was

¹¹ D.A., Washbrook, 'Agrarian Society in Colonial India' in *Modern Asian Studies*, 15, 3 1981, p.659

¹² Pamela, Price, 'Honour, disgrace and the Formal Depolitization of Women in South India: Changing structures of the State under British Colonial Rule.' in *Gender & History*, Vol. 6, No. 2, 1994 and 'Kin, Clan and Power in Colonial South India' in *Unfamiliar Relations: Family and History in South Asia*, Indrani Chatterjee (ed.) Permanent Black, New Delhi 2004

devalued during the 19th Century.¹³ Consequently, zamindari women were removed from all aspects of political rule as they were still culturally and ideologically restricted to stay within the women's quarters which were completely detached from officially recognized rulership.¹⁴ However, Price too has studied cases from the late 19th Century when the Anglo-Indian courts had been handling zamindari succession disputes for nearly a Century.¹⁵ As the Vassareddy case was tried between 1816 and 1846, this makes the female participation in the case even more valuable.

Many of the debates in the Vassareddy suit were over issues that concerned women; marriage, adoption and the proper conduct of wives. One particular issue was a debate on the status of the two wives in the case in which the two Vassareddy women, Atchama and Rungama, argued about their virtues as wives. During these discussions, constant references to Hindu law and ancient law texts were made, and I became curious about the definitions that these women were measured against in court. After a while I became aware that Anglo-Indian law was part of larger project of gathering and constructing knowledge to enable and justify the colonial administration. This collective effort has been termed 'colonial sociology' by anthropological historian Bernard Cohn. On consequence of particular relevance to this study was how the colonial sociology effectively constructed a model of the ideal Hindu woman. This model was built on the prescriptive ideals expressed in ancient orthodox Hindu texts and was universally applied in the Anglo-Indian courts. The result was according to Cohn that 'By the middle of the nineteenth Century these [Sanskrit orthodox texts] were conceived to be the very embodiment of an authentic India.'¹⁶ However, it soon became evident that this model of the Indian woman was not very relevant with regards to the zamindari women of the Vassareddy case, although it provided the reference point for the British judges in the court room. I detected some disparity between what the women were actually saying in their testimony and what the totality of court files provided with information about the lives of these women. Price has argued that the participants in these suits in some instances found the prescribed Hindu Law and the tradition it was meant to represent preposterously irrelevant to their lives. As orthodox Hinduism had traditionally been more dominant in northern India and Anglo-Indian law was based on orthodox Hindu texts, it is hardly surprising that the laws of the colonial court were not perceived as relevant. I became curious whether south India, which is recognized as culturally and religiously distinct from northern India, could have a different view of women

¹³ See Kumkum Sangari and Sudesh Vaid, 'Recasting Women: An Introduction' in *Recasting Women: Essays in Indian Colonial History*, Rutgers University Press, New Brunswick 1990 for a more general discussion on the topic.

¹⁴ Pamela Price 1994

¹⁵ Pamela Price 1994: 1996: 2004

¹⁶ Bernard Cohn, 'History and Anthropology: The state of play.' In *Comparative Studies in Society and History*, Vol. 22, No. 2 1980, p. 219

which could help me understand the women's expressions in the Vassareddy case.

Towards a distinct south Indian view on womanhood?

My supervisor made me aware of a study of a folk epic from the neighbouring district of the Vassareddy zamindary. 'The Epic of Palnadu' that was recorded and translated by Gene Roghair in 1982. This study provided a valuable insight to a local world-view and what Roghair has termed '...an alternative to Brahman elite ideology'.¹⁷ Cohn has most notably argued the need for a multidisciplinary approach to Indian history, and has become an important scholar to historians, anthropologists and sociologists alike. Cohn argued the need to combine the observational approach of the anthropologist with the historians focus on documented sources and chronology with the sociologist's structural approach.¹⁸ A wider approach certainly helped my project. After reading about several local epics and poetry from Telugu and Tamil country, all expressions of a localized ideology and world-view, I had the distinct feeling of 'connecting the dots'. In these epics, the female characters expressed virtues that were not directly opposite to the colonial sociology of women, but they were certainly not in accordance with the ideal orthodox Indian woman either.

Several historical examples from the pre-colonial period suggest that there were more possible identities for a woman in south India than the colonial sociology of women allowed for. Cynthia Talbot has written about female rulers from Telugu country in the medieval period particularly the famous queen Rudrama-devi 'the female king' who ruled successfully for several decades. Talbot mentions several examples of female rulers. Mostly these women came in this position as the mother of a minor heir or as a widow, whose reign was normally short-lived. Rudrama was however appointed as heir by her father who was sonless. Talbot argues that female rulers were never the preferred choice. However, when there was no son of a wife, a daughter was often chosen in preference of male relations. Talbot argues that this might have been connected to the significance of the nuclear family in medieval kingship in Andhra. She argues that '...the operative social unit was not the extended patrilineage so much as the immediate group of close kin.'¹⁹ A

¹⁷ Gene Roghair, *The Epic of Palnadu: A Study and Translation of Palnati Virula Katha, a Telugu Oral Tradition from Andhra Pradesh, India*, Clarendon Press, Oxford 1982, p.87

¹⁸ Bernard Cohn, *An Anthropologist among the Historians and Other Essays*, Oxford University Press, Delhi 1987 contains the most central essays on these subjects. The introduction by Ranajit Guha provides a good summary of Cohn's contribution to the focus on the advantages of a multidisciplinary approach.

¹⁹ Cynthia Talbot, 'Rudrama-devi, the Female King: Gender and Political Authority in Medieval India' in *Syllables of Sky: Studies in South Indian Civilization in Honour of Velcheru Narayana Rao*, David Shulman (ed.) Oxford University Press, Delhi 1995, p.418

female from the immediate family was thus in several instances preferred over the succession of a more distant male relative. Another well known example of historically powerful women is the south Indian *devadasis*, or the temple dancers who enjoyed a high social status in medieval south India.²⁰ The devadasis' status was significantly reduced in the colonial period and the institution was eventually even outlawed as the women came to be considered prostitutes. However, in the pre-colonial period these women were independent of their families and they quite often owned land. The surplus from this land was directed into religious endowments something that is evident through inscriptional evidence.²¹ The devadasis could display agency, and they could make independent economic and political decisions. Susan Wadley has stressed the point that devadasis were the only religious specialist within Hinduism that could only be a woman and whose position was textually sanctioned.²²

These historical examples suggest that there were various ideological views on womanhood in pre-colonial south India. Anthropology largely confirms this view for the 20th Century. In *The Powers of Tamil Women*, anthropologists Susan Wadley and Margaret Egnor and Holly Baker Reynolds all argue that the Tamil ambivalent view of women is built on a respect and fear for the power of women, which is believed to be far superior to that of men, although considered dangerous if not controlled by male domination.²³ Egnor argues that this is connected to the anti-authoritarian culture and the prominence of devotional *bhakti* worship in Tamil country.²⁴ Furthermore, it is widely acknowledged that the cross-cousin marriage ideal in Dravidian kinship makes daughters more valuable than within the exogamy which characterizes north Indian kinship systems.²⁵ The cross-cousin ideal, which was also the prevailing ideal in the early colonial period, provided south Indian families with pragmatic reasons to value their daughters. In south India a daughter was preferably married to a maternal uncle or to another kin member within the natal village or in a close village. This made the daughter's fertility and well-being valuable to her natal family, as opposed to in northern India, where daughters would be sent off to the natal home of her husband's

²⁰ Saskia C Kersenboom-Story, *Nityasumangali: Devadasi Tradition in South India*, Motilal Banarsidass, Delhi 1987

²¹ Leslie C. Orr, *Donors, Devotees and Daughters of God- Temple Women in medieval Tamilnadu*, Oxford University Press, New York 2000

²² Susan S. Wadley, 'Women and the Hindu Tradition' in *Women in India- Two Perspectives*, Doranne Jacobsen & Susan S. Wadley, Manohar 1995, p 124-5

²³ *The Powers of Tamil Women*, ed. Susan Wadley, Maxwell School of Citizenship and Public Affairs, Syracuse University, 1991

²⁴ Margaret Egnor, 'On the meaning of Sakti to Women in Tamil Nadu' p.23 in *The Powers of Tamil Women*, ed. Susan Wadley, Maxwell School of Citizenship and Public Affairs, Syracuse University, 1991 p.15. Egnor and Wadley furthermore argues that health statistics shows that women in south India have better health than in the north, and that this is because girls and women are valued more in the south than in northern India. Wadley 1991, p.161

²⁵ Cross-cousin marriages imply that a girl's ideal partner is the mother's brother or his son, or the father's sister son.

family far away.²⁶

In lack of empirical studies from the early colonial period in south India, I believe that alternative approaches can contribute to a 'thick description' of the female testimony of the Vassareddy case.²⁷ The need to contextualize the analysis of the women's participation will become clear after reviewing the source material at hand.

The sources and their inherent methodological challenges:

My main sources are the approximately 1400 pages of court documents that were sent from the Sudder Adawlut in Madras to the Judicial Committee of the Privy Council along with the final appeal in 1832. These documents are very valuable as source material for several reasons. First, they are valuable because the complete documents from the different trials are preserved and available. A full overview of the case makes it easier to present the material with a high degree of certainty because even if all else is uncertain, we can establish that we have not missed valuable documentation. I have already discussed that the timing of this case makes it valuable. The Vassareddy succession dispute was one of the first disputes concerning an estate of such magnitude and wealth. The case clearly illustrates how fast a wealthy and powerful estate like the Vassareddy zamindary could disintegrate in the colonial period.

The female participation in this case is what makes it particularly interesting. Indian elite women were restricted from appearing in public and were secluded within the household to the female quarters called *zenanas*.²⁸ Consequently, these women did not leave many sources which can provide us with information about their lives. Through their participation in the Anglo-Indian court, the zamindary women provided a rare voice from the past from an otherwise historically silent group. The Vassareddy women have left a number of testimonies, letters and appeals where they argue their own cases. Although they were certainly culturally and ideologically restricted, these women could express themselves and communicate their story to the court through their oral

²⁶ Anthropologist Minna Säävälä confirms this view and further illustrates this in her study on contemporary rural women in Andhra Pradesh by arguing that several rituals confirm this view. One is the first menstruation of a young girl which is celebrated in the entire village (after the four day seclusion period), a ritual which is not found in north India. Säävälä, Minna, 'Sterilized Mothers: Women's Personhood and Family Planning in Rural South India' in *Culture, Power and Agency: Gender in Indian Ethnography*, Fruzzetti and Tenhunen (ed.), STREE, Kolkata 2006

²⁷ Thick descriptions can be defined as a description that deals with a variety of relevant contexts in order to explain a particular action. The term was introduced by the philosopher Gilbert Ryle but developed in anthropology and sociology by Clifford Gertz. *Sosiologisk Leksikon*, Korsnes, Andersen & Brante (ed.), Universitetsforlaget Oslo 2004, p.330

²⁸ This did not imply however that they were isolated from political rule. I will discuss this in greater detail in the next two chapters.

testimony and statements that were written for them.

The zamindary women did not appear physically in court. A suitable female appointed by the court was sent to the zenana with the court's questions. The court appointee would then read the questions out loud to the zamindary woman under questioning and her answers were transcribed. After they were finished with the testimony, it would be read out to the women for their approval.²⁹ Finally, the answers were read aloud before the court. This complex process implied that the information could easily be manipulated and that connotative meanings could be lost. As the women were allowed to approve their testimony they were able to control the information they communicated on a different level than through normal oral testimony in court. The risk of manipulation and misinterpretation increases for every level the information has to be translated, re-written or transcribed. With these documents, these levels were many. For once, the testimony was given in Telugu, the local language. At some point in time, the testimony was translated into English. The judges were normally British, and were not always proficient in the local language. And even if they were, the documents had to be translated before the appeal was sent to London. The possibility of misinterpretation was also recognized in the case. At one point, one party in the suit argued that the collector of Guntur had misunderstood a significant event because he had interpreted a Telugu word as a Sanskrit term which had a slightly, but significant, different connotative meaning.³⁰

This was but one aspect of the methodological challenges inherent in court documents from the Anglo-Indian courts. Another complicating factor makes the source material from the Anglo-Indian court particularly difficult to assess. The Anglo-Indian Courts were characterized by perjury.³¹ This was a widespread problem and a constant source of frustration to the British Judges. When one pleader requested to present a list of witnesses to the Provincial court, one of the three judges answered: '... I am of opinion, that not a single testimony on the point should be taken. The Court, by examining witnesses, would in fact be lending their authority to perjury.'³² The decision

²⁹ The Vassareddy files mentions several places that the Vassareddy women was literate.

³⁰ Privy Council 1846: **IN THE PRIVY COUNCIL- ON APPEAL FROM THE SUDDER ADAWLUT OF MADRAS** between VASSAREDDY RUNGAMA, Guardian of the minor RAJA VASSAREDDY LUTCHMEPUTTY NAIDOO AND VASSAREDDY ATCHAMA, RAJA VASSAREDDY RAMANADHA BABOO and PUTTOORY CALY DOSS, I p.15

From this point on I will refer to these documents only as 'Vassareddy' followed by a Roman number. The Roman number indicates every time the documents start on page number 1. This indicates the chronological order in the book at the archive of the Judicial Committee of the Privy Council in London.

³¹ For an interesting perspective on this problem from a Western judicial point of view see Robert L. Kidder, 'Western Law in India: External Law and Local Response' in *Sociological Inquiry*, Volume 47 2007
<http://www3.interscience.wiley.com/journal/119629067/references> [entered 24th of October 2008]

³² Vassareddy II p.5

of the Provincial court was appealed to the Sudder Adawlut in Madras with the pleaders because of the:

...extraordinary and unprecedented manner in which the Provincial court has disposed of the suit of these Appellants, having not only assumed in favour of the Defendants every fact put in issue by the parties, but fixed beforehand the stamp of premeditated perjury upon all witnesses who might be called by the Plaintiff, although the names, situation and character of those witnesses were all equally unknown to them.³³

The Sudder Adawlut decided in favour of the complaint and the Provincial court was ordered to readmit the suit.

It is possible to understand the frustration of the judges in this case. After the Vassareddy zamindar Jaganadha died, no less than three different wills, all supposedly written within a few weeks and all of which naturally acknowledged one of the three main parties as heir, were presented as evidence in Court. Furthermore, the different parties all presented conflicting versions about the events in question and provided several witnesses to confirm their story. Price has explained the widespread perjury with the following argument:

Arguments in court were rhetorical displays, constructed to overpower the opposition even if this process resulted in sometimes remarkable fabrications of royal history, practice and kin relationships, and the misrepresentation of kingly values and symbols. Litigation in colonial dispute management was alien to the political culture of the zamindari domain and litigants used the legal instruments and concepts which the system employed as a blunt-edged tool in a non-violent combat. In this sense, succession remained an activity calling for the demonstration of superior political skill. Victory still represented an achieved status, even if the outcome was preceded by Anglo-Indian judicial reasoning.³⁴

Because of the persistent perjury it is nearly impossible to separate fact from fiction in this material and the documentation is not of much use as a source of factual events. But there are still ways in which extracting useful information from these documents becomes possible. Some events are possible to ascertain as they are not in opposition to the interest of any party and thus remains unchallenged. Furthermore, the testimony presented to the Court can reveal much about what was considered as believable and appropriate. A testimony can be a truthful account representing factual events. If the testimony is not a truthful account of what actually happened, it nevertheless presents a plausible scenario. All the parties in the suit have the same motivation: to have the Court believe their version and accommodate their claim in the final verdict. For an explanation to be acknowledged as truthful it has to be perceived as credible. Consequently, participants in a succession dispute would try to present a story which would be perceived as plausible. Furthermore, Price and others have established that the royal families involved in these suits were

³³ Vassareddy I p.24

³⁴ Pamela Price, *Kingship and Political Practice in Colonial India*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge 1996, p.60

preoccupied with preserving their honour.³⁵ In conclusion, the litigants in these suits were concerned with presenting a plausible story while maintaining their personal honour. As will become evident in my presentation of the Vassareddy suit in part II, a third concern of the participants in court could be to simultaneously tainting the opposing party's honour.

I have also used two other colonial sources, particularly for my background chapter on the Vassareddy case. E. F. Moore wrote a series of reports of the cases heard before the Privy Council.³⁶ The report on the Vassareddy case was written as a reference of the trial heard before the Privy Council, 14 years after it had been appealed from Madras. This report is a useful introduction to the case in 113 pages, but reveals that the focus of the case was different in London than it had been in the Sudder Adawlut in Madras. The Moore report is thus a valuable supplement which illustrates how the core of a dispute could change although it is insufficient for understanding the complexity of the case

I have also used *the Kistna District Manual*, a report on the district written by a British official Gordon Mackenzie in 1883.³⁷ This book provides a detailed description of the district on a variety of subjects, from ecology and agriculture to political history. The book contains sections on all the prominent zamindari estates in the district, including the Vassareddy estate and family. All my source material is of British colonial origin. They have all been written within the framework of the colonial administration. Cohn, among others, has claimed that all the knowledge collected and published by the colonial authority, whether under the Company or British Raj, was part of the colonial project; the colonial sociology intended to legitimize and justify colonial rule. Consequently, it is important to view these sources with a critical eye.

Having these challenges in mind, I will attempt to analyse the testimony, particularly the female, in the Vassareddy case. In my analysis, I have also been inspired by Gloria Goodwin Raheja whose work on women's oral tradition in north India has argued for how the female voices can display 'negotiated solidarities'.³⁸ By identifying these different solidarities and loyalties one can achieve a

³⁵ Pamela Price, 1994

³⁶ British Library; Asia, Pacific and Africa Collections; India Office Records : E.F.Moore, *Reports of Cases Heard and Determined by the Judicial Committee and the Lords of the Privy Council on appeal from the Supreme and Sudder Dewanny Courts in the East Indies*. Volume 4 1846-1850

³⁷ *Kistna District Manual*, Gordon McKenzie. Madras. (publishing date according to http://books.google.no/books?id=430nAMZz8LwC&pg=PA3&lpg=PA3&dq=chentsus+caste&source=bl&ots=_KTAiTsvWhv&sig=sR1XIqBBC2R_1_doMHvONoFFoE4&hl=no&sa=X&oi=book_result&resnum=3&ct=result [entered 30th October 2008]). It appears that this book has been published in a new version in 1990. I have used what appears to be an original copy.

³⁸ Raheja argues that female voices are often interpreted either as expressing support to the patrilineal ideals that are

more complete understanding of the individual woman, her situation and the framework she is operating within. The testimony of these women can provide information about the lives of royal women in the early colonial period. Their accounts can also indicate which female ideals were prevalent in the world-view of an early 19th Century Telugu zamindary. My main objective is to illustrate how these women displayed agency and what was perceived as being appropriate behaviour for contemporary zamindary women. In the introduction to her study on the medieval devadasis, Leslie wrote:

Because of the scholarly traditions we have inherited, much of our understanding of Indian history and society, and of women's part in that history and society, comes from the study of religious texts and of myths, symbols, and rituals. This study is essential insofar as it allows us to recognize pattern, models, ideals, and values that have salience in Indian culture and history and in the lives of Indian women. But equally important is attention to behaviour and experience of individuals...³⁹

I will attempt to accommodate both of Orr's point above. In Part I I will approach the subject of womanhood from a structural point of view. First I will present the development of the colonial sociology during the early colonial period with a particular focus on the female ideals that would come to dominate public discourse of the 19th Century. In the next chapter I will focus on south Indian folklore to illustrate how these can be said to represent more local views on womanhood that differ from the colonial sociology of women.

Part II is my case study of the Vassareddy case. I will first present a background history of the Vassareddy zamindary and family, before presenting the origins of the conflict. In the following three chapters I will present three central conflicts from the case from the zamindary women's point of view. I will analyse the different participants testimony with a focus on these zamindary women's agency.

keeping her subordinated, or as expressing a unified resistance based on female solidarity as opposed to patrilineal male solidarity. Raheja argues that this model only serves to reinforce the unbalanced view of women, and prohibits us from extracting the knowledge of the women's situation which can simulatiously express different solidarities. Gloria Raheja 'Negotiated Solidarities: Gendered Representations of Disruption and Desire in North Indian Oral Traditions and Popular Culture' in *Songs, Stories, Lives: Gendered Dialogues and Cultural Critique*, Gloria Goodwin Raheja (ed.), Kali for Women, New Delhi 2003

³⁹ Leslie Orr, 2000 p.10

1: Colonial perceptions of Indian Womanhood

In this chapter I will present the contents of the collective term colonial sociology. I will give a brief account of the historical development of this colonial project with a particular focus on the view of women. Colonial sociology developed a one-dimensional view of women based on orthodox Hinduism. I will discuss the model of the chaste Hindu wife and argue how this model influenced discourses in the Anglo-Indian courts. I will also briefly discuss the available studies on elite women, and argue how the colonial sociology of women has influenced research on the 19th Century Indian woman.

The colonial view of Indian women: a brief historiography

The 19th Century not only saw the consolidation of British colonial rule, it was also a time when much of the western knowledge on the complex Indian societies and their history was constructed. The administrators of the East India Company soon realized that more knowledge on the continent was needed to enable a successful colonial administration. Fascination with the ancient civilizations of the near and far east had been evident in Western Europe throughout the 18th Century.⁴⁰ The languages of these areas were studied and departments of oriental languages were established in European universities.⁴¹ As the 19th Century dawned, the discourse on Indian history gradually changed from an optimistic view based on admiration of former great civilizations, to a more negative form of 'Orientalism'. The prevalent western perception in the 19th Century was that India had no history; or rather that Indians were traditionally unaware of their history. The concept of a lost 'golden age' became dominant. This view saw India as a backwards and underdeveloped society that had seen its highpoint in its ancient civilizations, but that this glory had been lost with the collapse of these civilizations. The result was believed to be a disintegration of the economic and particularly moral order. It was largely accepted that the British presence in India could help the societies to once again unite in the nation of the 'Aryan golden age' and that the British could provide India with the great gift of history.⁴²

The most famous manifestation of this view on Indian history was James Mill's massive *History of British India* which was published in 1817 and influenced a generation of intellectuals. Mill

⁴⁰ See Edward W. Said, *Orientalism- Western Perceptions of the Orient*, Penguin Book, London 1995. Chap. II

⁴¹ Said, 1995.p.50

⁴² Janaki, Nair, *Women and Law in India: A social History*, Kali for Women Bangalore 1996 p. 37

described India as a civilization of brutality and low morals. He perceived India as a static and unchanged area that had seen no development since the Aryan period. The only significant change had according to Mills been the medieval Muslim invasion that had prohibited development and kept the isolated Indian village unaltered throughout the medieval period until the British made their presence felt on the subcontinent.⁴³ Mills argued that nothing proved his point better than the miserable condition that most Indian women were living under, as he described Hindu women as:

...in a state of dependence more strict and humiliating than which is ordained for the weaker sex... They are held in extreme degradation, excluded from the sacred books, deprived of education, and [of a share] in the paternal property.⁴⁴

The notion of the woman as a symbol of the state Indian civilization was further developed by Max Muller, a scholar greatly influenced by Mill. Muller was a highly influential scholar who conceptualized this view in the 1840's with his linguistic theories on the Aryans.⁴⁵ Building on the perception of the meagre state of women in contemporary Indian societies, Muller argued that Aryan women had been the equals of men. They had participated in religious rituals and enjoyed all the same rights as their contemporary Aryan men. Muller argued that the position of women changed radically during the medieval period and that their position had declined since. Muller's romanticised view of Aryan women spread in scholarship. One later writer, Clarisse Bader published her *Women in ancient India* in 1867. She described the Aryan woman, who was considered the progenitor of the upper caste noble Indian women of the 19th Century as '...ardent piety, spiritual and ascetic tenderness, complete abnegation of herself, unlimited devotion to her family, a boundless need of love, formed the character of such women.'⁴⁶ Historian Chakravarti argues that the Aryan woman soon became the only object of historical concern in the discourse on the position of Indian women in the 19th Century, something which prohibited a nuanced debate during the colonial period.⁴⁷

Colonial knowledge and the Anglo-Indian judicial system

This intellectual inclination towards viewing Indian society and history as in decline would have practical consequences. The orthodox Hindu texts produced in the 'Hindu golden age' came to be seen as the only authoritative sources of Indian tradition as British scholars carried out their studies

⁴³ Romila, Thapar, *Ancient Indian Social History: Some interpretations*, Sangam Books, London 1984 p.5

⁴⁴ James, Mill, *The History of British India*, 5th ed., James Madden, London 1840, p. 312-13 quoted in Nair 1996, p.35

⁴⁵ Uma Chakravarti, 'Whatever happened to the Vedic Dasi?' in *Recasting women: Essays on Indian Colonial History*, ed. by Kumkum Sangari & Sudesh Vaid, Rutgers University Press, New Brunswick 1990

⁴⁶ Clarisse Bader, 'Women in ancient India' quoted in Chakravarti, 1990 p. 46

⁴⁷ Chakravarti, 1990 p. 28

at the end of the 18th Century. Bernard Cohn has most extensively researched the colonial emphasis on knowledge. Cohn has divided the information that the colonial administration gathered on all different aspects of Indian tradition as different subcategories of 'investigative modalities'. The historiographical modality; the observational modality; the survey modality; the enumerative modality; the museological modality and surveillance modality were all aspects of the colonial project of gathering information.⁴⁸ Cohn has through his extensive empirical research concluded that the accumulation of knowledge was inseparably linked to the exertion of power.⁴⁹ This collection of knowledge as part of the colonial project has collectively been termed 'colonial sociology'.

Colonial sociology implied that the East India Company came to define what was to be considered as Indian tradition. This led to an inaccurate definition of Indian tradition as the knowledge collected by the East India Company represented only some aspects of tradition while other aspects were ignored. One obvious consequence of this inaccurately constructed tradition became visible through the Anglo-Indian judiciary system. The Company had by the late 18th Century greatly extended their activities in India from a trading company to an administration that performed many of tasks normally associated with state administration. Company administrators included the development of a system for dispute management as part of their enterprise.⁵⁰ The collection of knowledge on Indian customs now served a very practical purpose: the judges needed laws to decide disputes presented in the Anglo-Indian courts. The administration realized that the British legal system could not be copied and applied in India. The cultural differences were just too vast. In the positivistic Orientalist mode of the 18th Century, the Company wanted to manage the Indian societies according to their own customs and regulations. This was particularly true for dispute management because the colonial administration was aware that dispute management in localities had long traditions. The Company administrators knew that there already existed different arenas for dispute management, from the Raja's durbar to the local *panchayat*.⁵¹ It was believed that disputes were resolved in localities by religious codes found in the orthodox texts, the *dharmasastras*.

The massive work of collecting knowledge of Indian tradition was initiated by Warren Hastings

⁴⁸ Bernard S. Cohn, *Colonialism and Its Forms of Knowledge: The British in India*, Oxford University Press, Delhi 1997 p. 3-15

⁴⁹ Nicholas Dirks, Introduction in Cohn, 1997 p. xiii

⁵⁰ Bernard Cohn, 1997 p. 58

⁵¹ For information about pre-colonial dispute management in South India and the development of the civil court system in Madras Presidency, see Catherine Sandin Meschievitz, *Civil Litigation and Judicial Policy in the Madras Presidency, 1800-1843*, PhD. Dissertation, The University of Wisconsin Madison, 1986

who was appointed the position of governor-general in Bengal in 1772. Hastings first move was to arrange for several of the young and bright Company employees in Bengal to study oriental languages.⁵² However, Hastings and his contemporaries soon realized that it would not be possible to construct the history of India without consulting the indigenous groups that held the information on Indian history, custom and tradition. The Brahman caste men were the only group that was officially sanctioned to read the ancient texts of the Veda's and allowed to perform the rituals they described. Hastings thus employed eleven of the most respectable Brahman pundits in Bengal to choose from the dharmasastras those parts that were considered as the most representative and important texts. The first law-book containing English translations of the codes found in these texts was published in 1776, but it was soon replaced by the influential *The Digest of Hindu Law on Contracts and Succession* published in 1798. The massive work behind this publication was carried out by the classical Persian and Arabic scholar Sir William Jones in the 1780's and was completed by the classically taught H.T. Colebrooke after Jones' death in 1794. This publication was widely accepted and used throughout the colonial period.⁵³ The new law books were soon distributed for use in the Company courts. The judiciary reform had established courts for British subjects in the major cities first. This system was soon expanded to include all citizens of the cities. Within a few decades the Company had established an extensive court system of both criminal and civil courts in all regions under directly administered by the Company from the local province level to the high court of Madras.⁵⁴

The civil courts would prove to be hard to administer through the constructed law books. A distinction was made between different kinds of law. Because the Company had orders not to interfere in religious life, there was the construction of personal laws regarding matters that were traditionally guided by religious regulations. *The Hindu Law* was to apply for all non-Muslim subjects while the Muslim population was provided with their own Muslim personal laws.⁵⁵ These texts were translated and collected in law books that were to provide the British judges in the Company courts with codes and 'religious tradition'. All civil suits were to be decided by personal laws built on these regulations. This was to enable the British judges to pass judgement over matters that were regulated by religious tradition.

⁵² Bernard Cohn, *Colonialism and Its forms of Knowledge The British in India* Princeton University Press, Princeton 1996 p. 60

⁵³ Bernard Cohn, 1996, p. 70

⁵⁴ See Niels Brimnes, 'Beyond Colonial Law: Indigenous Litigation and the Contestation of Property in the Mayor's Court in Late Eighteenth-century Madras' in *Modern Asian Studies* 37, No.3 2003, for an account of the establishment of the judiciary system in late 18th Century Madras.

⁵⁵ All non-Muslims were registered as Hindus by the British at this time.

The narrow choice of sources of Hindu tradition presented problems. It appears that the Brahman pundits wished to stress the significance and relevance of the ancient orthodox Hindu texts as the one authoritative source of Indian tradition. It was after all the Varna categorization from the Vedic texts that put Brahmans at the very top end of the social hierarchy. Brahmans did enjoy a high status in Indian societies in the 19th Century. There were however large regional varieties. In south India, orthodox Hinduism was not as influential and significant as in the north. One reason was the bhakti movement, devotional worship which took the form of a personal bond between the deity and the worshipper. This form of worship did not require orthodox or textual sanctioning, and the position of the Brahman was thus less important in south India where bhakti tradition emerged and became the dominant form of worship during the medieval period. George Hart has through his studies of ancient Tamil literature established that Brahman values and its accompanying traditions did not infiltrate the daily lives of people in south India:

...in the south at least, the Brahman has imitated the high-class non-Brahman as much as the non-Brahmans has imitated the Brahman, and probably even more; for in the south the Brahmans was a newcomer, and to be accepted in the society he had to adopt those values and customs which were espoused by the highest indigenous members of that society.⁵⁶

Historians like Nicholas Dirks and Bernard Cohn have similarly argued that Brahmans was not at the top of the social hierarchy in the societies of pre-colonial south India.⁵⁷ Through his study of the little Tamil kingdom of Pudukottai, Dirks has argued that the Brahmans did not hold a higher position than the king even in the early colonial period.⁵⁸

The few religious texts translated by the colonial administration hardly represented the totality of Indian tradition even in the areas where orthodox Hinduism was dominating. Legal historian Janaki Nair argues that none of the orthodox texts applied by the British in the constructed Anglo-Indian law were of south Indian origin.⁵⁹ According to the renowned legal historian J. D. M. Derrett, Company administrators were aware that the orthodox Hindu code had little or no relevance in defining custom and tradition of the south Indian societies. J.H. Nelson, a district judge and member of the Indian Civil service criticised the Madras government for this approach. He argued that a south Indian ‘...unless indeed he happens to come into our court as a litigant, is no more affected by precepts found in the *Mitakshara* than it is by precepts contained in the Psalms of David.’⁶⁰ J.H.

⁵⁶ George L Hart, 'Ancient Tamil Literature: Its Scholarly Past and Future' p.60 in *Essays on South India*, ed. by Burton Stein, Honolulu 1975 in Meschievitz 1986 p. 27

⁵⁷ Nicholas Dirks, *Castes of Mind*, Princeton University Press, Princeton 2001, p.73

⁵⁸ Nicholas Dirks, *The Hollow Crown: Ethnohistory of an Indian Kingdom*, University of Michigan Press, Ann Arbor 1993 p.4

⁵⁹ Janaki Nair, 1996 p.26

⁶⁰ J.D.M. Derrett, 'J.H. Nelson: a forgotten administrators-historian of India' in J.D.M. Derrett, *Essays in Classical and Modern Hindu Law*, vol. 2, Leiden 1977, p.404-23

Nelson appears to have realized the prescriptive nature of the dharmasastras. He suggested an alternative; that custom should be identified in the localities, a view that had previously been argued by the governor of Madras Thomas Munro. Regardless of the opinions of these influential administrators, the Sudder Adawlut in Madras did not decide that local custom should have preference over Hindu Law before 1873. Even then, the judges in the local courts were reluctant to follow this recommendation.⁶¹ Because of the colonial reluctance to listen to critical voices such as J.H.Nelson, some historians have concluded that the ‘colonial sociology’ of India was more than a naïve attempt to identify Indian tradition. Cohn argues that the colonial administration gathered this knowledge ‘...as part of scholarly and pragmatic project aimed at creating a body of knowledge that could be utilized in the effective control of Indian society.’⁶² One of the most popular arguments used to legitimize the colonial presence was the female ideal found in the orthodox texts which the supporters of colonialism claimed explained the miserable condition of women in Indian in the 19th Century.

‘Symbols of tradition’⁶³: the ideal Hindu woman:

One of the most well known consequences of British insistence applying orthodox texts as the only sources of Indian tradition was the new focus on the Varna-categorization which led to a new process that has been aptly termed the colonial ‘invention of caste’.⁶⁴ Another consequence was that the law books based on sastric texts provided a very narrow image of the Indian woman. The orthodox view on the position of women fitted neatly into the homogenic Indian society described by Mill and Muller. However, these texts expressed the prescriptive ideals of the Brahman pundits.

The clearest example of the model Hindu wife is the character of *Sita* from the famous epic *The Ramayana*. Sita and her husband Rama are still considered by many Hindus as the ‘divine couple.’⁶⁵ Rama is presented in the well-known epic as the ideal king; Sita is the model wife and

⁶¹ D.H.A. Kolff, 'The Indian and the British Law Machines' in *European Expansion and Law- The Encounter of European and Indigenous Law in the 19th and 20th Century Africa and Asia*, ed. by W.J.Mommsen and J. A.De Moor, Berg Publishers, Oxford 1992, p.226-7

⁶² Bernard Cohn, 1996, p. 61

⁶³ This term is used by C. A. Bayly when he describes the British view on Indian women in the colonial period, in C.A.Bayly, *Empire and information*, Cambridge University Press 1996. Indian women as the embodiment of tradition is also argued by Orr in *Donors, Devotees, and Daughters of God- Temple Women in Medieval Tamilnadu*, South Asia Research, Oxford University Press, Oxford 2000, p. 13

⁶⁴ Bayly, Susan, *Caste, Society and Politics in India from the Eighteenth Century to the Modern Age*, Cambridge University Press, New York 1999 and Dirks, N.B., *Castes of Mind: colonialism and the making of modern India*, Princeton University Press, Princeton 2001 are important contributions. This is a topic that has been much debated.

⁶⁵ David Kinsley, , *Hindu Goddesses- Visions of the Divine Feminine in the Hindu Religious Tradition*, University of California Press, Berkley 1986, p.65

together they represent a model of ‘...social perfection’.⁶⁶ Sita is the selfless, devoted and sexually faithful wife, whose life revolves around her husband. Her utter obedience and devotion to her husband is illustrated throughout the story. To mention only one example, the otherwise stunningly beautiful Sita loses her special glow in captivity in Lanka when she is apart from Rama.⁶⁷ The religious historian Kinsley argues that Sita had no separate identity; her life and existence revolved around Rama, despite his cruelty towards her. Even though Sita had remained chaste throughout her captivity, Rama took notice of the gossip that claimed otherwise. Sita complied as her husband sent her away in exile. Fourteen years passed before Rama discovered that Sita had given birth to, and raised, his twin sons during her stay in the forest. Even after returning to the kingdoms the second time, the gossiping about Sita’s supposed lack of virtues continued. Sita accepted the gossiping and allowed herself to be sunk back into the earth, in order to maintain her husband’s honour. This was true for most Hindu women; they were taught to value themselves in relations to others.⁶⁸ Women were expected to cultivate the welfare of others before their own, particularly for their husband and children. So even though there are several popular goddesses in Hindu mythology like Parvati and Lakshmi, Sita most perfectly represents the ideal Hindu woman. Consequently, Sita holds an elevated position among many Hindus, while simultaneously evoking the rage of Indian feminists.⁶⁹

Susan S. Wadley also argues Sita’s position as the model Hindu wife. Furthermore, Wadley argues Hindu law focused exclusively on a woman as wife. This was similarly the focus of all Hindu mythology. Wadley argues that this was consistent in all authoritative written literature in India.⁷⁰ The ideal Hindu woman was one who achieved her happiness from being subordinate to her husband and did not strive to break out of his control. Living according to dharma made the wife auspicious and she was consequently a source of happiness and prosperity for her husband and family.

A south Indian expression of the orthodox Hindu wife:

Julia Leslie has conducted a study of a little known 18th Century Sanskrit text *Stridharmapaddhati*, written by a pundit at the court of the Maratha Raja’s of Tanjore some time between 1719 and 1750.⁷¹ The name of the text can be translated as ‘A Guide to the Religious Status and Duties of

⁶⁶ David Kinsley, 1986, p.68

⁶⁷ David Kinsley, 1986, p.72

⁶⁸ David Kinsley, 1986, p.77

⁶⁹ David Kinsley, 1986, p.77-78

⁷⁰ Susan S Wadley, 1995, p.115-119

⁷¹ Julia Leslie, *The Perfect Wife- The Orthodox Hindu Woman according to the Stridharmapaddhati of*

Women' and is according to Leslie the only known orthodox Hindu text that deals exclusively with the subject of women. The dharmasastras is a category that contains all the literature on religious codes and law. According to Derrett this literature was based on the three sources of *dharma*⁷², or righteousness; the Vedas, tradition and accepted custom. This is further divided into two subcategories; primary material like *sutras*, *smrtis* and *puranas*, and commentaries on these codes like the famous *Laws of Manu*. The Stridharmapaddhati belongs to the last category.⁷³ Leslie acknowledges that this text is not of the best quality compared to other texts, but it is valuable because it contains specific prescriptive regulations regarding the daily activities of an orthodox Hindu woman of the 18th Century. Leslie argues that the text was most likely commissioned by of the Tanjore kings of the early 18th Century. It is likely that the text was intended as material that could be read out loud to the women of the Tanjore court in the resting period after their midday meal.⁷⁴ She further argued that the text must be seen in the context of the very unstable environment of the Maharata court of Tanjore. The Maharata kingdom in Tanjore was faced with the constant Mughal threat from the North.⁷⁵ Furthermore, the royal house was detached from their familiar cultural environment of Maharashtra in Western India. The distinct cultural regional of Tamil country did according to Leslie allow greater freedom for women, something which was unfamiliar for the Tanjore kings.⁷⁶ Because of this cultural isolation, the royal house of the Marathas in Tanjore became set on reinforcing their own cultural ideals.⁷⁷ The challenges to orthodox Hindu dharma were many in the unstable environment of the 18th Century Tamil country. Not only did the nearby Muslim rulers challenge orthodox Brahmanical values, other attacks and challenges came from Christian missionaries and the bhakti worship that prevailed in the southern regions. The author of the text was as an orthodox Brahmin who thus represented a very prescriptive view on the ideals that was challenged at the time.

After a brief introduction, the second part of the Stridharmapaddhati focuses exclusively on the wife, as dharma (code of conduct) for a woman meant being a chaste and obedient wife. The tasks a wife had to perform correctly in the morning included waking up before her husband, meditation and worship, cleansing rituals and getting dressed. The daily activities continued with maintaining

Tryambakayajvan, Oxford University Press, Delhi 1989 p.12

⁷² Tryambaka supposedly applied the definition of dharma provided by Manu: 'Dharma when violated, verily, destroys; dharma, when preserved, preserves, therefore, dharma should not be violated, lest the violated dharma destroy us.' Manu Smrti 8.15. Manu was a religious commentator whose dharmasastras from between 200 BCE and 200 CE translated as the Laws of Manu became one of the most frequently used sources of Hindu tradition in Anglo-Indian law.

⁷³ Julia Leslie, 1989, p.24

⁷⁴ Julia Leslie, 1989, p.22

⁷⁵ Julia Leslie, 1989, p. 15

⁷⁶ Julia Leslie, 1989, p.4

⁷⁷ Julia Leslie, 1989, p.21

the sacred fire, household duties and duties in connection with meals. According to this text, a wife should prepare her husband's food personally in spite of having servants that could perform that task. Furthermore, she was to wash her husband's feet and only eat after he was finished and out of her sight. The instructions for the day time also contained regulations in regards to communication with other people. According to these regulations, a wife should never talk to other men than her husband. This was however modified as it could interfere with her household tasks: 'She should not talk to any other man apart from traders, renouncers, doctors and old men' and she was thus allowed to '...converse with those men who are instrumental in her affairs.'⁷⁸

The evening was also regulated. Different rules applied for sleeping but especially for the act of lovemaking; a process that lifted certain restrictions. One example was that a husband would normally not be allowed to touch his wife's feet because this was an act of subordination that she performed for him. This prohibition was lifted during the act of love-making. The wife also needed to be well prepared for the evening and she was dressed and perfumed once again: 'She will come to the pleasure room freshly bathed and dressed. After they have made love, they will each go separately to wash; returning to chew betel together and apply ointments to each other's bodies.'⁷⁹

The next part of the *Stridharmapaddhati* focuses on 'the inherent nature of women'. This section reveals the ambivalent view of women in orthodox Hindu texts; on the one hand is the view of the inherently wicked nature of women representing chaos and destruction (*strisvabhava*), while on the other hand is the focus on the purity and prosperity of the chaste wife (*stridhrama*). According to Leslie both Tryambaka and Manu expressed that sinfulness was a female virtue in all species. A female birth was in itself a signal of sin. This sinfulness was so profound that it was more difficult for a female to be reborn as a male than it was for an animal to be reborn as a human.⁸⁰ Tryambaka quotes Manu when describing the nature of women: 'they [women] are innately promiscuous, fickle-minded, lacking in love, and unfaithful to their husbands even when closely guarded'. He continued by stating that 'Manu allocated to women lying and sitting around, a love of ornament, indiscriminate sexual desire, anger, meanness, treachery and bad conduct.'⁸¹

The inherently wicked nature of women poses a challenge to Tryambaka; how can such sinful beings be instructed to act virtuously? Tryambaka gives the following explanation to the question:

If, as a result of hearing in this way about the multiplicity of faults (attributed to women),

⁷⁸ Julia Leslie, 1989, p 171

⁷⁹ Julia Leslie 1989, p. 244

⁸⁰ Julia Leslie 1989, p 247

⁸¹ Julia Leslie 1989, p 248

someone were to ask how women could (possibly) have any inclination towards religious duty, then the answer is (twofold): because it is understood from the words of Manu and others that they (women) have such qualities as inherent purity; and because it is also understood from the words of the Vishnupurana⁸² that women are inherently blessed with good fortune.⁸³

Leslie argues that Tryambaka's insistence of the purity of women was not unproblematic as women were constantly associated with impurity, particularly because of the polluting menstruation period. Tryambaka does not provide a particularly useful explanation for these conflicting ideas, but quotes Manu again:

Since, O twice-born men, a woman is of benefit to her husband by serving him in thought, word and deed, will come to dwell in the same heaven as he does- that is, (she can attain) those same (worlds) as a man (can but) without enormous effort- that is why I said [...] about women that they are blessed.⁸⁴

Leslie argues that Tryambaka's intention is to argue that women were not beyond religious instruction as even bad people may be able to improve. For a woman to improve herself and act in accordance with dharma, securing prosperity for her husband and family, she must follow the religious instructions carefully in order to refrain from acting according to her inherent nature.

The next section of the Stridharmapaddhati contains regulations for women in different situations. This section contains some general rules on behaviour: A woman should not be tempted or bribed by another man; she should not participate in religious festival, weddings or other public events. She should provide service to her in-laws, co-operate with her husband in religious affairs, show restraint in economic matters and show bold confidence in sexual matters. Furthermore, she should value cleanliness of her body; have an auspicious presence and a gentle tongue. She should not complain when beaten by her husband and should at all times wait on her husband, regardless of his nature. The main deity and guru of a noble woman was her husband.⁸⁵ More regulations were aimed at the religious duties of menstruating women, pregnant women, women whose husband was away, and for widows.⁸⁶

One section of particular interest is Tryambaka's commentaries on the subject of women's property which yet again reveal contradictions. First, Tryambaka states that many codes stated that women were denied rights of '...ownership, inheritance and the independent disposal of property.'⁸⁷ However, Manu also provides a description of the six types of women's property. These included

⁸² The Vishnupurana was considered as one of the most important of the eighteen puranas; ancient Hindu texts.

⁸³ Julia Leslie 1989, p 250

⁸⁴ Julia Leslie 1989, p 258

⁸⁵ Julia Leslie, 1989, p 274

⁸⁶ Julia Leslie, 1989, p283-304

⁸⁷ Julia Leslie, 1989, p 277

gifts given to her at her wedding ceremony, gifts she received on her first arrival at her husband's house, gifts given in the act of love and that which is given her by her brother, by her mother and by her father. Furthermore, a noble woman was allowed, and even expected, to make religious donations. This would naturally be impossible for a wife without having means at her disposal, even though Tryambaka argued that she needed the consent of her husband. The last section is Tryambaka's conclusion on the primary religious duty of a wife; obedience to her husband. Here, Tryambaka argues that a woman should perform this duty without regard for her own life. She should never question her husband, even if he sells her to another man. Furthermore, she should obey his orders even when they were in conflict with her other duties.⁸⁸

In her own conclusion, Leslie presents some of her critical commentaries to the text. She argues that the text is the result of a highly selective and arbitrary method, representing the ideals of a Brahman pundit in a hostile atmosphere. Leslie argues that the '...texts of dharmaśāstras are overtly prescriptive' from which we learn '...the duties of men and women according to the orthodox understanding of transcendental law.' This type of literary product can be seen as representing '...the value system of a particular social class.'⁸⁹ The social class in this context would be that of a ruling south Indian royal house. However, it is evident that this as a prescriptive text does not descriptively reflect reality. As Leslie argues herself, prescribed ideals are modified and changed when applied in the realities of everyday life. Although the text is of no use as documentary evidence of events in the royal household, it represents notions of ideal feminine behaviour prevalent in the early 18th Century royal court of the Maratha Rajas of Tanjore.

Leslie does not comment any further on how orthodox Hinduism was challenged in 18th Century south India. As mentioned above, several historians have argued the relatively low position of the Brahman and orthodox Hinduism in pre-colonial south India. The text suggests that the Maharata kings of Tanjore shared more ideological values with their relatives the Deccan Marathas than they did with their Tamil neighbours. It is impossible to establish how much the ideals of the Tanjore court shared or differed from the Telugu country royal houses of the 18th or early 19th Century. This text is however valuable because it is the only orthodox text concerned solely with the conduct of women and because it is one of the rare available texts of the orthodox Hinduism with a south Indian origin. The view of women presented in the *Stridharmapaddhati* appears to have been in general accordance with the colonial view of women which built on other, older orthodox texts.

⁸⁸ Julia Leslie, 1989, 305-317

⁸⁹ Postel-Coster 1977, p.135-50 in Leslie 1989, p 326

The persistence of the orthodox colonial view

The persistence of the orthodox view on the Indian women can be seen in the writing from the late 19th Century. *The High-Caste Hindu Woman* by the Indian woman Pundita Ramabai Sarasvati confirmed the ideology of the colonial sociology of women.⁹⁰ Ramabai, who was born in Pune in Maharashtra, wrote the book while living in the U.S. According to her American friend Rachel L. Bodley, the dean of the Women's Medical College in Pennsylvania, the book was written

..in the belief that if the depths of the thralldom in which dwellers in Indian zenanas are held by cruel superstition and social customs were only fathomed, the light and love in American homes, which has so comforted her burdened heart, might flow forth in an overwhelming tide to bless all Indian women [...] She is satisfied, moreover, that India cannot arise and take her place among the nations of the earth until she, too, has mothers; until the Hindu zenana is transformed into the Hindu home, where the united family can have pleasant times together.⁹¹

Ramabai wrote that the sacred texts all agree that there are three phases of a woman's life: childhood, married life and widowhood or old age.⁹² The orthodox view of women was described in the sacred texts of the Vedas which were according to Ramabai, '...believed by the devout Hindu to be the eternal, self-existing Word of God, revealed by Him to different sages.'⁹³ Ramabai shared the colonial view of the enduring oppression of women as she described the general view on women in India as: 'She, the loving mother of the nation, the devoted wife, the tender sister and affectionate daughter is never fit for independence, and she is "as impure as falsehood itself". She is never to be trusted; matters of importance are never committed to her.'⁹⁴

In accordance with the objectives of colonial sociology Ramabai used the position of women as a defence of the necessity of British colonial rule. She was, however, sceptical of the British application of religious codes in the Anglo-Indian court because: 'The learned and civilized judges [...] are determined to enforce, in this enlightened age the inhuman laws enacted in barbaric times four thousand years ago... There is no hope for women in India whether they be under Hindu rule or British rule'⁹⁵

Another imperative aspect of colonial sociology was the theoretical distinction of the separate spheres. This term became influential as Victorianism in Britain increasingly focused on the domestic sphere as an appropriate place for women. During the 19th Century, a distinction between

⁹⁰ Ramabai, Pundita, Sarasvati, *The High Caste Hindu Woman*, Philadelphia 1888

⁹¹ Ramabai, 1888 p. viii

⁹² Ramabai, 1888 p. 11

⁹³ Ramabai, 1888 p. 10

⁹⁴ Ramabai, 1888 p. 56

⁹⁵ Ramabai, 1888 p.66

private and separate public spheres gradually became common among the Indian upper and middle classes.⁹⁶ The tradition of physical separation within the household which designated the zenana as the distinct female quarters, made it easy for the colonial administration to argue that there indeed existed a 'private sphere' in India. The perception of the zenana as a closed unit isolated from the political and social life of the 'public sphere' was however a false presumption. The households of elite families were more than domestic units of production and consumption. Jack Goody has argued that in pre-industrial societies there '...could be no specific kinship domain that is not also an economic, political and religious one.'⁹⁷ The colonial sociology of women implied that the 'private sphere' was of no value for the colonial project of gathering knowledge and that the private sphere should remain private. C.A. Bayly argues that the British might have underestimated the information that could be extracted from the private sphere of Indian households, and thus ignored important information about Indian social structures.⁹⁸

Even though it has been established that the Indian household was not an isolated unit detached from society, the seclusion of women within the female quarters represents a methodological problem for the historian of 19th Century royal women. Female seclusion implied that women generally did not participate in the public discourse and these women have as a result left few sources. One consequence is that few studies on life from within the zenana have been conducted. There are some notable examples. *Domesticity and Power in the Early Mughal World* describes life within the female quarters in the pre-colonial Mughal court.⁹⁹ Ruby Lal paints a colourful picture of the intrigues and political and strategic games of the Mughal harem. She shows the political influence of the Mughal women, particularly the older women in the royal household, who even at some points held formal political powers. The available studies focusing on the colonial period are mainly written on Bengal in the late colonial period. An important study is *The Changing Role of Women in Bengal* by Meredith Borthwick.¹⁰⁰ Borthwick provides another account of the secluded elite women in the late part of the 19th Century, and illustrates that these women had greater freedom and even influence and power than colonial sociology of women allowed for. Other available accounts are several contemporary descriptions written by British women, wives of Company

⁹⁶ Murshid, Ghulam, *Reluctant Debutante: Response of Bengali Women to Modernization 1849-1905*, Sahitya Samsad, Rajshahi University, Rajshahi 1983 for one example.

⁹⁷ Jack Goody quoted by Indrani Chatterjee in *Unfamiliar Relations*, ed. by Indrani Chatterjee, Permanent Black, Delhi 2004 p. 8

⁹⁸ C. A. Bayly, 1996 p.94

⁹⁹ Ruby Lal, *Domesticity and Power in the Early Mughal World*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge 2005, p.205-208 and p.104

¹⁰⁰ Meredith Borthwick, *The Changing Role of Women in Bengal 1849-1905*, Princeton University Press, Princeton 1984, p.243

administrators or missionaries, who were invited into the zenana by the royal women.¹⁰¹ One contribution from Madras Presidency is the diary of Julia Maitland, the wife of a Company civil servant who was invited into the zenana by the local Rani of Penny-Whistle during her stay in different localities in 1830's Telugu country.¹⁰²

The most relevant publication to this study is William Dalrymple's commendable book *White Mughals* that deals with intrigues of upper class and royal households of the Nizam's late 18th Century Hyderabad. Dalrymple's provides a fascinating account of lives behind the walls of the zenana based for the most part on correspondence between the employees at the Nizam's court and the British East India Company employees who lived in close contact with the indigenous political elites in the semi-autonomous city.¹⁰³ These upper class and royal women in Dalrymple's study practiced purdha (female seclusion) strictly, but are far from the female ideal of the colonial sociology. Young and elder women alike displayed much informal power as they influenced the decisions of their men.

One consequence of the colonial ignorance of the women within the zenana was that the colonial sociology of women was allowed to flourish in contemporary public discourse. British colonial discourse on Indian womanhood in the 19th Century was preoccupied with customs deemed oppressing and religiously sanctioned. Debates on *sati*, widow immolation, widow's right to re-marry and child marriages dominated the public discourse on women, even though many of these customs were either infrequently practiced or regionally and culturally specific. Legal historian Nair has argued that the debates on these social reforms compromise several thousand documents in the archives of the British Parliament, while practically none regarding the far more consequential British colonial policies can be identified.¹⁰⁴ However, these debates led to massive social reforms, starting with the abolition of *sati* in 1828. Reforms and law regulation the other issues soon

¹⁰¹ A recently published book has collected writings from several British women in colonial India: *Memsahib's Writings: Colonial Narratives on Indian Women*, Indrani Sen (ed.) Orient Longman 2008

¹⁰² Julia Maitland, *Letters from Madras*, Alyson Price (ed.), Woodstock Books 2007 p.92-100. I have been unable to geographically locate the Raja she refers to as the Raja of Penny-Whistle, although she refers to his town as Dratcharrum. Maitland writes that this town was located 30 miles from their home at Rajahmundry, in the same general area as the Vassareddy zamindar.

¹⁰³ Dalrymple, William, *White Mughals: Love and Betrayal in 18th Century India*, Penguin Books, New Delhi 2002. This study is particularly interesting because Dalrymple presents a very detailed picture of the interaction between the British resident in Hyderabad and many of his colleagues who married Indian women and even converted to Islam. During the time-span of his study, this practice was deemed unacceptable by the colonial administration in both Madras and Bengal and it was decided that Company officials should refrain from interacting with the Indian subjects. This decision did not have an immediate effect which is evident in the material from the Vassareddy case. In the court files it appears that the collector of Guntur was a very active participant in the adoption of Jaganadha in 1803 where he had the ceremonial task of dropping precious stones over the adopted infants head. Vassareddy VII p.174

¹⁰⁴ Janaki Nair, 1996, Chapter 3

followed. Recent writings on the social reforms of the 19th Century have argued that these debates were part of the colonial sociology project designed to legitimize British colonial rule. This view is clearly evident in Ramabai's book discussed above. The studies of the colonial social reforms have also established that these reforms often reinforced and entrenched the customs even further, rather than eradicating them.¹⁰⁵ One problem with the social history approach was that many of these studies reinforced the colonial view of women in the 20th Century by operating within the framework provided by colonial sociology, while ignoring other approaches to the study of Indian women under colonialism.¹⁰⁶

Women and Anglo-Indian law

That Indian indigenous political systems were gradually changed during the course of the 19th Century is by now widely recognized. Extensive litigation in the colonial courts contributed to processes of *brahmanization*¹⁰⁷ or *sanskritization*¹⁰⁸. Through this process during the 19th Century, the Anglo-Indian courts accepted the colonial sociology of women and applied the inherent values as cases were decided. Price has in her studies concluded that female participation in zamindari litigation contributed to a negative development for Indian elite women. However, Price's studies are conducted on cases heard before the Privy Council in the late 19th Century. Considering the largely accepted view that the 19th Century saw a negative development, it would be natural to assume that this development had not yet progressed to the same level at the beginning of the Century. One important contribution has been made by Ranajit Guha's article called 'Chandra's death', a study of trial from 1830's Bengal investigating the circumstances of Chandra who died after consuming an herb intended to end her unwanted pregnancy. Guha has analyzed the female testimony in this case, and concluded that these female voices could show a range of different solidarities simultaneously.¹⁰⁹ This perspective which can be a useful analytical tool for the student of Anglo-Indian litigation and testimony has been developed and refined by Raheja. Both Guha and Raheja's studies are however quite far from the zamindari succession disputes from early century Telugu country. The Vassareddy case which was initiated in 1816 and decided thirty years later thus

¹⁰⁵ Janaki Nair, 1996

¹⁰⁶ Kumkum Sangari, & Sudesh Vaid, 1990 p.24

¹⁰⁷ Janaki Nair, 1996 p.40

¹⁰⁸ For examples see Nicholas Dirks, 2001, p.170 or D.H.A Kolff, 1992 p.206 and Dagmar Engels, 'Women and Law in Colonial India' in *European Expansion and Law*, ed. by Mommsen & Moor, Berg Oxford 1992, or Bernard Cohn, 'Notes on disputes and Law in India' in *An Anthropologist among the Historians and Other Essays*, Oxford University Press, Delhi 1987 p.624. These terms describes the development which occurred as the Anglo-Indian court applied the Hindu law based on the Sanskrit dharmasastras when resolving cases.

¹⁰⁹ Ranajit Guha, 'Chandra's Death' in *Subaltern Studies V: Writings on South Asian History and Societ*, ed. by R. Guha, Oxford University Press, Delhi 1987, p. 135-165

provides a rare source of noble female testimony in the Anglo-Indian court from the early colonial period and can illustrate agency exercised by royal women in this period.

I have argued in this chapter that the colonial sociology constructed a very orthodox female ideal which was not very representative for Indian women in Telugu country. In the following chapter I will substantiate this claim with a presentation of alternative approaches towards a definition of distinct south Indian views on womanhood.

2. Alternatives approaches towards south Indian womanhood

In the first chapter I presented the historiography of colonial sociology and discussed the emergence of a particular view on Indian women within this colonial discourse. I concluded that this view of Indian women was highly selective and represented only one aspect of Indian womanhood. Furthermore, I argued that the colonial sociology on women was particularly irrelevant for south Indian women. In this chapter, I will explore some different approaches to a south Indian perspective on womanhood. The material I discuss in this chapter comes from what has been termed 'the little tradition' by anthropologist Robert Redfield. Redfield distinguished local, agrarian cultures as different from the cosmopolitan elite; 'the great tradition'. The 'great tradition' thus reflects the culture of a small group while the 'little tradition' represents the larger part of the population of a civilization.¹¹⁰ The discipline of folklore studies often focuses on the products of 'the little tradition'. The advantage of studying these sources is that they are of a more dynamic character than the cultural products of the elites. Epics, poetry and songs are all far more adaptable to change and absorb aspects of the prevalent ideology of a society more easily. Narayana Rao has described local epics as '...vehicles of ideology.'¹¹¹

In this chapter I present very briefly epics and poetry from Telugu country, the regional base of the Vassareddy zamindary. I also present material from Tamil country. There are two simple reasons for this choice. Firstly, Tamil country has been studied on a much larger scale than Telugu country. Consequently, scholars of Telugu country have read and been inspired from the work conducted on southern Tamil country. A second reason is that these two distinct language areas share some common cultural and ideological features. Both are Dravidian areas, and many studies have been conducted on Dravidian culture and kinship systems as a distinct category.¹¹² Particularly in comparison to the northern regions, Tamil country and Telugu country can be said to be culturally and ideologically closely related.

Another possible objection here could be that my study focuses on the elite and that cultural products from 'the little tradition' do not represent the ideals of the political elite of Telugu country.

¹¹⁰ Robert Redfield, *Peasant Society and Culture: An Anthropological Approach to Civilization*, University of Chicago Press, Chicago 1956

¹¹¹ Narayana Rao 'Six Telugu Folk Epics', in *Another Harmony. New essays on Folklore in India*. Oxford University Press Delhi 1986 p. 134

¹¹² Thomas R. Trautmann, *Dravidian Kinship*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge 1982 is one acclaimed example.

However, pre-colonial south India was characterized by a great variety of little kingdoms where boundaries and spheres of influence were constantly challenged and changed. In such a fluid political environment, the ruling classes were more dependent upon the co-operation and recognition of their subjects than the rulers of the more stable political dynasties of northern India. One can argue that this made 'the little tradition' closer and more ideologically relevant to the ruling classes of the unstable southern kingdoms. Furthermore, Telugu epics were quite often group or caste specific and a category defined as martial epics, which will be discussed below, particularly reflected the values and world-view of the landowning castes.

I believe that a study on particular south Indian views on womanhood found in local literature will help to contextualize the information that I extract from the female testimony from the Vassareddy case in Part II of this thesis. First I will however discuss the concept of *sakti*, a point that has been significant in several disciplines dedicated to studies of south Indian womanhood and which must be taken into consideration in discussions on female agency.

Sakti: the powerful Hindu woman:

Shakti or *sakti* is most commonly defined as cosmic energy or more specifically as the female energy present in the universe. Kinsley describes *sakti* as 'The complementary pole of the divine tendency toward quiescence and stillness'.¹¹³ This energy is the basis of all aspects of creation, action and power in Hindu ideology, while the static element is regarded as a male quality. A man could achieve *sakti* through honourable behaviour and action, but only women were born with this particular energy. This is also described in the Laws of Manu, where it is believed that the seed is the hard, male element representing structure and culture, while the female womb is the soft element representing non-structure and nature. A common metaphor for this is that the woman is the field that the man plants his seed in. This is represented by two complementary terms; while *sakti* is power; *prakṛti* is nature.¹¹⁴ These terms represent the duality of femaleness: on the one hand a woman is benevolent and fertile. She produces life and directs her energy towards the wellbeing of her family. On the other hand, she is malevolent, violent and destructive. Although *sakti* is an important feature of all Hindu mythology and ideology, it is particularly important to the southern

¹¹³ David Kinsley, 1986, p.133

¹¹⁴ Susan Wadley, 1995 p.113-116. This distinction is also given by Egnor's Tamil informers in Margaret Egnor, 'On the meaning of Sakti to Women in Tamil Nadu' p.23 in *The Powers of Tamil Women*, ed. Susan Wadley, Maxwell School of Citizenship and Public Affairs, Syracuse University, 1991

part of India.¹¹⁵

Margaret Egnor argues that the importance of sakti in the Tamil region can be associated with the strong anti-authoritarian nature of Tamil culture expressed through the weak position of orthodox Hinduism and the strong influence of bhakti devotionism in the area.¹¹⁶ Sakti is what makes a woman powerful. However, this power can be dangerous and is greatly feared. Violent and destructive goddesses are worshiped throughout south India, and the worship of such divine females is a mixture of fear and respect. Sacrifices are made to satisfy the goddess so that she can direct her powerful energy towards good use instead of expressing it through uncontrolled anger and destruction. A key to the control of female power is male dominance. This is an aspect of Hindu ideology found all over India; a female power needs to be under male control.¹¹⁷ The dangerous powers of women serve the purpose of legitimizing female subordination in society.¹¹⁸

Saskia C. Kersenboom-Story stresses the significance of sakti in the south Indian context in her book on the devadasis of south India.¹¹⁹ She writes that sakti represents the dynamic aspect of the divine evident through the goddess worship in southern India. Kersenboom-Story argues that the institution of devadasis developed out of a necessity to control the dangerous aspect of this female force; a woman whose female power was ritually emerged with the powers of the great and feared goddess. Through her devotion to the deity, she would become auspicious and act as a protection to the local people.¹²⁰ Similar to the power which is achieved through subordination to a deity, the same is achieved by women through their selfless dedication to the welfare of her family. Mother goddesses are of the most popular deities that are being worshiped in south India. One reason is that mothers are considered as very powerful; child-birth represents extreme suffering, and thus gives the woman that has endured it a particular strong power.¹²¹ Through their suffering, chastity and self-control, women become powerful.

Price has written on the importance of sakti and goddess worship for kingship and power in the politically unstable late pre-colonial period in South India. In a period of changing power relations a

¹¹⁵ Susan Wadley, 1991, p xii

¹¹⁶ Margaret Egnor, 1991 p.15

¹¹⁷ Susan Wadley, 1995, p.122; Margaret Egnor, 1991, p.14-29

¹¹⁸ Leslie Orr, 2000, p.10-14 and Tapper, Bruce Elliot, 'Widows and goddesses' in *Contributions to Indian Sociology*, Vol. 13 No. 1 1979, p.4

¹¹⁹ Saskia Kersenboom-Story, , *Nityasumangali: Devadasi Tradition in South India*, Motilal Banarsidass, Delhi 1987

¹²⁰ Saskia Kersenboom-Story, 1987 p. 204

¹²¹ This is also considered to be a dangerous power. Wadley argues that while a wife is considered as good through their subordination to their men, mothers can be both good and bad depending on the level of self-control. Susan Wadley, 1995, p.121

person's abilities as ruler became more important than in more stable and entrenched political systems. A man's wealth could represent his level of sakti; power accumulated through proper action.¹²² A person's good karma represented the fruits of former action and as a consequence the person was filled with sakti which was a prerequisite for future proper action.¹²³ This again connected to the relatively weak position of orthodox Brahmanical Hinduism in pre-colonial south India.

As discussed in the introduction, empirical evidence from the late medieval period in south India strongly suggests the insufficiency of colonial sociology of women to explain the powerful positions of some categories of women in this period.¹²⁴ Wadley too has argued for the insufficiency of drawing the potential female ideal merely from Brahmanical sources. She argues that one needs to view the orthodox Hindu ideals as one part, while also considering what is expressed through folklore and oral traditions. Also, Wadley stresses the need to include social structures if we are to understand the regulations and customs that provide the rules of proper conduct for women. The ideological and social aspects of south Indian preoccupation with sakti and female powers is thus a useful backdrop when examining south Indian folklore and the female characters within the local tradition.

Telugu epics: 'The Epic of Palnadu'

The *Palnati Virula Katha*, hereafter referred to as 'the Epic of Palnadu' is a local epic from Telugu country, which has been written down and translated by Gene Roghair. This epic has long traditions and has been carried down in oral form for approximately 800 years.¹²⁵ Roghair argues that although there is much interesting written Telugu literature valuable to studies of south Indian and Telugu country, oral literature is particularly important.¹²⁶ Written Telugu literature most often has some roots in Sanskrit culture while the oral tradition has its roots in the south Indian countryside. Roghair argues that the epic is 'the oral literary expression of a local-world view.' and that the translated epic provides an alternative to Brahman elite ideology.¹²⁷

¹²² Pamela Price, 1996 p.33-34

¹²³ Margaret Egnor, 1991 p.16

¹²⁴ Cynthia Talbot, 1995 & Leslie Orr, 2000

¹²⁵ Gene Roghair, 1982, p.7

¹²⁶ For a very informative and chronological presentation of different forms of Telugu literature, see BH Kistnamurti, 'Shift of Authority in Written and Oral Texts: The Case of Telugu' in *Syllables of Sky: Studies in South Indian Civilization in Honour of Velcheru Narayana Rao*, ed. by David Shulman, Oxford University Press Delhi 1995

¹²⁷ Gene Roghair 1982, p.1-2, 87

While Roghair was conducting his fieldwork in the 1960's and 1970's, the stories from 'The Epics of Palnadu' could be found in radio shows, school books for children, in novels, magazines and paintings. However, the most important manifestation was the festival of heroes, celebrated every year in October/November. During the festival which celebrated the perceived historical events from the epic, the stories were performed by authorized singers, most often from one of the lower castes.¹²⁸ The stories found in this epic was perceived by the people of Palnadu as the story of their country set in the unstable period of the 12th Century, a politically chaotic period in the Deccan and Telugu country.¹²⁹ Although a variety of versions exist and historians debate whether the events can be viewed as a source of information about factual events, Roghair argues that inscriptional evidence in accordance with the majority of versions of the epics suggests that the final battle of this epic corresponds with a battle which was fought in the Palnadu district in 1182.¹³⁰

The story takes place in three different non-geographical worlds; *devaloka*, the world of the Gods; *nagaloka*, the world of serpents and *naraloka*, the world of men. The stories contain a variety of beings from local Gods and local mythological beings to pan-Indian Gods, mythological beings, humans of different castes, different spirits and animals. The main actors are however the Heroes, who are superior to the Gods in this epic world.¹³¹ One of the central actors, the Hero Brahma Nayudu is of the warrior Velama caste.¹³² The Velama caste is central throughout the epic and each episode in the epic focus on an individual Hero or Heroine, rather than on castes or other groups. This does not imply that there are no Brahmans in the epic. The epic does have several Brahman characters but Roghair argues that throughout the epic Velama heroes outrank the Brahman characters, even though Brahmans are normally considered of higher rank.¹³³ Roghair argues that the epic served the purpose of integrating the Velama caste, as the Velamas became one of the dominant landholding castes which held a number of substantial zamindaries in the following centuries.¹³⁴

Narayana Rao has similarly stresses the usefulness of studying oral epics, particularly Telugu epics. He argues that these epics are particular useful because many Telugu epics are associated with specific communities, like the Velamas caste. He has studied many different Telugu epics and divided them into two main categories: martial and sacrificial epics. He reminds us that landowners

¹²⁸ Gene Roghair 1982, p 26

¹²⁹ Gene Roghair 1982, p.95

¹³⁰ Gene Roghair 1982, p.76

¹³¹ Gene Roghair 1982, p 87

¹³² Gene Roghair 1982, p.97

¹³³ Gene Roghair 1982, p.103

¹³⁴ Gene Roghair 1982, p.121

were the predominant political power in pre-modern Telugu country and martial epics were the epics of the landowning castes like the Velamas, expressing their warrior ideology:

The self-image of the dominant landowners in these communities incorporated the ideology of warriors who protected the community and the territory: an ethic of men who preferred a heroic death on the battlefield to the humiliation of survival in defeat. Physical strength and readiness to fight in protecting one's honour were idealized as superior to male virtues.¹³⁵

The central themes of these epics were kin conflict over land or injured martial pride. The other type of epic, the sacrificial epic will be discussed below. Narayana Rao thus confirms 'the Epic of Palnadu' as relevant to the study of conflict regarding the estate left by the Velama caste zamindar Vassareddy Vencatadry Naidoo. Not only is the epic specifically connected to the landowning castes of Telugu country, the geographical location of the events of the epic further contributes to its relevance. Palnadu was a neighbouring district to Guntur and was annexed into Guntur during the Permanent Settlement in 1801.¹³⁶ Several of the stories take place in Guntur, more specifically at Amarvaty, where Vassareddy Vencatadry Naidoo built his fort at the beginning of the 19th Century.

Of particular relevance to this study is the position of women found in 'the Epic of Palnadu'. Roghair uses the women to illustrate how this epic represented an ideological view that differed significantly from the orthodox ideology of the Sanskrit epics.¹³⁷ In Roghair's own words 'In the epic even the wives who most closely approximate the classical ideals sometimes have qualities which reveal a different value system'.¹³⁸ The most striking difference is the multiple female characters, most of whom lack counterparts in the Brahmanical literature.¹³⁹ Roghair furthermore argues that 'The female roles integrated into Palnadu tradition suggests a considerable distance between the Brahmanical ideals of femininity and those which appear in the oral literature.'¹⁴⁰

. The female roles in the epic are too many and complex to be presented here in great detail. I will only give a few examples. The wives in the epic display traits normally associated with courtesans as they are sexually attractive and manipulate men. Although she represents the chaste and pure wife of the hero Baludu, Mancala is a complex character who is similarly to her husband's mistress young, beautiful and sexually attractive. She however openly expressed her displeasure, refuses her husband sexual contact and mocks him in public. Another character is the young woman Sivanagala Devi who refuses to marry a wealthy relative, despite her mother's orders. Sivanagala wants to

¹³⁵ Narayana Rao, Velcheru, 1986, p.148-9

¹³⁶ See Map II

¹³⁷ Gene Roghair 1982, p. 129

¹³⁸ Gene Roghair 1982, p.134

¹³⁹ Gene Roghair 1982, p. 130

¹⁴⁰ Gene Roghair 1982, p. 129

marry her childhood friend and manages to escape from her household and the village. She marries her childhood friend thus breaking the security of the bond to her natal family. She gives birth to a set of twins. The daughter Akka Pinakka does not marry but instead becomes a holy woman who enjoys the respect among the men of Palnadu as an older sister. The epic also contains a female heroine who displayed the same qualities as the male heroes. The epic also contains a number of goddesses. Roghair argues that the epic contains at least five different female characters. But even those who have the status of chaste wife differ from the orthodox Hindu ideal. They disobey their parents and their husband, and acts on their own initiative. Roghair argues that the epic has integrated a far more active and equal position for the woman in a marriage. In conclusion, he argues that the female roles express ideologies of the landowning castes which have applied a highly selective integration of Brahmanical roles for women.¹⁴¹

Kanyaka Ammavari

Velcheru Narayana Rao is a scholar that has written extensively on epics, folklore and devotional poetry of south India and particularly from his ancestral region of Telugu country, today's Andhra Pradesh. He has also translated several of these epics which illustrate different female characters than the hegemonic colonial view, although these epics shares features with the classic Sanskrit epics. I will give a summary of one of these epics to illustrate narrative features that are very similar in nearly all the epics described by Narayana Rao.

The *Kanyaka Ammavari Katha* is set in the city of the Komatis (a merchant caste) in the West Godavari district, on the coast of the Bay of Bengal. The leader of the Komatis lives with his daughter Kanyaka who is said to be the most beautiful woman in the world. The local king visits the city and falls in love with the girl. He sends word to the father that he wants to marry her. If her father refuses, the king promises that he will invade the city and abduct Kanyaka. The elders in town get together and discuss the situation. They know that they are powerless against the superior forces of the king and some even argue they might exploit the situation to get favours from the king. While the king and his men wait outside the city, Kanyaka's father sends the king his approval to marry his daughter, but he insists that he needs time to prepare for the wedding. However, Kanyaka takes control of the situation. She assembles the people of the city and reveals her plan which is to immolate herself in a fire. She asks who of the town's people will be willing to follow her. 106 families agree to follow her in death. Kanyaka select the husband and wives only while leaving the

¹⁴¹ Gene Roghair 1982, p.130

younger men and women to carry on the caste line. Kanyaka has a pit dug but before she enters the fire she sanctions a code of conduct for the caste in the future. She insists that cross-cousin marriages are to be the rule for the lineage no matter the circumstances. She also decides that all girls are to bear her name and that the women of the town will be cursed by being ugly so that no man will desire a Komati woman ever again. In the meantime, the king has sent some soldiers into the village to investigate what is taking so long. The soldiers are so impressed by Kanyaka's virtuous act that they decide to desert the king and worship Kanyaka. By the time the king becomes suspicious, it is too late. When his second batch of soldiers enters the city, Kanyaka and the others have already entered the fire and died.¹⁴²

Five of the epics from 'Epics and Ideologies: Six Telugu Folk Epics' have strikingly similar features. The protagonist is a woman who becomes a widow and who wants to perform sati to honour her husband and her family. They all face resistance and have to overcome major obstacles. They all have to correct something which is not right before they throw themselves at the pyre. The story Kanyaka Ammavari Katha is particularly interesting because of the epics development. Local folk epics have according to Narayana Rao undergone some major changes. Many such epics and folk tales are also made into written texts. Narayana Rao defined this as 'secondary epic formations'.¹⁴³ This process involves a series of changes; most importantly in this context is that the story or epic is 'sanskritisized'. This again has several implications. Of interest to this study is how the role of women in the epics change as the epic is transformed from an oral story to a printed literary product within the framework of colonial sociology. This change is according to Narayana Rao illustrated best by comparing the Sanskrit secondary epic version of Kanyaka Ammavari Katha to the traditional version presented above. Kanyaka still holds an important role in the secondary epic, but her status is changed. In the original epic, Kanyaka initiated her death herself, and was decisive when she decided to throw some families that did not want to join her, out of the caste and their town, while at the same time prescribing rules for the remaining families. In the secondary epic, Kanyaka does not take this initiative. This is instead transferred to a Brahmin called Bhaskaracarya. Kanyaka's role as caste leader is thus greatly reduced or diminished while her chastity and virtuous nature is inflated and becomes her prominent feature.¹⁴⁴ Kanyaka's agency, her independent initiative and her defining political role within her caste is thus no longer considered as appropriate female virtues.

¹⁴² Narayana Rao, 'Six Telugu Folk Epics', in *Another Harmony. New essays on Folklore in India*. Oxford University Press Delhi 1986, p.137

¹⁴³ Narayana Rao, 1986 p.149

¹⁴⁴ Narayana Rao, 1986 p.158

The three twins

Another interesting epic from the Tamil region called the 'Three twins' known as *Annanmar Katai*, or 'The Story of the Elder Brothers'. This epic is geographically and thematically more distant from the Telugu country of Vassareddy case than the 'Epic of Palnadu'.¹⁴⁵ Beck argues that though this epic is distinctly south Indian, it shares several features with the classical Sanskrit epics like the Ramayana and Mahabharata, unlike the 'Epic of Palnadu'. Nevertheless, Beck argues for some similar features in the Tamil epic.

This epic contains several female characters; all of whom at first sight appear as chaste Hindu wives. One character Tamarai is unable to become pregnant with her husband because he has been put under a curse by a distant relative. Her husband soon accepts this, but Tamarai refuses to give up her hope of having children. She is informed that she need to repent for the sins of her husband's father by going through seven death-like experiences and spending three times seven years in captivity. After twenty-one years of meditation on Mount Kailasa, Tamarai is granted a meeting with Siva¹⁴⁶ who rewards her efforts. She becomes pregnant with magic triplets. Later in the story, Tamarai's children, two boys and a girl, are grown. The two boys are very successful in warfare and defeat many great kings. However, after one battle were many of their soldiers die, the boys regard their leadership as so severely flawed that they commit suicide in order to protect their honour. Their sister consequently makes sure that her brother's wives are immolated before she ventures out to find their bodies. She revives them for a short while to say her goodbyes before she too kills herself.¹⁴⁷

The description above does not give the epic the attention it deserves, but serves to illustrate my point. Beck furthermore argues that even though the female triplet is not an active participant in much of the epic, she is the driving force behind the action of her brothers.¹⁴⁸ This is similar to the 'Epic of Palnadu' where Roghair argues that 'Men are often the active agents; women the energy behind them.'¹⁴⁹

¹⁴⁵ Brenda Beck, *The three twins- The telling of a South Indian folk epic*, Indiana University Press, Bloomington 1982 p.13

¹⁴⁶ One of the most important Hindu Gods, whose name means 'the auspicious one'.

¹⁴⁷ Brenda Beck, 1982 p.13-17

¹⁴⁸ Brenda Beck, 1982 p.13-17

¹⁴⁹ Gene Roghair 1982, p.135

Devotional poetry

Another source of local tradition is devotional poetry which emerged with the bhakti movement. In one book on the subject, *When God is a Customer*, Narayana Rao deals with Tamil and Telugu erotic devotional poetry called *padam*.¹⁵⁰ These poems developed within a particular south Indian tradition, something which is evident in that most of the words in the poems Narayana Rao has analyzed, uses Telugu or Tamil words, and hardly any words of Sanskrit origins. He traces the development of this poetry from its origins in Tamil bhakti tradition to the conservative versions of the 19th Century. The interesting part is that these poems most often have a female voice. Most often this is the voice of the poet through a courtesan who has a god as her customer. However, Narayana Rao argues that these poems originate from the great poet Ksetrayya who was patronized by a 17th Century king Vijayanraghava (1633-37).¹⁵¹

Many of these poems also had the voice of a married woman who found true passion with her lover. The woman is the one who takes the initiative in these poems. During the early colonial period the wife as the protagonist disappears from this form of poetry. The female voice becomes exclusively the voice of a courtesan. The courtesan was a respected woman and her services were greatly appreciated in the pre-colonial period. She was considered as a valuable member of society and was a vital part of the entourage of a powerful man, admired for her sexual abilities as well as her talents in singing and dancing. Narayana Rao argues that the courtesan enjoyed a freedom that was normally reserved for men.¹⁵² As the Victorianism of the British and orthodox Brahmanical Hinduism took hold during the early 19th Century, the respect for the courtesan gradually disappeared. Furthermore, the active and passionate role of wives found in pre-colonial devotional poetry disappeared, as this was not appropriate within the value system of colonial sociology.

In these texts of 'the little tradition' there is more than one possible identity for a female. The women of the sacrificial epics represent an ideal close to colonial sociology of the high colonial period. They sacrifice themselves to save the honour of their caste without any concern for themselves. Although these characters represent different virtues connected with female power, or sakti, there are some striking similarities. What unites the female characters here, opposed to the orthodox ideal wife represented by Sita, is that these women all display independent agency. These virtuous women all take charge of the situation, and appears as the protagonists in the stories who's

¹⁵⁰ *When God is a Customer: Telugu Courtesan songs by Ksetrayya and Others*, Narayana Rao, Ramanujan and Shulman, University of California Press, 1994

¹⁵¹ Narayana Rao, Ramanujan and Shulman, 1994 p. 23

¹⁵² Narayana Rao, Ramanujan and Shulman 1994, Introduction

actions fuels the progress of the story. Unlike Sita, who complies with every wish of her husband, even when he sent her into exile for 14 years, these women are not restricted by the actions of their more passive, male counterparts. They go to great lengths to reach their goal, even if their goal is self-immolation. Perhaps the most striking character, Kanyaka, extends her actions even longer. She appeared as the leader of the caste. She was able to get most of the town's families to agree to self-immolation and she also prescribed the codes of conduct for the caste. Her words were respected, and her display of independent political agency was seen as appropriate even though she in some respects operated within the framework of orthodox Indian womanhood.

Concluding remarks:

Colonial sociology of women developed as a result of the colonial need for knowledge on Indian tradition. Once accepted, this one dimensional view of women that saw the obedient, chaste wife as the only proper female identity, had a massive impact. Through alternative sources that represent local tradition, it appears evident that south Indian womanhood was far more complex than would be possible within the framework of colonial sociology. Although south Indian female ideals did not differ completely from the orthodox ideal, the epics and poetry examined above reveals different value systems. South Indian preoccupation with sakti emphasises the massive intense power of women. This power can be both good and bad and needs to be under male control. However, the female characters in the epics are not obedient wives, comfortable with the passiveness of male subordination. On the contrary, these women display independent actions and display virtues unparalleled in classical Sanskrit literature.

The studies of colonial social reforms have attempted to provide the otherwise mute voices of Indian women from the colonial period history, with a voice. However, the studies largely categorized the female voices as either supporting the patriarchal structures that was keeping them subordinated, or as voices of resistance. This dichotomy ignores the possibilities of the individual female voice and the possibility that a historical subject may balance different loyalties simultaneously. Discussing female agency as a concept separate from notions of power can provide a more productive approach. It appeared from the female characters discussed above that displaying agency was considered appropriate female behaviour within the framework of a south Indian epic, although it's relation to power was context specific.

In the following chapters, I will explore the Vassareddy succession dispute with a focus on female

testimony. I attempt to identify some of the features of south Indian womanhood outlined in the discussions in this chapter. I will also make space for these rare individual voices from the past and try to identify the different solidarities and loyalties that appear in their testimony. This can contribute to our understanding of appropriate female behaviour in an early 19th Century south Indian zamindary. However I will first present a background history of the Vassareddy family and estate. This is necessary to understand the disastrous dispute that within a few decades would reduce the once powerful Vassareddy estate to a famous family history without material assets.

Part II

1: The Vassareddy zamindary and the origins of the dispute

The Vassareddy case is valuable as the object of a case-study. First of all, this case is interesting because of the size of the estate involved. The Vassareddy zamindary had a long history and enjoyed a massive influence and control in the district, particularly during the reign of Vencatadry Naidoo who controlled the massive estate in the turmoil of the late 18th Century and during the permanent settlement. Vencatadry Naidoo was seen as one of the few success stories of the permanent settlement in Madras Presidency. From being considered as a threat to Company authority in the district during the turn of the Century, it is hard to conceive how the entire Vassareddy estate was all lost in a matter of two decades.¹⁵³ The judges too realized the special nature of this case. According to the third judge in the Provincial court:

I have been guided solely by the desire of furthering public justice, it being most desirable, and for the interest of all parties in this suit, that a Decree should be passed as speedily as possible, that the villages now the cause of contention and litigation be no longer subject to the anarchy and confusion which has and must arise from a divided authority, thereby occasioning serious impediment to the regular superintendence of public revenues, and entailing the certain ruin of a zemindary long held by a zemindar who has been acknowledged by the public authorities to have been particularly punctual in the discharge of his engagements.¹⁵⁴

However, the case was hardly resolved as quickly as this judge suggested. From the first suit was filed in 1816, 30 years would elapse before the case was tried before the Judicial Committee of the Privy Council. The Vassareddy case was one of the first zamindary succession disputes of this magnitude and with such a tragic outcome; from 1832 onwards the entire estate was under attachment and managed by the Court of Wards. This illustrates how rapidly indigenous rulers in the localities could be deprived of the foundation for their traditional power. The zamindary system doubtlessly led to a fragmentation of the local political elites, as large ancestral estates were divided or entirely lost.

The Vassareddy case is relatively well-known among scholars focusing on disputes in early colonial South India. According to legal historian Meschievitz 'The court battles for control of the Vassareddy estate are notorious, both for their length and apparent futility.'¹⁵⁵ Robert E. Frykenberg also described the case in his book *Guntur District*¹⁵⁶ and the article 'Elite groups in a South Indian

¹⁵³ Kistna District Manual, page 311

¹⁵⁴ Vassareddy VII p.114

¹⁵⁵ Meschievitz, 1986 p.226

¹⁵⁶ Robert E. Frykenberg, *Guntur District 1788-1848: A History of Local Influence and Central Authority in South India*, Clarendon Press Oxford 1965

District'.¹⁵⁷ In this article Frykenberg describes the case as '...a staggering complex struggle for succession.'¹⁵⁸ Frykenberg has written an impressive and detailed account of the society of Guntur in the early 19th Century. The Vassareddy case is however not the main object of his study and he presents the case as '...a fascinating story of 113 pages.'¹⁵⁹ This refers to the report written by E.F.Moore based on the proceedings of a case before the Judicial Committee of the Privy Council.¹⁶⁰ This report only covered the case as it was presented to the Privy Council court in the summer of 1846. The case was appealed from Madras 14 years earlier and much had changed during those years.¹⁶¹ The infamous famine that struck Guntur in 1832 had contributed to the ruin of Ramanadha Baboo who was the temporary manager of the estate, and the entire zamindary had been attached by the government.¹⁶² Furthermore, when the case was heard in the Privy Council court it appeared as a conflict between two male descendants of the late Vassareddy Vencatadry Naidoo. The Moore report described the case as revolving around the question of whether Vencatadry Naidoo's adoptions of two sons were to be considered legal and in accordance with local custom. Although this discussion formed an important aspect of the case, this report does not accurately represent the true complexity of the case while it was pursued in the Indian Company courts.

The Moore report does not cover what I found to be the most interesting aspect of the case after reading all of the court documents from the Vassareddy case, namely the participation of the Vassareddy women. Vencatadry Naidoo's oldest adopted son left two wives, Atchama and Rungama, when he died in 1825. They both became very active participants in the suit previously fought between Jaganadha and his adoptive brother Ramanadha over control of the Vassareddy zamindary. These women's involvement in the case was not as passive bystanders or witnesses who were involuntarily brought into the suit. Both Atchama and Rungama initiated action and participated fully in the succession dispute that was to determine the future of the estate once managed by the famous Vencatadry Naidoo. However, before I start examining the suits that compromised the Vassareddy case in greater detail, a background history of the Vassareddy family and estate is in order. Acknowledging the zamindary's long history is necessary for a full appreciation of this case's relevance to the historiography of the colonial presence in early colonial south India.

¹⁵⁷ Robert E Frykenberg, 'Elite groups in a South Indian District', *Journal of Asian Studies*, Vol. 24, No.2 1965

¹⁵⁸ Frykenberg, 1965b p.270

¹⁵⁹ Frykenberg, 1965a, p.44

¹⁶⁰ British Library: E.F.Moore, 1846-1850

¹⁶¹ The case was appealed from the Sudder Adawlut court in Madras by Rungama in October 1832 with a 55 page long appeal. Vassareddy XI p.1-55

¹⁶² Frykenberg, 1965a, p.4

The Vassareddy family history

The Vassareddy zamindary was at the turn of the 18th Century one of the most influential and wealthy families of the Krishna District. The Krishna district was located on the Telugu country coast in the northern part of Madras Presidency. From the rich delta of the coastal region, the districts northern frontier was the Krishna River, while the mountains in Palnadu marked the district's western boarder.¹⁶³ The district was situated around the important highroad from Madras to Hyderabad, and most of the visitors here were travellers just passing through or taking a break on the way.¹⁶⁴ The district consisted of a variety of different landscapes that could be heavenly green and fertile after a good monsoon or after the flooding of the Krishna river, or destitute, gold and barren after a bad monsoon season. The district also had picturesque mountains, deep jungles harbouring tigers, bears and killer bees, but also dessert plains of black and red sand.¹⁶⁵

Inscriptions show that the area once was part of the Chola Empire. Later the Chalukyas left numerous inscriptions, before the Reddy kings of Kondavidu built a fortress in the district. The Vijayanagar Empire controlled the area in the 16th Century and there are many inscriptions from this period. Soon after the fall of Vijayanagar, most of the district was conquered by the Golconda king. Later, parts of the district were subordinate to the Navab of Arcot. The Dutch East India Company kept a station in Masulipatam, and even endowed temples in the area.¹⁶⁶ The French controlled parts of the area from the middle of the 18th Century, and had a fort built at Kondavidu, east of Old Guntur.¹⁶⁷ So when the British East India Company officially took over the authority of the area from the Navab in 1790, the area was already well acquainted with the presence of foreign powers.¹⁶⁸ This period was a very disturbed one; not only was control over parts of the district changing hands quite rapidly, there where also numerous gangs and tribes that by their violent plundering made life unsafe for the villagers and travellers alike. A Dr. Heyne that travelled through the area in 1797 described Palnadu, which was annexed into Guntur in 1801, as a place with '...no security for life or property.'¹⁶⁹ It was not only the unstable political environment that made Guntur an inhospitable place for foreigners. *The Kistna District Manual* describes how many foreigners

¹⁶³ See Maps I & II

¹⁶⁴ Although the district did have important temples that attracted pilgrims, and many archaeological sites which attracted archaeologists. *Kistna District Manual* p179-180 and p.186

¹⁶⁵ <http://www.kistnadistrict.com/html/district-profile.htm> [entered 3rd October 2008]

¹⁶⁶ *Kistna District Manual* p179-180.

¹⁶⁷ *Kistna District Manual*, p.182

¹⁶⁸ *Kistna District Manual*, p.151-153. According to publication of the World Telugu Conference, the first British settlements were established in Guntur as early as 1611. Dr. V. M. Reddy & Dr. P. Raghunatha Rao, *Telugu country under British Rule*, Telugu country Pradesh Sahitya Akademi, Hyderabad 1975, p.6

¹⁶⁹ *Kistna District Manual*, p.151-153

died of tropical diseases shortly after arriving in the district. Apparently, the environment was so dangerous that the Company had to pay their officers a large extra risk bonus on top of the normal salary just to find personnel that was willing to take the risk of moving there.¹⁷⁰

The majority of the land of the Vassareddy estate was in the Guntur district and included the town of Guntur.¹⁷¹ The Vassareddy estate had long traditions in the district, and Vencatadry Naidoo was the eleventh generation of Vassareddy zamindars.¹⁷² The ancestor of the family was Vassareddy Verappa Naidu who in 1670 was appointed Desmukh¹⁷³ of the pargana of Nandigāma by the King of Golconda. The area was after his death in 1686 divided between his three sons. This division was continued to the brother's sons. One of these, Chinna Pudmanaboodoo, who according to the genealogical tables in the court files was Veerapa Naidoo's grandson and the third generation of Vassareddy rulers, has become legendary because he supposedly escaped from the Mughal prison in Delhi by using his charm and manipulative abilities.¹⁷⁴

In 1710 a dispute arose about control of the area of Kondavidu between the two major families in the district, the Velmavaru Manika Rao, who had held control over the area since the family was granted their positions by the Vijayanagar rulers, and the Desastha Manu Rao that had come from the north and gained their power through the Muslim rulers. According to the Kistna District Manuel, The Subahdar of the Deccan granted the Vassareddy family control over a third of the Kondavidu circar in an attempt to balance the conflicting forces.¹⁷⁵ These three families remained the major powers in the area throughout the century. Frykenberg however, tells a slightly different story about the origins of Vassareddy power in Guntur. According to his book, the district was dominated by the two families until 1710 when the above mentioned Chinna Pudmanaboodoo, or Vassareddy Padmanbhudu, came across the river from the North as the leader of a mighty Kamma family, who quickly gained influence in the district, on the expense of the Manika Raos. From the small beginning of 22 villages in the northernmost enclave of the district, in the talook of Chintapally, granted in 1710, their influence grew such that the family only fifteen years later was granted another 225 villages in the district, thus making the Vassareddies the most powerful family

¹⁷⁰ Kistna District Manual, p. 183.

¹⁷¹ Kistna District Manual, p.177

¹⁷² See 'List of Vassareddy zamindars' in the Appendix

¹⁷³ Deshmook: The district collector. A hereditary officer under the Hindu Government, exercising revenue and police jurisdiction over a large district. He was the immediate superior of the headmen of the several villages.

¹⁷⁴ The story tells how Chinna Pudmanaboodoo was taken prisoner by the Mughal emperor but that he convinced the ladies in the royal female quarters to help him escape, by means of his 'manly beauty'. Furthermore, he convinced the Emperor himself not to imprison him again by taming an untameable horse from the Emperor's stable. *Kistna District Manual* page 307

¹⁷⁵ Subahdar was a governor of a province or a chief Indian officer of a company of Indian troops in the British army. In this case he was a governor for the Nizam of Hyderabad.

of the district.¹⁷⁶

In 1761 the family's dominions were once again expanded through an imperial grant from the Nizam. After this one of the three cousins became far more powerful than the others, according to the Kistna District Manual his name was Náganna.¹⁷⁷ After his death his dominions were shared divided between his two sons; Rámanna took control of Nandigáma, and Jagayya over Chintapally. In the Court files however, the Vassareddies present their ancestral history in a slightly different version. Jagayya, apparently only a year after killing his second cousin, Viranna of the junior Chintalapádu branch of the family, was beheaded by one of Basalat Jang's officers.¹⁷⁸ The story of how his presumably young widow received the news has become a famous story within the family. Jagayya's wife Achamma had a golden bead necklace in her hand when she received the horrible news, and no female member of the Vassareddy family has worn such a necklace since in honour of the devoted wife. Achamma proved her devotion by throwing herself at her husband's funeral pile, thus performing the last recorded incident of sati in the Kistna district.¹⁷⁹

But these were restless times, and apparently Rámanna in 1770 found himself in conflict with the mighty Basalat Jang who held Guntur with the help of a substantial French force. He managed to storm Rámanna's fort at Chintapally, driving him over the river into Company territory. Basalat Jang instated the eldest son of the late Viranna, Mouli as zamindar of all the Vassareddy estates in Guntur. This arrangement seems not to have lasted very long. In 1772 when Vencatadry died, Rámanna quickly claimed his brother's territory back. This claim was acknowledged by the Madras Government on the condition that he maintained his brothers' children. By 1777 his differences with Jang must have been resolved as Rámanna was back at his fort at Chintapally.¹⁸⁰

The rise of Vencatadry Naidoo

In 1778 Rámanna died, and left his estate to his nephew Vencatadry Naidoo instead of his own son Paupiah. Vencatadry consequently imprisoned both his cousins Paupiah and Moliah. According to one witness in the Vassareddy case, Rámmanah had raised Vencatadry and regarded him as his own son. He consequently left him the estate out of affection for the boy. One witness, Gallamoody

¹⁷⁶ Robert E. Frykenberg, 1965 p.22

¹⁷⁷ Kistna District Manual p.309

¹⁷⁸ Basalat Jang was the brother of the Nizam, and enjoyed control over Guntur.

¹⁷⁹ Kistna District Manual, p.309-310. But this is also mentioned several places in the Vassareddy case files.

¹⁸⁰ Kistna District Manual, p.309-310

Shashiah, a 75 year old Brahman who had been employed at Amarvaty most of his life, described Vencatadry's accession to the Provincial court:

Afterwards, while Vencatadry Naidoo's father Boochiah [he was called both Boochiah and Jagannah acc. to this witness] was carrying on the management of the zamindary, the Mogul Foudjar for some reason caused his head to be cut of treacherously. At that time, as Vencatadry Naidoo was two or three years of age, Vencatadry Naidoo's mother delivered him to Ramanah, telling him as follows: "As his father's rightful zemindary should devolve on him, keep him by you and protect him; and conduct the management of the whole zamindary, and deliver over the same, together with the other estates, to him whenever he may demand the same, after he shall have attained competent age." And she burnt herself. Therefore Ramanah kept Vencatadry Naidoo under him, and patronized him, and conducted the affairs of the said zemindary. While Ramanah was managing the business thus, Vencatadry Naidoo, having attained the proper age, quarrelled with Ramanah, saying that the rights of his father's zemindary, and that he, Ramanah, had no concern with it. Thereupon Ramanah used to satisfy him saying, "I will give you your zemindary." Ramanah having fallen sick, and thinking he would die, he sent for his son Paupiah, his youngest brother's son Moliah, and Vencatadry Naidoo, and told his son and younger brother's son saying, "Vassareddy Ramalingana gave to Vencatadry Naidoo's father this zemindary, without reserving in us any concern therein; therefore he was beheaded: his zamindary rights belongs to Vencatadry Naidoo and not to us, and he will rule over the same. You should not quarrel with him, but conduct yourself according to his wish, receiving allowances."¹⁸¹

Regardless of the details surrounding Vencatadry Naidoo's succession, the death of Jang, made Vencatadry the major power in the district, the closest superior power being the Nizam of Hyderabad situated 292 km away.¹⁸² The Company found Vencatadry Naidoo's massive power threatening, and the Masulipatam Council suggested to the Government in Madras that this massive power could be divided between Vencatadry and his relation Lakshmipati, who ironically was the son of Viranna whom Vencatadry's father murdered. Vencatadry was outraged and seized Lakshmipati's fort at Muktiāla by force. The Company was unable to challenge Vencatadry's superior military power until 1794, when they managed to force him to let his cousins out of prison and also granted them an allowance. British forces stationed a battalion at the fort of Chintapally in order to keep control on '...the lawless Vencatadry.'¹⁸³ Vencatadry never returned there, but instead constructed his new residence at Amarvaty further down the river. This massive complex of gardens and temples with burnished copper roof became the admiration of the district and reflected the magnitude of Vencatadry's wealth and influence.¹⁸⁴

By the end of the 18th Century, Vencatadry's powers towards the Company were severely restricted and the use of force was no longer effective against the far superior Company forces. He did

¹⁸¹ Vassareddy VII p.216

¹⁸² <http://www.mapsofindia.com/distances/hyderabad.html> [entered 30th of June 2008]

¹⁸³ Kistna District Manual, p. 311

¹⁸⁴ During the construction of the fort at Amarvaty, the ruins of a now famous Buddhist temple were first discovered. Robert E. Frykenberg, 1965 p.34

however manage to use his connections to manipulate the foreign authorities. During the Permanent Settlement that was finally concluded in the district in 1802 Vencatadry was able to get the value of his land grossly undervalued and thus made fortunes of the extra unofficial revenues. He used these funds not only on his lavish princely lifestyle but to buy new land thus expanding his domain further.¹⁸⁵ Vencatadry Naidoo played this game very cleverly; he always paid his revenues to the Company on time, giving them no reason to interfere in his business. At one time when he was going on a pilgrimage to Benares, he paid his revenue in advance to make sure that the British had no reason to intervene in the management of his estate while he was away.

Vencatadry Naidoo dedicated massive funds for charities and religious donations. Gift-giving was an important tool of the pre-colonial south Indian kingly politics that was used to establish and confirm power relations between rulers and subordinates.¹⁸⁶ Vencatadry was popular among his subjects because of his princely level of spending when it came to weddings and other grand occasions.¹⁸⁷ However, he appears to have realized the need to have a hands-on-approach in the management of his affairs. In several letters to his adopted sons, Vencatadry Naidoo instructs them to get more involved in the management of the talooks, or divisions of the estate, that he had put them in management of:

I understand that you do not pay much attention to the affair of your talook. The season of the year is approached; you ought by this time to have gone into the talook, accompanied by the mujoodars, &c., and spoken personally with every ryot and renter, and taken care of all the affairs, and collected the money from such places as it was practicable, and taken bonds for the balances where they are allowed to remain uncollected; you must take kabooliats for five years in this Fusly, and grant cowls, and give due encouragement to all the persons; but if you stay in the cusha, thinking you are a zemindar, assuming authority to yourself, and neglect to do as above, not only your talook will be ruined, but also you must consider yourself a mischief-maker; therefore you will act properly hereafter.¹⁸⁸

The great zamindar appears to have had a great ability to balance between the world-view of the pre-colonial period and the demands of the modern world as a revenue administrator under the Company. One example is the remarkable story of how Vencatadry Naidoo was one of the first to vaccinate his ryots against smallpox. He apparently let himself be inoculated first, and then employed doctors to do the same to all his subjects that were willing to undergo the procedure.¹⁸⁹

¹⁸⁵ Masulipatam was an important port during the 18th Century that was used by the French and British forces and it was also the closest sea-port to the long independent state of Hyderabad

¹⁸⁶ The significance of the gift as a political integrative tool in south India has been argued by Price for royal politics and by Appadurai for the south Indian temple. Price 1996, and Arjun Appadurai, *Worship and conflict under Colonial Rule: a south Indian case*, Cambridge University Press 1981

¹⁸⁷ Kistna District Manual, p. 313. Bile in this context is defined as 'inclination to anger' <http://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/bile> [entered 29th of October 2009]

¹⁸⁸ This note from Vencatadry to his youngest adopted son contains no date, but must have been written between 1812-1816. Vassareddy VII p.93

¹⁸⁹ <http://www.smallpoxhistory.ucl.ac.uk/Other%20Asia/ongoingwork.htm> [entered 1st October 2008]

The Kistna District Manual provides another fascinating story about Vencatadry Naidoo. The story claims that Vencatadry Naidoo was trying to rid himself of a curse. In his younger days he, according to the legend, wanted to be rid of a tribe of Chentsus, a hunter tribe, who pillaged in his territories. He invited 150 of the tribe's men to a feast only to behead them all. The guilt of these actions haunted him and every time he sat down to eat his food would turn into insects. According to the Kistna District Manual, there might have been a grain of truth to this story because Vencatadry did erect 108, 30 feet tall, copper pillars outside different shrines.¹⁹⁰ He also at two different points in time donated his weight in silver to local Brahmins. Vencatadry Naidoo appears to have been a quite remarkable man who is remembered to this day. The ancestors of the 'Vassareddy dynasty' have recently established a web-site honouring the family's proud history with the ambition to publish a book on the subject.¹⁹¹

The origins of the conflicts

The origin of the well-known Vassareddy case starts with Vencatadry's life as a married man. For many years, Vencatadry Naidoo had only one wife, Yerema Garoo, whom he had three female children with. Two of the girls died during infancy, while one was married before she too died. To secure a male heir, Vencatadry and Yerema decided to adopt a boy. Vencatadry's cousin Moliah's wife gave birth to their second son in 1798. Yerema proposed to adopt the boy, something Vencatadry Naidoo initially opposed as he still considered Moliah as his sworn enemy. Yerema nevertheless convinced him and they offered Moliah to make his son heir to the zamindary and all other possessions. Moliah accepted the offer. On the 2nd of April 1798, Jaganadha Baboo was officially adopted by Vencatadry. The due ceremonies were performed, and the adoption was communicated to the Government through formal letters to the collectors and the Board of Revenue.¹⁹² On the 11th of May 1803 Jaganadha was married and the ceremony of *Yova-Raja-Pattabishekam*, in which Jaganadha was bestowed with the zamindary honours, was performed on

¹⁹⁰ This story illustrates how a story can grow out of proportion. According to Wikipedia, Vencatadry beheaded over 600 men.

¹⁹¹ 'Among all the rulers Raja Vasireddy Venkatadri Naidu is famous and ruled 33 years. He borne on 27th April 1761 and his parents Sri Vasireddy Jagganna and Smt Achamma. He was assumed charge in 1783 at Chintapalli. Later he crossed Kistna River and made Amaravathi as his capitol till his death. He is a well named philanthropist he built so many temples, Amaravathi, Managalagiri, Chebrolu, Ponnuru, Vijayawada, Srisailam and other places.' <http://www.vasireddy.us/history.asp> [entered 13th of October 2008]

¹⁹² Of the many ceremonies that were necessary, one was to give the boy a bath in water from the sacred river Poosheara Nadur. The collector of Guntur, Mr. Smith, was also involved in a ceremony that involved throwing precious stones over the infant's head. The Company later forbade their employees from participating in such ceremonies. Vassareddy V p.3

that same day. The adoption was thus acknowledged by the government, and Jaganadha was considered as the heir of the Vassareddy zamindary.¹⁹³

Supposedly, Vencatadry Naidoo suffered some mental problems between 1805 and 1808.¹⁹⁴ One witness, Gallamoody Timmiah, testified in the Provincial court that Vencatadry had during that time worn the clothes of a gentleman, or European clothes. He had supposedly also spoken English and was observed in the streets of Guntur town reciting poetry.¹⁹⁵ Vencatadry's cousin Vassareddy Paupiah, went even further in his testimony in the same court claiming that: 'Through the effects of the bile he [Vencatadry] used to abuse people; sometimes he remained quiet; there were eruptions on his body, and he used to bite and scratch his own flesh.'¹⁹⁶

Whether or not this story was a fabrication constructed to render Vencatadry as unreliable in that period is nearly impossible to determine. Regardless of his mental state, Vencatadry chose to marry a second wife in this period, after he had a conflict with his first wife Yerema. He married the ten year old Parvati Ammah in May 1807. Only a short time after this marriage, Vencatadry expressed that he wished to adopt another boy together with his young wife. The choice fell on the second son of his other cousin Paupiah. The reason Vencatadry decided to adopt a second son is not established in the court documents. Vencatadry's first adopted son Jaganadha and his wives claimed that this was due to Vencatadry's insanity. Considering that these three would all benefit if the court denied the second adopted son Ramanadha's claim as heir, their statements are not very credible.

Ramanadha on the other hand, claimed that Vencatadry and Yerema had had a disagreement, and that they had lived separately for several years. According to Ramanadha, Jaganadha has always been a disobedient son who found cockfighting more interesting than learning how to manage an estate. He had spent most of his time at the household of his natural parents, despite having nothing to do with them officially.¹⁹⁷ Consequently Vencatadry considered securing another son as the best option. Adoption was the only choice as his new wife would surely not be able to bear children for another few years.¹⁹⁸ Ramanadha Baboo was adopted on the 14th of September 1807 in conjunction with his new young wife.¹⁹⁹

After the adoption of Ramanadha Baboo, Vencatadry was reconciled with his senior wife Yerema,

¹⁹³ Vassareddy I p.2

¹⁹⁴ Vassareddy V p.3

¹⁹⁵ Vassareddy VII p.219

¹⁹⁶ Vassareddy VII p.223

¹⁹⁷ Vassareddy VII p.153

¹⁹⁸ Vassareddy, VII p. 4

¹⁹⁹ Vassareddy III p.2

who moved back into the fort at Amarvaty.²⁰⁰ From this time on the different parties appear to agree that Vencatadry treated the two boys as his equal sons. This was also recognized by the different courts when Ramanadha's adoption was debated in the dispute. Vencatadry prepared the boys for their future positions as he had the intention of making both of them joint-heirs to the zamindary. One aspect of their education was that Vencatadry let his sons try themselves in practice as managers. In 1812 he divided his property into four talooks. One was to be reserved for charitable purposes. One was to be managed by himself, while Jaganadha and Ramanadha were put in charge of one talook each.²⁰¹ He also made the boys sign *farigh-kutti* papers where they had to acknowledge that they would honour their father's wishes.²⁰² In 1816 Vencatadry reorganized his properties again; this time he divided them in two parts. In order to decide fairly who was to get which part, he arranged for the two boys to draw tickets.²⁰³

But Vencatadry's once so punctual payments were not so punctual anymore, as parts of his property was already put under attachment for not paying the set revenue to the Company.²⁰⁴ On the 17th of August 1816 Vencatadry Naidoo died, in the presence of both his sons and two Company officials.²⁰⁵ At the time of his death Jaganadha was 19 years old, while Ramanadha was only 16.²⁰⁶ This would mark the beginning of the end for the zamindary that had been at it's height under Vencatadry's reign at the closing of the 18th Century. Once the pride of the Permanent Settlement, the Vassareddy zamindary would suffer the same faith as most of the zamindary estates of south India.²⁰⁷

The Vassareddy court cases:

The Vassareddy dispute was originally several separate suits that were after a while put together into one case because of the interwoven nature of the different conflicts. When the case was tried before the Provincial court, the case was listed with two plaintiffs and three respondents. The plaintiffs were Jaganadha's widow Rungama, who also claimed to be the guardian of the other plaintiff, the alleged adopted son of her and Jaganadha, Lutchmeputty Naidoo. The respondents in the case were Jaganadha's younger adoptive brother Ramanadha Baboo, Jaganadha's oldest widow

²⁰⁰ Vassareddy, VII p. 4

²⁰¹ Vassareddy III p.2

²⁰² 'Farigh-kutti,- a deed of release or discharge', Vassareddy Glossary p.6

²⁰³ Vassareddy II p.4

²⁰⁴ Vassareddy I p.6

²⁰⁵ Vassareddy VII p.100

²⁰⁶ Vassareddy VII p.100

²⁰⁷ Vassareddy VII p.114

Atchama and the long time servant of the Vassareddy family Puttory Caly Doss. The origin of these constellations requires some explanation.

The first suit was filed by Ramanadha against Jaganadha whom he believed had received a more productive part of the divided estate. He also claimed that Jaganadha had forcefully taken control over some of the islands in Masulipatam that belonged to his part of the estate. A few months later Ramanadha also filed a suit against the collector of Guntur, who refused to put him in possession of some attached villages even after the required revenue had been paid. The collector supposedly did this because he regarded Jaganadha as Vencatadry's heir, and wanted to wait to release the attached villages until the court had come to a decision. This suit was decided against Ramanadha, and then it was appealed and retried several times.²⁰⁸

The main discussions in these first cases revolved around whether or not both brothers should be regarded as joint heirs to the estate. This discussion would continue throughout the case and was the dominant theme in the Moore report that described the proceedings in the Privy Council.²⁰⁹ The great disagreement was about the relations between Jaganadha and Ramanadha and their adoptive father Vencatadry Naidoo. Vencatadry Naidoo had informed the authorities of his intentions of leaving the estate to his two adopted sons. He had executed several official documents to the correct institutions in an attempt to secure that his wishes were respected after his death, and even invited the local collector to witness his death.²¹⁰ This was however not sufficient for the different Company courts. In order for Jaganadha and Ramanadha to be recognized as Vencatadry Naidoo's heirs, their adoptions had to be proven. The major bone of contention between the two parties was whether a second adoption was allowed according to local custom, which the court found hard to establish.

Despite that both Jaganadha and Ramanadha confirmed that Vencatadry Naidoo had treated them as equals, Jaganadha's pleader argued that a sonless man was only allowed to adopt one son as long as the first adopted son was alive. This discussion would continue throughout the case as the pleaders found new quotations from the Dharmasastras, as well as precedence through other cases that proved their position. The discussion on the validity of a second adoption illustrates very clearly the insufficiency of the British Hindu legal codes. The law books used by the British judges contained codes that both allowed for and banished a second adoption. This was recognized by one

²⁰⁸ Meschievitz, C. S. 1986 p.201 briefly discusses this suit.

²⁰⁹ British Library: E.F.Moore, 1846- 1850

²¹⁰ Vassareddy VI p.7

judge in the Sudder Adawlut in Madras who stated that ‘In respect to the validity of a second adoption under the Hindu law, a son first adopted being alive, the Court of Sudder Adawlut are aware that much differences of opinion has prevailed.’²¹¹ Similarly, precedence was difficult to establish because there were few cases that dealt with the issue of a second adopted son. These legal codes were insufficient to cover the extreme variety within local custom and tradition on these specific and other social and religious topics. Cohn has argued that although the British administrators realized the inapplicability of the orthodox legal codes in south India, they continued to be used in the colonial courts.²¹²

While the case between Jaganadha and Ramanadha was pending in court, Jaganadha fell seriously ill and eventually died in February 1825, nine years after the death of his adoptive father Vencatadry Naidoo. Ramanadha was instated as manager and zamindar of the estate soon thereafter.

Women and the Vassareddy case:

The women in the Vassareddy case did not appear until the case between the two adoptive brothers Jaganadha and Ramanadha had been debated in court for a few years. I do however believe that a full account of this complex case is necessary if one is to achieve a comprehensive understanding of the issues the proceedings addressed. The case raised questions regarding issues that were almost exclusively regulated by personal law; adoption, inheritance, marriage and the relations between family members. All issues which involved the royal women of the Vassareddy estate. The discussions on these issues found in the court documents can provide valuable information about the internal social structure of such a powerful zamindary. As discussed in the previous chapter, the participation of the noble women in these cases is particularly interesting. Royal women of rank did hardly participate in the public life of colonial India. Although they were doubtlessly influenced by social and cultural restrictions when they presented their stories to a British court, their accounts are valuable because they are the only ones available to us. There was a grave contrast between the nature of secluded life of the zenana where discretion and physical separation from the public was a key element, to the vulgarly detailed accounts of the personal life that they had to present in court. The rhetoric of a colonial courtroom clashed completely with the subtle and elegant art of a noble woman participation in public life.²¹³

²¹¹ Vassareddy VI p.25

²¹² Bernard Cohn, 1965, p.117

²¹³ William Dalrymple gives several examples of the subtle flirtation of the normally secluded Indian noble women of 18th century Hyderabad, W. Dalrymple, 2002 p. 171-203

I look at how these women present their stories to the court; how they present themselves and particularly how they depict the other. Through this they tell a story of what was considered appropriate behaviour for a zamindary woman of early 19th Century Telugu country. If the position discussed in the previous chapter is maintained after examining their testimonies, one would expect that these women would present a model of appropriate behaviour for noble Indian women that differed from the colonial sociology of women.

I explore these issues in three different sections which have been divided by the issues debated and by the most significant identities for women associated with these themes. These identities were discussed in the previous chapter as evident in colonial sociology and also in the more localized literary traditions. The identity as wife, widow and mother was the most important identities for an Indian woman whether in south or north India. This has been argued by anthropologist Good who divides a south Indian female's life into the categories of girl, woman, wife, mother and widow.²¹⁴ Ramabai, the author of *The High Caste Hindu Woman*, also used a similar division in her book where she distinguished between a woman's childhood, married life and widowhood. As the first category is not so relevant in this context, I have divided my analysis of the case into chapters that represent both the position of the Vassareddy women and the issues that were debated in court as they argued their case as wife, widow and mother.

²¹⁴ Anthony Good, *The Female Bridegroom- A comparative study of Life-Crisis Rituals in South India and Sri Lanka.*, Clarendon Press, Oxford 1991 p.7

2: Wife

...a wife has to follow her husband everywhere like a shadow, she has to support him like a companion, has to execute his orders like a servant or slave. Such good behaviour, the *sastras* say, will be rewarded in this life by well-being, and after this life by heaven; contrary behaviour will be punished by lengthy sojourns in hell and a bad rebirth.²¹⁵

Married life was the most important phase in the life of most Indian women. Sāāvālā argues that all over rural India, a woman was by definition also a wife; as a potential, actual or former wife. Very few women remained unmarried.²¹⁶ A girl or a woman could be said to derive their identity through their relations to others. While a man's identity was defined more on the basis of his individual abilities, a woman was largely defined through her ability to nurture her relationship with others; to adapt to her surroundings and the inherent expectations to her. The value and identity of a woman was largely based on her position as her husband's wife. A wife was considered as half of the husband and was thus a prerequisite for his completeness.²¹⁷ A marriage represented more than a union of two people. In the Indian context, a marriage concerned all members of the bride and bridegrooms families. A marriage was a strategic ritual that connected the two families together. The alliance was reinforced and maintained through a continued exchange of brides and bridegrooms. This was particularly important in royal families where such alliances could strengthen and stabilize the families power base in the unstable environment of pre-colonial south India.²¹⁸ Marriage was thus not restricted to a matter of the private sphere but rather a very public matter.

This significance of the identity of a wife was reflected in all the sources of Indian tradition discussed in the first chapter. The colonial perceptions of Indian womanhood that was largely drawn from orthodox Hindu texts, focused exclusively on the woman as wife. According to the colonial sociology, this was the only honourable identity for a female. No other identities or roles are discussed as important in for example the Laws of Manu. Manu prescribed that females must always be under male control; a daughter was subordinate to her father; a wife to her husband, and a widow to her father or brother. There was no shortage on rules providing guidance for a chaste and obedient wife. The laws of Manu contained codes regarding all aspects of a wife's existence, and

²¹⁵ Vyāasmṛti 2, 18-40 in Klaus Klostermaier, *A Survey of Hinduism*, State University Press of New York, Albany 1994, p.363-4

²¹⁶ Minna Sāāvālā, 2006 p.151

²¹⁷ Vrihaspati (a 15th century scholar on *Smṛti*, or Hindu Law) quoted in Vassareddy X p.310

²¹⁸ Pamela Price, 1996 p.35. For a fuller discussion on the political and strategic importance of marriage see Thomas R. Trautman, *Dravidian Kinship*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge 1981

also guidance for the husband as to how he should control and discipline his wife. A husband on the other hand was obviously not considered to be in need of rules regulating his conduct. Rules and codes on the proper conduct of a good husband were few and far between in Manu's laws. After all, the wife was considered as representing the chaotic and nature element while the man represented the hard substance and culture.²¹⁹ The husband was naturally in control and increased his honour and power through controlling the woman who was unpredictable by nature. The ideal wife was thus a woman who had surrendered her power to her husband, and who enjoyed being under his control. Using the terms discussed in the second chapter, she had directed her energy and power into nurturing her children and family. The ideal wife did not initiate decisions and action in her life, but followed the instructions of her husband who was naturally more suited for the task and only had her best interest in mind. Following this reasoning, a wife could not act independently. This prohibited any participation in politics and the public sphere altogether.

The inaccuracy of the colonial sociology of women in the south Indian context was discussed in the first two chapters. It appears evident that it is possible to identify a south Indian view on womanhood that differed from the colonial sociology. South Indian notions of womanhood were not completely different from the colonial view, as several features central in the colonial sociology of women were also important in the south Indian context. Particularly the centrality of the identity as wife was a universalistic feature that was also vital to south Indian womanhood. This was most clearly expressed by Leslie's study of the 18th Century Stridharmapaddhati.

However, through exploring different sources of more localized tradition it appears that it is possible to identify some features that differed from the colonial sociology. The most striking difference is how the female characters found in south Indian epics and poetry did not fit the passive and subordinate ideal virtue of a chaste Hindu wife. Roghair has shown the number of female characters found in the Epic of Palnadu, in contrast to the monistic identity of a chaste wife found in the orthodox Hindu literature. The multiple female characters in local epics suggest that south Indian societies found other identities than the chaste wife as acceptable and even honourable.²²⁰ Even the chaste and obedient wives found in the Telugu and Tamil folk literature differs from their Sanskrit counterparts. The shared feature of the different female identities found in these sources, and described by anthropologists of south India, is their ability to act. They displayed independent initiative and even disobeyed their husbands and fathers, without damaging

²¹⁹ Susan Wadley,., 1995, p.113-116

²²⁰ See in Holly Baker Reynolds, 1991, for one example which discusses different identities for women, including the much respected unmarried young female

their honour. The honour of a south Indian wife might not have depended on her ability to be passive and follow instructions rather than her ability to initiate action when the circumstances required it.

The perfect wife and negotiated solidarities

Atchama and Rungama became involved in the Vassareddy case because of their statuses as the wives of a mighty zamindar. Because they were married as young girls, the identity of being Jaganadha's wife was doubtlessly the most important identity in their lives. Because their status as wives was the condition for their involvement in the suit, the two women depended heavily on the court's perception of their virtues as wives. Furthermore, since the two young women were declared enemies and each others greatest competition, they were both equally dependent on portraying the opposing wife in a bad light. Consequently, each wife depended on the Court's perception of them as an ideal wife. This was a delicate game because being to blunt in the description of the other wife could backfire. After all, they were both wives of the same husband and they shared an interest of preserving his personal honour as his personal honour could also affect their statuses as his wives.

How much this colonial sociology of women differed from the prevalent perception of the ideal wife in an early 19th Century royal house in Telugu country like the Vassareddy zamindary is impossible to ascertain. It is equally difficult to determine the participating parties own awareness of such ideals, and the supposed discrepancy between them. I find the ideas and terminology used by Gloria G. Raheja in her studies of women's oral traditions in north India useful in this context:

It now seems clear that we need to move beyond dichotomous modes of analysis, and beyond that earlier twofold task of examining the gendered aspects of oral traditions and the way in which such traditions are at least partly constitutive of the social world in which they occur. The challenge now, it seems, is to keep simultaneous analytical and ethnographic view those two kinds of identities and two kinds of solidarities: solidarities that find their justification in reference to community of kinship ties and local ties, and the struggles within such communities that find their justification in reference to the claims of those who discover that the larger solidarity is all too often predicated upon their own disadvantage.²²¹

The approach stressed by Raheja opens the perspective when analysing the testimony in these cases. The Vassareddy women definitively had to balance different solidarities as wives, co-wives, widows, sisters-in-laws and as litigants. Despite these conflicting considerations, it might be possible to detect what was considered close to ideal wifely behaviour in early colonial south Indian

²²¹ Gloria G Raheja, 'Introduction- The Paradoxes of Power and Community: Woman's Oral Traditions and the Uses of Ethnography' in *Songs, Stories, Lives- Gendered Dialogues and Cultural Critique*, ed. by G.G. Raheja, Kali for Women New Delhi 2003, p.8

zamindary. Because they were both dependant on appearing as a model wife, their perception of what this term implied should be possible to detect in their testimony.

The wedding

Both Atchama and Rungama were very young when they married Jaganadha. The marriage ceremonies were performed on the 11th of May 1803 at the fort at Amarvaty.²²² At the time Jaganadha was about five and a half, Atchama was a few months older while Rungama was four years and three months old.²²³ After the wedding, the two girls moved to their husband's family at Amarvaty rather than staying with their parents until they reached sexual maturity.

For a prominent man like a zamindar, having a number of wives was normal. A king or zamindar was considered as a symbol of the prosperity of his kingdom or estate, and having a number of wives and children was expected of a prosperous king.²²⁴ It was not uncommon that the first marriage was arranged and performed at a very young age. What was unusual about this particular marriage was that Jaganadha was married to both girls on the same day. The double wedding of the young zamindar's adopted son was debated in court. It appears from this discussion that a double wedding was not a common practice as none of the pleaders nor witnesses could give an example of a similar situation. This unconventional solution supposedly had its origin in a domestic conflict between Vencatadry Naidoo and his wife Yerema. Apparently the two girls were each the preferred candidates of one of the two spouses. Yerema had singled out Atchama as her favourite candidate for their adopted son's first wife. Vencatadry Naidoo on the other hand preferred the slightly younger Rungama.²²⁵ The double marriage was thus a result of a compromise between the two. None of the parties in the suit disputed the date of the wedding or the fact that Jaganadha married both girls on that particular day. However, from this point on, the stories departed and the two women gave quite different accounts of the details of their simultaneous wedding day.

Atchama claimed that she married Jaganadha in the morning in a separate ceremony and that he married Rungama later in the afternoon. This statement was backed by a number of witnesses that confirmed that Atchama married Jaganadha separately in the morning. Atchama further argued that a simultaneous wedding was impossible due to practical difficulties. Her main argument was that

²²² Vassareddy I, p.2

²²³ Vassareddy XII p.837

²²⁴ Pamela Price, 1996 p.35

²²⁵ Vassareddy XII p.424

the ceremony of attaching the wedding neck ornament, the *mangala-sootrum*, which was according to Atchama the central ceremony that marked the completion of the union, would be impossible to perform with two wives at the same time. The husband attached the ornament around his wife's neck to symbolize his protection over her and her subordination to him. Atchama described their wedding to the Provincial court in the following testimony:

The marriage of myself and of the Plaintiff did not take place at one and the same time. Although two women may be actually married to a man at once, yet that act is unlawful; and even in that case it is not possible to put on the mangala-sootrum (or the marriage neck ornament) at once to them both, by reason of the difference in their age. The act of fixing the mangala-sootrum first constitutes the distinction in seniority. This being the case, and the Plaintiff's nuptials having been performed after mine, and she being younger than myself, her statement above is quite strange. While my title as eldest wife (which is plainly confirmed by a variety of vouchers that were presented to the authorities, including your Court, in my husband's name) has been publicly acknowledged; and while the authorities, including your Court, have determined this point on many occasions, the Plaintiff's endeavours to explain that she is a lawful wife are of no avail. [...] Your Court, as well as the Sudder Court, passed many Decrees in pursuance of the said laws in the cause of this nature, and the local custom is consistent therewith. While there is in general the distinction of seniority and juniority between children born at the same time from the womb of a mother, there is no reason for the non-existence of the distinction of seniority among two women who were espoused to a man; nor is there any thing to the contrary any where.²²⁶

Furthermore, Atchama argued that her father-in-law, Vencatadry Naidoo, was known as a well organized man who went to great lengths to make sure that all aspects of his actions were performed correctly. He had always been honoured by the Company for his neat administration. Consequently, Atchama argued that he would not have risked performing a ceremony that could be questioned by the authorities or other influential people. The wedding of Jaganadha and Rungama later that day was according to Atchama to be considered as being of a more symbolic nature while her wedding was a true union of a husband and wife.

Rungama denied Atchama's story. She claimed that Jaganadha was married to both her and Atchama in one ceremony. She also denied that the attachment of the neck ornament was the central ceremony because the young husband would need assistance to attach the ornaments in any case.²²⁷ Rungama also provided the court with several witnesses who confirmed her story. She flipped Atchama's argument around and argued that Vencatadry Naidoo's honourable reputation should be regarded as sufficient reassurance to the court that this ceremony was allowed and valid.

²²⁶ Vassareddy XII p.368

²²⁷ Vassareddy XII p.863

Status and rank among royal wives

The two young wives had very justifiable reasons for discussing the nature of their respective statuses as wives. As seen in the quote above, Atchama claimed that she was to be considered as Jaganadha's senior wife. Consequently, Rungama should be considered as his junior wife. Although a man could marry a number of wives, the first wife held a special position. Only the senior wife was regarded as the half of her husband. As expressed by Colebrooke quoting the laws of Manu:

...among the wives, the first is the legal wife, and the second intended for sensual gratification; that all acts of religion should be performed in conjunction with the first wife alone; and that as the second and other wives cannot be considered as legal wives, the husband should not perform any acts of religion in conjunction with them.²²⁸

The important symbolic status of a wife was thus restricted to the senior wife. A husband's religious and symbolic obligations often required the presence of his wife which would ideally be the senior wife. The senior wife's elevated status in relation to other wives was also reflected in the status of the offspring. The son of a senior wife would normally be regarded as of higher status than the son of a junior wife, and the senior wife had the best chance of producing the oldest male heir, something that could increase her status further. However, this was obviously the ideal that was not always carried into action. In the pre-colonial period, ability could replace such status. As a result a king was in some cases succeeded by a younger son or even an illegitimate son in preference of a lesser able elder son. It was not uncommon for a wife to succeed to the throne after the death of her husband either, as mentioned in the introduction. This was particularly the case if the wife was the mother and guardian of a future heir; a minor son. The mother would then rule in her own right until her son was old enough to take over.²²⁹

Being senior wife could thus have very real material implications. A wife could inherit her husband, though usually only for the duration of her life until other male heirs would be entitled to the property. Similarly, she was entitled to the property and wealth that she had brought into the marriage. This was called a woman's *stridhana*, a term that has been emphasised as the only legal inheritance for a zamindar's wife by many scholars.²³⁰ This was however restricted to the senior wife. The junior wives were normally only entitled to maintenance, a sum of money that was normally insufficient to support the lavish lifestyle of a zamindar's wife. A great reduction in living standards would thus go hand in hand with the reduction in social status.²³¹ The best way for a

²²⁸ Vassareddy XII p.367

²²⁹ Cynthia Talbot, 1995 p.412-16

²³⁰ Dagmar Engels, 'Women and Law in Colonial India' in *European Expansion and Law*, ed. by Mommsen & Moor, Berg Oxford 1992 p.164 and Janaki Nair, 1996, chapter 3

²³¹ Price has argued how there could be great differences in living standards between the zamindar and his near

junior wife to secure her future was through her reproductive abilities. One out of several wives could improve her future status considerably through producing a child when no other wife was able to, or ideally give birth to a male heir before another wife.²³² In such a situation a junior wife could, despite her inferior status, secure a future as the mother of the raja or zamindar.

Consequently, Atchama was set on convincing the Court that she was Jaganadha's ritually acknowledged senior wife. She argued that her superior age too proved that only she could be considered as his rightful heir. Rungama, as Jaganadha's junior wife, was only entitled to maintenance. Rungama denied this. According to her, their simultaneous wedding ceremony and the fact that Jaganadha married them both with the same intention implied that they should be considered as 'joint wives'.²³³ Atchama presented the court with material evidence in the form of letters sent to the collector by Jaganadha where he described Atchama as his senior wife. Rungama confirmed that Jaganadha called Atchama his senior wife in official correspondence, but argued that this was a mere reference to her age and had no significant meaning beyond this.²³⁴ Rungama proceeded by arguing that she should be considered as Jaganadha's senior wife due to the developments at Amarvaty after the three had become adults.

The background for Rungama's claim on the practical status as senior wife started with intrigues at Amarvaty. According to the court proceedings the two wives had never been on friendly terms. The second judge of the Sudder Adawlut court in Madras expressed that '... Jaganadha Baboo took a dislike or pretended to do so, to Atchama, and confined and harshly treated her, as appears by the testimony of her witnesses in this case, at the instigation and intrigues of Rungama.'²³⁵ The reason for this hostility is unclear, although Rungama argued that it was a result of Atchama's jealousy. Jaganadha supposedly preferred the younger Rungama due to her youthful appearance. Atchama argued that Rungama tried to force her, as senior wife, out of the fort so she could be the sole wife of Jaganadha. This was denied by Rungama who claimed that '...I am not the cause of conflict

kinsmen. Price, Pamela, 1996 p.52

²³² The race to produce a male heir was very clear in the Pittapooore case which is discussed in great detail in Pamela Price, 'Kin, Clan, and Power in Colonial South India' in *Unfamiliar Relations*, ed. by Indrani Chatterjee, Permanent Black, Delhi 2004 p.192

²³³ Vassareddy X p.341

²³⁴ Vassareddy XII p.861. Louis Dumont has famously stressed the importance of distinction between older/younger, senior and junior in all the Dravidian kinship systems. Anthropologist Michael York has however argued that this distinction is in some cases like his study of the Telugu country Raj Gonds serves a practical function and does not '...carry any structural distinction of status'. Dumont *Hierarchy and marriage alliances in south Indian kinship*, periodical paper no. 12, Royal Anthropological Institute 1957 in Michael Yorke, 'Kinship, marriage and ideology among the Raj Gonds' in *Contributions to Indian Sociology*, Vol. 13 No 1 1979 p.112

²³⁵ Vassareddy III p.29

between husband and wife.²³⁶ The conflict between the spouses ended with dramatic events as Atchama claimed that Jaganadha locked her inside a room in the fort for one and a half month, until her brother Cheroomaumella Venkata Ramanah got notice and obtained a police order instructing Jaganadha to release Atchama and put her in her brother's custody.²³⁷ Atchama consequently left the fort on the 9th of April 1819 and did not return until six years later, after the death of her husband.²³⁸ This information is confirmed by both sides of the conflict although the reason for Atchama's decision to leave the fort and her husband was seriously debated. This was not a unique action of a zamindar's wife. As mentioned in the previous chapter, Yerama had for some reason left Vencatadry Naidoo for a few years. Also, in a succession dispute concerning the zamindary of Pittapooore, the senior wife of the Pittapooore zamindar Rama Row, Subbamma, was at one point insulted by her husband because of his preference for his younger wife. When returning from a journey, she travelled to her parents' residence in stead of returning home with her husband. She stayed there for several years and told the court that she intended to stay there until her husband expressed his regrets and presented a formal request for her to return to his zenana.²³⁹

During the period of Atchama's absence, Rungama functioned as the sole wife of Jaganadha and according to Rungama he performed '...in conjunction with me all the religious duties observable by our caste.'²⁴⁰ Through her practice as senior wife, Rungama argued that she should be considered as having the higher status of the two wives. Atchama denied that anything could challenge her position as senior wife. The term joint-wives was according to her an invention of Rungama's to further her case, as the term had no practical meaning.²⁴¹

Displaying moral superiority:

The factual events in this story are impossible to safely determine but that does not affect the value of the women's testimony. Both women were dependent upon who the court considered to be Jaganadha's senior wife. As senior wife there was a very real chance of being designated by the court as Jaganadha's heir. The result could be control and management of the entire Vassareddy estate. This implied not only elevated status and official political power; it also meant a significant

²³⁶ Vassareddy XII p. 887

²³⁷ Vassareddy VI p.19

²³⁸ Vassareddy XII p.360

²³⁹ Privy Council 1899: Sri Raja Rao Venkata Surya Mahipati Rama Kistna Rao Bahadur v. The Court of Wards and Venkata Kumari Mahipati Surya Rao,

²⁴⁰ Vassareddy XII p.381

²⁴¹ Vassareddy X p.343

control over the funds of the estate. These funds could be used to support a very comfortable lifestyle but it also provided an opportunity to allocate money for charitable or religious purposes. Religious endowments and charitable donations could in turn be transformed into increased social status and personal honour.²⁴² In fact, winning a law suit was in itself a source of honour as a victory in court was regarded as competition where the best player won, rather than achieving recognition of a superior right.²⁴³

For Rungama however, there was the great risk that the court could decide that she only had the position as Jaganadha's junior wife. Such a decision would imply a future of surviving on the maintenance that she would be granted from the appointed heir. Rungama thus depended upon convincing the court that Atchama was not entitled to the position and status as Jaganadha's senior wife. According to Rungama, Atchama had left the fort voluntarily. She had for a long time been envious of Rungama's status as Jaganadha's favourite and tried to create conflicts between them. Rungama gave the following testimony in the Provincial court:

... it will be obvious to you, that the said Court have erred in passing their Decree in favour of Atchama, knowing from several records, that I am joint widow of my late husband; that Atchama, in April 1819, or six years before my husband's death, left him, lived separately at such places as she liked, sued him in Courts, and obtained by their Decrees a separate maintenance for her life; and that I attended always my husband till his death, rendering services to him, and partaking in his joy and sorrow.²⁴⁴

Atchama was supposedly unable to act as an honourable and obedient wife. Rungama claimed that Atchama disobeyed her husband constantly and that she even argued loudly against him in the presence of others. Furthermore, Atchama supposedly had a violent temper that she was unable to control. In the testimony above, Rungama claimed that Atchama stayed at different places after she left the fort. Not only did she spend time with her parents and brother; Rungama claimed that Atchama had lived at several different locations in both Guntur and neighbouring Rajahmundry. It was not considered proper for a married woman to stay anywhere else than with her husband, her parents or her brother. Rungama claimed that Atchama had proved her dishonourable nature by ignoring this regulation.

Atchama had even filed several suits against her husband, to complete the humiliation. She filed one suit in the civil court where she claimed maintenance from her husband and compensation for the

²⁴² The political function of donations and largess is discussed by Price, Pamela 1996 p.54 and Appadurai, Arjun and Breckenbridge, Carol Appadurai, 'The South Indian Temple: Authority, Honour and Redistribution.' In *Contributions to Indian Sociology*, vol. 10 No. 2 1976

²⁴³ Pamela Price, 1996 p.60. See quote in the introduction.

²⁴⁴ Vassareddy X p.341

hardship she had suffered at Amarvaty. Atchama was granted maintenance of 350 rupees in April 1819, a decision she accepted.²⁴⁵ Atchama also filed one or more suit before the criminal court where she claimed compensation for the physical damages that her husband had inflicted on her.²⁴⁶ Nothing is mentioned in the court material about the details or outcome of this case. However, Rungama argued that this proved that Atchama had no intention of returning to her husband, but that she did appear to have every intention of humiliating her husband in public. According to Rungama, Atchama had failed her practical obligations as wife in addition to proving herself to be completely void of virtues expected of an honourable royal wife. Because she had failed to honour any of her marital duties, Rungama argued that Atchama should not be considered as Jaganadha's senior wife.²⁴⁷ Quoting the Colebrook Digest of Hindu Law Rungama argued that a wife should be '...instantly banished for speaking unkindly.' and that '...after one year a husband is authorized to deprive his wife (who may be disobedient to him) of her separate property, and cease to cohabit with her.'²⁴⁸ Unlike the morally bankrupt Atchama, Rungama argued that she stood faithfully by her husband's side. She had never intentionally done anything to contribute to a conflict between Jaganadha and Atchama, as her only interest was the wellbeing of her husband. Rungama claimed that the relationship between her and Jaganadha was based on mutual affection and respect, and that he intended for her to be his sole heir. When her husband died Rungama was overcome by sorrow and she argued that this proved her devotion to her husband.

Atchama blankly denied Rungama's version. She claimed that she was terrorized by Rungama for years before she was forced to leave Amarvaty. Rungama was supposedly determined to create a conflict between Atchama and Jaganadha and worked very persistently to succeed. According to Atchama, Rungama applied a double strategy. She supposedly used her feminine skills to get a mental grip on her husband. Through her sexuality she was able to convince Jaganadha of Atchama's evil nature.²⁴⁹ Simultaneously she initiated a campaign against Atchama. During this Rungama supposedly tried to kill her, as she expressed in a letter to the collector of Guntur in June 1825: 'I now therefore, beg to state, that when I was confined and oppressed by the ill persuasion of my savatee (or the other wife of my husband) Rungama, with an intention of making me die by starving.'²⁵⁰ Because of the serious threat to her life, Atchama was forced to leave the fort after her

²⁴⁵ Vassareddy VII p. 283

²⁴⁶ Vassareddy X p.296

²⁴⁷ Vassareddy VI p.17

²⁴⁸ Vassareddy XII p. 765-66

²⁴⁹ Vassareddy X p.331

²⁵⁰ Vassareddy VII p.281

brother had released her from captivity.²⁵¹ She furthermore claimed that she only stayed with her parents and her brother, both equally proper places for a woman of her rank to stay.²⁵² Atchama furthermore claimed that she only filed the suit for maintenance because Rungama had made sure that Jaganadha did not pay Atchama any of the maintenance she was entitled to. Rungama supposedly continued to have a great influence over their mutual husband something that prevented Atchama from returning:

As my husband, from the great love he then had towards my savatee (his second wife), did not protect me from her attempts against my life, I was unable to remain there, and stayed in my parent's house. As my savatee prevented me from receiving support from my husband, I solicited the Court to cause my husband to give me subsistence till I may be enabled to obtain my lawful right. In perusing the Decree passed and the Record of the assistant magistrate of Guntur relative thereto, it will appear that I am guiltless and eldest wife to my husband, and that I was not discarded by him, he never even made use of such an expression, and that the Defendant has now unjustly accused me.²⁵³

However, in late 1824 Atchama claimed that she started receiving letters from Jaganadha that was delivered through a messenger. In these letters Jaganadha expressed that he had realized that he had treated his senior wife unfairly. He apologized and recognized Atchama as his senior wife and sole heir.²⁵⁴

Another argument made by Atchama was intended to reveal to the court that Rungama was not as honourable as she gave the impression off. According to Atchama, Rungama practised the purdha, or seclusion, selectively. Atchama provided several witnesses who claimed that Rungama always issued orders unveiled before the servants and that the male servants at Amarvaty were free to visit her and have social relations with the zamindar's wife.²⁵⁵ One witness gave a physical description of Rungama to prove his point, and described her as '...fair, quite tall and a little bulky.'²⁵⁶ Furthermore, Puttury Caly Doss, the trusted servant of Vencatadry and Jaganadha, and Ramanadha both supposedly conversed with Rungama without any restrictions according to one witness.²⁵⁷ This evidence was doubtlessly intended to suggest to the court that Rungama was of a low moral standard as she allowed sexually mature men other than her husband and immediate male kin to see her unveiled, an unthinkable act for a chaste orthodox wife.

²⁵¹ Vassareddy X p.302

²⁵² Vassareddy X p. 331

²⁵³ Vassareddy X p.302

²⁵⁴ Vassareddy I p.20

²⁵⁵ Vassareddy XII p.627

²⁵⁶ Vassareddy XII p.620

²⁵⁷ Vassareddy XII p.453

Ideological expression in the testimonies

Conflicts between wives were not an exclusive element of the Vassareddy case. The problems which could arise between two wives could prove to be quite damaging. This was a common phenomenon and was also a source of much conflict between the six wives in the Pittapooore-case mentioned above.²⁵⁸ The problems connected with such domestic conflicts caused the Maharaja of Bobbili to warn his readers against the possible problems with having more than one wife in his book *Advice to the Indian Aristocracy* with the following story:

A certain man had at the same time two wives, one young, the other elderly. The young one wishing him to look young began to pull out his grey hairs. And then the elder wife, being jealous of her co-wife, began to pull out all his dark hairs. He thus became bald in a very few days.²⁵⁹

The conflict between the two wives could be connected to the fact that they were both equally dependent on the Court's recognition of their position as Jaganadha's wife. The colonial sociology of women does not differ dramatically from the ideal expressed by Atchama and Rungama. Rungama described herself as being close to this ideal. '...I never acted contrary to my husband's intentions even in my dream, and it is therefore obvious that he loved me till he died.'²⁶⁰ Rungama was consequently set on convincing the court that her only concern was the well being of her husband, and that she did not interfere in his personal relations with his other wife. Rungama argued that Jaganadha obviously believed that she had done nothing to harm Atchama; otherwise he would not have accepted to pay the maintenance granted to Atchama by the Provincial court. Rungama supposedly followed her husband in all his decisions and accompanied him on religious and festive occasions. When he died Rungama described herself as '...absorbed in grief at the time my husband died'.²⁶¹ Rungama expressed how she felt lost and deserted and unable to make decision without the firm and secure protection of her husband. Atchama argued along similar lines. She described that she was unable to communicate with her husband because of Rungama's hold on him, but that she in reality wished nothing else than to stay by his side. Only when her life was threatened did she reluctantly leave her husband's residence. She furthermore denied that she had filed the suits to humiliate her husband; the suits were filed out of necessity, because she claimed that Rungama had prevented Jaganadha from paying the maintenance she was entitled to.²⁶²

²⁵⁸ Pamela Price, 1994, p.9

²⁵⁹ Maharajah Sri Rao Sir Venkata Swetachalapati Ranga Rao Bahadur, K.C.I.E., Maharaja of Bobbili, *Advice to the Indian Aristocracy*, Madras 1905, p.137

²⁶⁰ Vassareddy XII p.765

²⁶¹ Vassareddy XII p.361

²⁶² See quote on the previous page.

As devoted wives neither of the two blamed Jaganadha for any of the troubles and conflicts. He appeared as quite passive in these dramatic events which, according to their stories, were mainly driven by the actions of the women. Atchama even testified in the Provincial court that:

Through the influence the Plaintiff had over my husband, he only permitted me to be exposed to injuries by her, but he did not himself bear any ill-will towards me. But if any body performed any act during the days he was master, his name ought to be mentioned, but not that of any other; subsequently, he was considered as the author of all the dangerous acts to which the Plaintiff subjected me.²⁶³

Both Atchama and Rungama thus blamed the other wife for being the source of the conflict. Rungama painted a colourful picture of Atchama as an uncontrollable woman, an image that can resemble the uncontrollable goddesses that can be found in local epics. Atchama similarly argues for Rungama's manipulative abilities, as seen in the quote above. The fear and respect of the powers of virgins and young girls has been described by anthropologists as George Hart as common in the Dravidian areas.²⁶⁴ When following this line of thought, Atchama's arguments implied that Rungama used her feminine skills and power to manipulate Jaganadha. This image can resemble the courtesans found in folk literature who used their sexuality to achieve their objectives. The accusations of the two women against each other conveniently also liberated Jaganadha of all responsibility in the situation.

The contour of an ideal wife that appears from the Vassareddy women's testimony does not differ significantly from the colonial sociology of women. This is expressed by Rungama in her testimony quoted above. A separation between ideal and action is an appropriate distinction here. The story of the background for Jaganadha's double wedding showed that Vencatadry's wife Yerema did not live up to the passiveness inherent in the colonial sociology of women.. The domestic dispute between the two that resulted in this unusual wedding was not challenged by any parties in the suit. Furthermore it is hard to imagine who would benefit from fabricating this story. On the contrary, Jaganadha would most certainly have wished to protect the honour of his adoptive mother, who was still alive during the time that the case was tried in India.²⁶⁵ From the narrative presented by all parties concerning the double wedding, we can conclude that Vencatadry Naidoo's senior wife Yerema was neither passive nor obedient, although she according to the colonial sociology ideally would have settled with her husband's decision.

²⁶³ Vassareddy XII p.370

²⁶⁴ George L Hart III, 1973 p.238

²⁶⁵ Several witnesses from the Sudder Adawlut court in 1832 testified in Court that Yerema was still alive. Furthermore, Vencatadry Naidoo's junior wife was also alive as she was examined as a witness by the Provincial court.

Furthermore, Yerema was determined that Jaganadha should marry her candidate and the compromise was apparently the result. A witness in the case, Cheroomaumella Seetaramanah furthermore claimed that Yerema was the one who convinced Vencatadry Naidoo to adopt Jaganadha. Vencatadry Naidoo was supposedly against adopting the boy because he considered Jaganadha's natural father and his paternal uncle's son as his sworn enemy. The witness claimed that Yerema managed to convince Vencatadry Naidoo to change his mind and carry out the adoption.²⁶⁶ This shows that as the zamindar's wife, Yerema displayed independent agency, similar to the female characters of the epics discussed in the second chapter. The choice of a son to adopt and the choice of that son's wife were both decisions that could have major implications. The son's abilities and dedication could determine the future success of the management of the estate. The wife's ability to bear children would be crucial for the family in the future. Furthermore, a marriage between two children also created a bond between the two families, an alliance that could in some cases last beyond the lifetime of the married couple.²⁶⁷ This suggests that Yerema's independence and agency was not considered as inappropriate behaviour for a zamindar's wife.

Atchama and Rungama on the other hand did not display to much independent agency in the discussion concerning their positions as wives. As the Anglo-Indian law judged women according to the ideals of the colonial sociology of women, both women attempted to present themselves in accordance with that ideal. Using the terminology from Raheja above, both wives expressed their loyalty to the patrilineal kinship system. It was this system that allocated a special position for the senior wife, the identity which Atchama claimed to have an undisputable right to. Although Atchama claimed loyalty to the patrilineal kinship system, her actions after the conflict at Amarvaty expressed resistance to the same structures and particularly to the orthodox ideal. Because Atchama refused to stay at the fort of her husband, her loyalty to her husband and her marital duties was no longer given primacy. Atchama's solidarity to her natal kin became more important as she left the marital home with her brother. As briefly discussed in the first chapters, this solidarity should ideally have ended at the marriage ceremony in orthodox patrilineal kinship tradition. However, as Atchama returned after Jaganadha's death she once again expressed her loyalty to her husband and his family as she argued her position and claimed her right, as senior wife.

Rungama similarly expressed her solidarity to the colonial sociology of women as the model chaste and obedient wife of Jaganadha. However, she too displayed critique against the same system as she

²⁶⁶ Vassareddy VII p.205

²⁶⁷ Michael Yorke, 'Kinship, marriage and ideology among the Raj Gonds' in *Contributions to Indian Sociology*, Vol. 13 No 1 1979, p.111

claimed that Atchama had forfeited her position as senior wife because of her improper actions. Even though the Anglo-Indian law expressed the position as senior wife as a symbolic identity established by ceremonial practice, Rungama argued that the preconditions for this title should not be as rigid. She argued that through action she had proven herself as a far more deserving candidate for the position of senior wife. However, she did simultaneously express loyalty to the view of Anglo-Indian law as she claimed her right to inherit her husband through her self appointed status as senior wife.

For Atchama and Rungama, protecting one's personal integrity and honour could sometimes come into conflict with displaying unconditional loyalty to one's husband. Personal pride was hardly a virtue for the chaste Hindu wife whose only concern was the wellbeing of her husband. Rungama tried to portray herself in accordance with the ideals of the colonial sociology. Rungama did not display much independent initiative as Jaganadha's wife because she had no need to act outside the limited sphere allowed for a zamindar's wife. This changed however when Jaganadha's death suddenly made her the junior widow of the late zamindar, a position that left her much more vulnerable. As necessity demanded, the following two chapters will illustrate that Rungama would have to balance different solidarities, making her appear as more independent and powerful when she was forced to fight for her future in the colonial courtroom.

3: Widow

What is cruel?
The heart of a viper.
What is more cruel than that?
The heart of a woman.
What is the cruellest of all?
The heart of a sonless, penniless widow.²⁶⁸

The least respected and coveted identity for a female was that of a widow. As expressed by the legal historian Nair; ‘The fate of widows in upper caste families was not inappropriately called *living death* since the widows allowed her husband to pre-decease her.’²⁶⁹ As discussed in the previous chapter, royal Indian women derived their identity through their relations to other family members, and no relation was more important than the relationship between a husband and his wife. Consequently, it was a double tragedy when a husband died, as his widow(s) would often face a very hard future. Ramabai Sarasvati wrote a separate chapter on widowhood in her book *The High Caste Hindu Woman* in which she argued that widowhood marked the by far worst period of the life of the high caste woman. Widowhood was according to her ‘...regarded as the punishment for a horrible crime or crimes committed by the woman in her former existence upon earth.’²⁷⁰

This view is confirmed by 18th Century pundit Tryambaka. Leslie argues that Tryambaka outlined three possibilities for a wife to achieve the status of *patrivata*, the perfect devoted auspicious wife who secures the eternal bliss of herself and more importantly her husband. The ideal is the wife who dies before her husband and patiently awaits him in the afterlife. The second best option is the wife who performs sati; following her husband into his funeral pyre. The third option is for the wife who outlives her husband to lead an ascetic life for the rest of her days. This was according to Tryambaka a difficult task because of women’s inherent nature. The widow had to leave according to a number of strict regulations; she was to remove all ornamentation, should perform regular fasts, she should live on flowers, roots and barley and eat only once a day. In fact, she should live as an ascetic, accept that she was not allowed to leave her home.²⁷¹ Furthermore she should never wear perfume or mention another man’s name, she should sleep on the ground and should avoid such

²⁶⁸ Ramabai, 1888 p.57

²⁶⁹ This was not as radical among the lower castes where widows often had greater opportunities to f. ex. marry again. Janaki Nair, 1996 p.59

²⁷⁰ Ramabai, 1888 p.69

²⁷¹ According to Leslie, widows in southern India today often have their hair shaved off at their husband’s funeral ceremony as a symbol of her future life. Leslie 1989 p.303

pleasures as chewing betel.²⁷²

The horrible position of widowhood appears to be consistent both in the colonial sociology of women and in the more particular south Indian context. According to religious anthropologist Holly Baker Reynolds, the status as widow was the most feared identity for Tamil women. A barren woman also held a very low status, but because barrenness might be a temporary status, the definitiveness of widowhood ensured that a widow's status remained low.²⁷³ The only way for a woman to escape the dreaded state of widowhood was to remarry and thus once again become a wife. However, this was a choice that has traditionally been denied Hindu women, particularly women of rank.

The cruelty faced by widowed women in India was one of the most favoured arguments for those who argued for the need of colonialism in the 19th Century. Most famously, widow immolation, or sati, was outlawed by the colonial administration in Bengal in 1829.²⁷⁴ This was the beginning of a massive public debate that resulted in a variety of social legislations. The second most debated issue was concerned with a widow's right to remarry. This debate resulted in the 'Widow's Remarriage Act' of 1856. The background for this debate was that as a result of the traditional young age of many brides and many consequently became widows even before they were sexually mature. Traditionally, these laws were viewed as an extension of the humanity of the western societies into the brutal world of Indian civilization. However, recent research has argued that the social legislation of the 19th Century used to legitimize the colonial presence, often led to a reaffirmation of the patriarchal restrictions they were intended to weaken.²⁷⁵ Raheja defined the discourse of the social reformers of the 19th Century as '...providing an authorizing narrative for colonial rule.'²⁷⁶

Becoming a widow in 19th Century south India was doubtlessly not an advantageous position to be in. However, exception did occur. One example is a case from the Privy Council regarding a dispute over a part of the zamindari of Ellore. The zamindar of Ellore died childless in 1864. He left two widows who inherited the zamindari. According to the court documents, the two widows managed the zamindari together with great success for twenty years before the senior widow died.²⁷⁷ Another

²⁷² Leslie 1989, p.299

²⁷³ Holly Baker Reynolds, 1991

²⁷⁴ Lata Mani 'Contentious Traditions: The Debate on Sati in Colonial India' in *Recasting Women: essays in Indian colonial history*, Rutgers University Press, New Brunswick 1990, p. 88

²⁷⁵ Lata Mani, 1990 and Janaki Nair, 1996 are two examples.

²⁷⁶ Raheja, 2003, p.3

²⁷⁷ Privy Council 1888: SRI RAJA VELLANKI VEKATA RAMA RAO BAHADUR Zemindar Garu vs. SRI RAJA PAPAMMA ROW BAHADUR Zemindar Garu for self and as legal representative of Sri Raja Narayya Appa Rao

exception to the general rule about widows is found in the Gavara caste, a farmer's caste in contemporary Telugu Country. According to anthropologist Tapper the villages of these castes have had a slightly different view on the position of widows. The widows here were feared as powerful beings, because of their sakti, but became auspicious due to their subordinate to male control.²⁷⁸ What is particularly different here is that widows could challenge the positions of men. A widowed woman became the head of the household if her sons were not yet married when their father died. A widow could also exert control over her married sons and the decision making of the entire family.²⁷⁹ But although Tapper argued that widows were feared and respected and could in some situations exert power, this was in the end an expression of challenges to male control which served as a justification of male dominance.

The Vassareddy widows and the origins of the dispute

The death of Jaganadha on the 28th of February 1825 marked the entry of the conflict between Atchama and Rungama into the public sphere. The events in the months leading up to the day of Jaganadha's death and in the following months would be discussed in great detail as the different narratives were presented in court. A few facts appear certain because they are not challenged by any of the contesting parties. At the time of Jaganadha's death, he was living at Amarvaty with Rungama as his only wife. He supposedly died after a long period of physical decline that was according to the doctors that testified in court, a result of his obesity.²⁸⁰ Within a few days, both Atchama and Ramanadha were present at Amarvaty, and Ramanadha was at some point instated as manager.

Atchama claimed that she had received the first letters from her husband some six months before his demise. In these letters Jaganadha expressed his regrets over the development of events six years earlier. He supposedly admitted to be under the influence of Rungama, and that she had persuaded him that Atchama was an unfit and disloyal wife against his better judgement. Jaganadha acknowledged Atchama's position as his senior wife and promised to make sure that the authorities were informed about her status as his natural heir. Atchama gave the following account of what happened in the months preceding Jaganadha's death:

As my husband was well aware that I am his successor, and that any voucher executed by him

Bahadur Zemindar Garu,

²⁷⁸ Bruce Elliot Tapper, 1979, p.20

²⁷⁹ Bruce Elliot Tapper, 1979, p.5

²⁸⁰ Vassareddy XII p.417-21

to others except to me, giving them any authority, cannot be valid, he, when his distemper increased, executed a will in my name on the 2nd February 1825, purporting that I should inherit the whole of his estate, real and personal, after him, and that I may adopt a proper boy of our race; and sent the same to me, saying that I should keep that circumstances in private until his further orders. I did accordingly. Afterwards, his sickness having greatly increased, and when he thought he will not live longer, that is on the 22nd of the same month, corresponding with Monday, the third increasing moon, on the month of Phalguna, year Tarana, he wrote a poorony in my name, that I should come down to Amarvaty and take care of his estate, &c., I so soon as the poorony reached me, proceeded to and took up my residence in my eastern upstairs house, situated at Amarvaty.²⁸¹

The note that Jaganadha supposedly wrote to her was presented to the Provincial court as documentary evidence:

Finding myself unwell, I have lately sent to you authority, in writing, to succeed to my talook, &c., estate on my death. Now I find my sickness is increasing more and more. Rungama troubles me much to leave by writing the talook, &c., to Chava Lutchme Putty of another gotrum whom she (Rungama) has been taking care of, but I have not consented to it. Upon a reflection of my illness I think I shall not live many days. Since she is thus troubling me while I am alive, she may, in conjunction with the servants, very likely forge something hereafter, the seal being on their possession. Therefore, as soon as you see this note, you will come here and take care of the talook and other estates according to my writing to you.²⁸²

Rungama did not find this explanation credible and said that ‘...had the said will been genuine, why did the second Defendant (who was in Guntur, contiguous to Amarvaty) not venture to come to Amarvaty until the day next to that on which my husband died.’²⁸³ However, as the obedient wife she claimed to be, Atchama said that all she wanted was to honour her dying husband’s wishes and that she had arrived at Amarvaty as early as she could. When she finally did arrive at Amarvaty, Atchama claimed that she was refused entrance into the fort. She wrote letters to the collector of Guntur, requesting his help. In several letters, Atchama expressed the mistreatment she was suffering and requested that the collector ordered the police to forcefully put her in possession the estate that she considered to be rightfully hers.²⁸⁴ The collector, hiding his irritation over the complaining widow very poorly, answered Atchama: ‘You shall not write to me arzees hereafter upon this subject. You will state your case to the Courts, and receive their answer.’²⁸⁵ Atchama followed the collector's instruction and filed the suit against Ramanadha and Rungama on the 12th of May 1825.²⁸⁶

The reason for Atchama’s suit was supposedly that Ramanadha was now formally instated as

²⁸¹ ‘Poorony,- A note.’ Vassareddy Glossary p.13

²⁸² Vassareddy VII p.280

²⁸³ Vassareddy XII p.362

²⁸⁴ Vassareddy VII p.281

²⁸⁵ Vassareddy VII p.281

²⁸⁶ Vassareddy I p.20

manager, despite that the case between him and Jaganadha had yet not been decided in court. The reason was that Ramanadha withdrew the appeal as soon as he heard that Jaganadha had died. Later, when this cause was revived by the Provincial court, he claimed that this was done because he knew that Jaganadha had appointed him as his heir. Atchama claimed that the adoption of Ramanadha had yet not been proven valid in court, and he was thus not to be considered as having any legitimate claim to inherit neither Vencatadry Naidoo nor Jaganadha. Atchama argued that this was a case to be resolved in court by Ramanadha, and that it did not concern her. She did not mention the consequence of the possibility that Ramanadha's claim could be judged to be valid. Atchama expressed that she so naturally assumed that she was the heir of Jaganadha's estate that she was utterly surprised when she encountered trouble.

Rungama, the plaintiff of the final suit, presented quite a different version of the events. She told the court that Jaganadha had known that he would die for a long time, despite his young age. The two thus prepared for the time after his death. Jaganadha and Rungama supposedly had a sincere relationship built on mutual love and respect.²⁸⁷ He regarded Rungama as his only heir because he was on unfriendly terms with both Ramanadha and Atchama. They had supposedly adopted a son together, Lutchmeputti Naidoo, only a few days after Atchama had left Amarvaty in 1819, and Jaganadha intended for him to inherit the title and estate after him. He thus wrote a will where he confirmed the adoption and he appointed Rungama to act as manager until Lutchmeputti came of age.²⁸⁸ This document was according to Rungama sent to the collector and Court of Wards for safekeeping.

The stories of both widows were denied by Ramanadha who also presented a will to court. He quickly dismissed Atchama by stating that her claim as '... incredible; for from the year 1819 until my brother's death, himself and Atchama were litigants in public Court, and never in terms.'²⁸⁹ He claimed that Jaganadha had realized that Ramanadha was his only rightful heir, as his undivided brother. According to Ramanadha, Rungama was fully aware of her husband's intention to make his adoptive brother his heir. Jaganadha had supposedly trusted his wife with the safekeeping of the will and had instructed her to send for Ramanadha after he had passed:

My adoptive father, with an intention to have the family augmented, adopted me as his second son and being undivided brother to the Plaintiff's husband, who died leaving neither male nor female issue, I am considered as his lawful heir; consequently on the 26th February 1825, he voluntarily bequeathed his whole estate to me, by leaving a will and other documents in my favour, and committed them to the charge of the Plaintiff, and died on the

²⁸⁷ Vassareddy XII p.765

²⁸⁸ Vassareddy XII p.394

²⁸⁹ Vassareddy VII p.283

28th of the same month. Afterwards this Plaintiff sent me a message that my brother left a will in my favour, that I should immediately proceed to Amarvaty, for the purpose of receiving charge of the estate, and for performing the funeral ceremonies of my brother. I accordingly arrived at the forth of Amarvaty on the 1st of March, when she not only informed me of the above circumstances, but also sent the original will, with her arzee, to the collector of Guntoor, and another arzee, enclosing a copy of the said will, took possession of the whole estate, both real and personal; and on the same day made it known, by means of arzees, to the collectors of Guntoor and Bunder; and afterwards I, taking up the management of the zemidanry, and supporting the family of my brother, continued to live in the same house; and the funeral rites, as well as monthly and yearly ceremonies of my brother, have been performed by me as his heir, in consequence of my being undivided and younger brother to him.²⁹⁰

Rungama filed the suit in August 1826, eighteen months after her husband Jaganadha had died. Supposedly, she had been unable to finance the suit earlier. Ramanadha rejected this and said that Rungama had acted in conformity with her late husband's wishes until she received some bad advice on a trip to Masulipatam. Ramanadha told the Provincial court that Rungama's story did not make much sense according to the wills left by Jaganadha. In the will where he confirmed Ramanadha as his rightful heir, Jaganadha also had made provisions for his junior wife. In the will, the *samuts* of Royapoody and Nataky, together comprising forty-three villages, were allotted to Rungama. The annual profit of 58,000 rupees from these villages and a monthly allowance of 1000 rupees were intended to secure Rungama a comfortable and secure future.²⁹¹ This was undeniably a major improvement compared to the 350 rupees of monthly allowance she was awarded in the first suit.²⁹² Ramanadha claimed that had he forged the document written by Jaganadha favouring him as heir, there would be no reason for him to make such an allotment to his brother's junior wife who was in Ramanadha's opinion only entitled to maintenance from the estate. Although later in the case Ramanadha appears to have been so annoyed by Rungama's suit that he told the court that she had by suing him not been an obedient wife of her late husband, thus rendering her unworthy of the inheritance she was promised in the will.²⁹³

Ramanadha and Caly Doss furthermore denied that they had instructed people not to lend Rungama money to finance a suit against them. Ramanadha told the court how Rungama had been given a lot of jewellery by Vencatadry Naidoo at her wedding at an estimated value of 40,000 rupees. During her marriage she had received even more valuable jewellery by her husband, who supposedly also gave his wife a large amount of cash.²⁹⁴ Ramanadha and Caly Doss thus claimed that Rungama's story of how she was unable to finance the suit was a mere invention by Rungama to provide an

²⁹⁰ Vassareddy XII p.374

²⁹¹ Vassareddy X p.344

²⁹² Vassareddy XII p.789

²⁹³ Vassareddy XII p. 750

²⁹⁴ Vassareddy XII p.752

explanation for the amount of time that elapsed before she filed her suit. The third judge had in a mocking manner described the case as created in the Masulipatam bazaar, a claim Ramanadha confirmed as accurate.²⁹⁵ Ramanadha argued that the incorporation of Caly Doss in the suit clearly expressed the invention of the suit as the only reason to include the trusted servant was to ensure that he was not presented to the Court as a witness.²⁹⁶

The opposition to Rungama's claim

The defendants were not alone in denying the truthfulness of Rungama's story. The second judge in the Provincial court expressed his suspicion that the pleader Camarauze Gedda Boochiah had something to do with initiating Rungama's suit.²⁹⁷

I think it may be safely asserted, the present cause would not have come before the Court, had he himself performed his duty. Whether a claim be justly founded or otherwise, the pleader knows he must gain, for the fees are deposited in Court before a single line is committed to paper; and I think therefore that any one who undertakes a cause like the present, whilst he is in possession of all the circumstances connected with it, as Boochiah must indisputable have been [...] That this suit is for the advantage of the pleaders, and the pleaders only, is, I think, beyond all dispute.²⁹⁸

This supposition was supported by Atchama's pleader who argued that Rungama's claim had originated when she had realized that she would only be entitled to allowance if Ramanadha or Atchama was appointed as heirs of the zamindary. Rungama very clearly denied that Boochiah had anything to do with initiating the suit, and argued to the court that there was no evidence to prove such a statement.²⁹⁹ In a lengthy answer of approximately forty pages presented in the Sudder Adawlut court, Rungama denied this:

I am a woman who cannot appear before a Court: I must therefore either appoint an agent to appear in Court on my behalf, or abstain carrying on the suit. The agent, who may have been so appointed by me, will act according to the instructions and papers furnished by by me, subject to the rules of the Court. He can do nothing on his own pleasure [...] I carry on this suit out of my own knowledge, upon real facts, as well as upon good reasons I have for it. Nobody advised me newly to bring this suit; neither my salahakars or advisers gave any advice as to any new matter.³⁰⁰

Ramanadha was not convinced by Rungama's arguments. He claimed that Rungama had been present when Jaganadha wrote his will and that she was well aware of his intentions of honouring the custom prevailing in the family. As can be seen in Table 1, the Vassareddy zamindary had

²⁹⁵ Vassareddy XII p.778

²⁹⁶ Vassareddy III p.19

²⁹⁷ Vassareddy III p.25

²⁹⁸ Vassareddy XII p.677

²⁹⁹ Vassareddy XII p. 761

³⁰⁰ Vassareddy XII p.872

always been passed on to brothers or brothers' sons if the zamindar died childless. Ramanadha argued that because a woman had not ruled the zamindary before, putting a woman in charge would be in opposition to the custom of the family. Furthermore, Ramanadha argued that it was extremely unlikely that Rungama could stay at the fort for many months without knowing that Ramanadha was instated as manager.

Rungama did not deny that she interacted with both Caly Doss and Ramanadha in addition to a number of servants. Several witnesses claimed that they saw Rungama and Ramanadha together daily and that they appeared to be on very friendly terms.³⁰¹ Ramanadha argued that the story of the conspiracy and the story that the couple adopted of Lutchmeputti Naidoo had been invented in an attempt to substantiate her claim. Ramanadha however believed that this was merely an argument made to convince Rungama to file the suit. Ramanadha thus confirmed that Jaganadha had lived together with Rungama the last six years of his life. Furthermore, Ramanadha shared Rungama's view on Atchama. The will that Jaganadha supposedly left in favour of Ramanadha, contained the following regarding his senior wife:

...Ramanadha Baboo is to continue to pay monthly to my eldest wife the sum of rupees 350, agreeably to the Decree passed by the Zillah Court of Masulipatam, and not more, because, instead of being attached to my interest, she has been desirous of my ruin, and committed acts that were disgraceful to my samastanum, and improper to be mentioned by me, and tending to my unhappiness, and left me, and prosecuted me in the Zillah Court. She has therefore no right to any thing more of my estate.³⁰²

Atchama's initial victory and other succession disputes with female participation

The Provincial court did not share the views of Ramanadha's pleader in the initial suit which she filed against him on August 15th 1825. The court did not put much weight on the documentary evidence in the case which is not surprising considering that three different wills of the late Jaganadha were presented as evidence. The Provincial court decided the case in favour of Atchama in the first suit on December 22nd 1825.³⁰³ The judges believed that her position as senior widow had not been challenged by the evidence presented in court. She was thus appointed as Jaganadha's heir on the grounds of her position as his oldest wife, and not based on the material evidence presented in court. One reason given by the judges was that the validity of Ramanadha's adoption had not been established by the Provincial court. Given the doubts concerning Vencatadry Naidoo's

³⁰¹ Vassareddy XII p.651

³⁰² Vassareddy XII p.398

³⁰³ Vassareddy III p.17

right to adopt a second son, the judges decided in favour of Atchama.

This point may be used to argue against the widespread perception that women were not allowed to inherit landed estates in the colonial period. The established conception still prevalent today, as discussed in the previous chapter, was that a widow was only entitled to the *stridhana*, the wealth that she brought into the marriage, most often in the form of dowry. This was not specified by the Provincial court who appointed Atchama as her husband's heir.³⁰⁴ I have already mentioned one case above where the two widows in Ellore jointly inherited and managed the estate of their late husband. In this case, Atchama, as the senior widow was appointed as heir in preference of an adopted brother of the late zamindar. She was not awarded because of the lack of male relatives. Ramanadha was undoubtedly related to Jaganadha, if not as an undivided brother, then because their fathers were cousins. Furthermore, the natural older brothers of both Ramanadha and Jaganadha, Padmanabha Ramanna and Rama, appear to have been alive during the case, as they are mentioned in the debate on whether there existed boys within the family eligible for adoption. Although their fathers were in constant litigation with Vencatadry Naidoo over the rights to their common ancestral estate, the sons are not mentioned as contesters in the Vassareddy suit. This was despite that at least one of them, Ramanadha's natural father Paupiah, was alive and testified in the Provincial court.³⁰⁵ The only possible explanations for their absence from the case are that they either was not admitted as parties in the suit, or they did not consider that they would succeed in court. In any case it is evident that their claim could never be given precedence over the claims of the late zamindar's widows. In addition, the opposing parties did argue against Atchama and Rungama's claim on the basis of gender. Ramanadha's pleaders argued that '...it was not customary for women to rule the country in the Vassareddy family.'³⁰⁶ This point was however never argued by the judges who after all appointed Atchama as heir in the first suit.

In some cases from the same district in late 19th Century however, the judges argued quite differently. In one case which was originally filed in the District court of Vizagapatam, the widow of the late zamindar of Belgram filed a suit in order to be recognized as the heir of her late husband's estate in preference of his cousins. She argued that she had acquired parts of the landed property in her own name, and that this gave her right to the property. The judges denied her claim by the following statement: '1. Because there is no evidence of such self-acquisition or partition as would be necessary to give the widow of the late zamindar any right to hold against the male heirs

³⁰⁴ Vassareddy III p.17

³⁰⁵ Vassareddy VII p.223

³⁰⁶ Vassareddy XII p.782

of her husband.³⁰⁷

Similar arguments are found in the Inugnati case that was heard before the Privy Council in 1898. This case concerning a lesser zamindar was also pending in court for decades. This case was originally between the paternal grandmother of the late zamindar Sitayamma and his cousin Inugnati Rajagoopala Rao, the adopted son of the previous zamindar, Rama Rao's sister Anna Rao. Sitayamma had been appointed as heir by her grandson Rayadappa who died in 1861 only three years after he inherited the estate from his father Rama Rao. Sitayamma claimed that she had contributed to the property while her husband was zamindar. She claimed the estate for herself and on behalf of her daughter and her daughter's adopted son. After Sitayamma's death in 1886 the case continued between the daughter Laksmhi Kataiyammi and Inugnati Rajagoopala Rao. This case was also decided in favour of the latter because he, as a male relation, according to the judges held a particular right to inherit.³⁰⁸ Together, these cases suggest that the emphasis on the stridhana as the only right of a woman was a feature of the Anglo-Indian courts in the later colonial period, and not necessarily under the Company Raj.

Atchama's victory did however not last very long. After the case was decided, Rungama filed her suit, suit No. 29 on September the 6th 1826.³⁰⁹ This implied that the suit between Jaganadha and Ramanadha was revived, and that Rungama was included as the plaintiff of the suit that was to include all the cases that had been filed in relation to the succession to the Vassareddy zamindary.³¹⁰ All the judges in the Provincial court expressed very frankly that they believed that Rungama's suit was based on forged information, and that the adoption of Lutchmeputty had never taken place. However, they did acknowledge that IF Rungama was able to prove Lutchmeputty's alleged adoption; his right would be superior to the claims of both adopted brother Ramanadha and the senior wife Atchama.

Ideological expressions and concluding remarks

The death of Jaganadha was doubtlessly a dramatic event for Atchama and Rungama alike, as it implied that they became widows, a position feared by Indian women. Atchama was however

³⁰⁷ Privy Council, 1895: SRI RAJA VIRAVARA THODRAMAL RAJYA LAKSHMI DEVI GARU versus SRI RAJA VIRAVARA THODHRAMAL SURYA NARAYANA DHATRAZU BAHADUR GARU

³⁰⁸ Privy Council 1898: Inugnati case [front page missing from the microfilm copy]

³⁰⁹ Vassareddy I p.23

³¹⁰ Vassareddy I p.21

initially rewarded when she was recognized as the heir of the estate left by her late husband Jaganadha. Atchama's testimony in court suggests that she was confident that her position as senior wife and widow would be recognized:

As I have become principal successor to the whole of my husband's (that is, my father-in-law's) estate, real and personal, there is no occasion for me to write my answer to this number. All the movable and immoveable property of my father-in-law, Raja Vencatadry Naidoo, in whosever's charge it might be concealed, should, according to the decision passed in the cause No. 20 of 1825, devolve solely on me, who am the legal successor to my husband....³¹¹

She attempted once again to give the court the impression that she was an obedient wife when she followed her husband's instructions, which can be seen by her testimony on the third page of this chapter. However, her argumentation did not extend much further. Having her position as senior widow established, Atchama could focus her attention elsewhere. She appears to have directed her efforts at disclaiming both Ramanadha's and Lutchmeputti's adoptions, as these were the only two who could challenge her position in the succession dispute.

Rungama on the other hand was in a far worse position than her co-wife Atchama. The court was sceptical of Rungama's claim from the very beginning. The main argument was that the court considered it highly unlikely that a bright young woman such as Rungama would live in ignorance of the alleged conspiracy for so long. The judges clearly expressed that they viewed the 18 months that passed between Jaganadha's death and Rungama's suit as proof that the entire case was fabricated. The third judge in the Provincial Court even expressed that Rungama and her pleader attempted to take advantage of the ignorance of the European judges:

The first part of the present complaint is pretty well calculated for the supposed ignorance of Europeans respecting the situation of native females of rank; but the story of the karar-namah of the 24th of August 1825, is one of those egregious blunders which, fortunately, the clumsy conspirators of this part of the country rarely fail to commit.³¹²

Rungama was quick to resort to the position as an ignorant young widow. She portrayed herself as quite helpless without her husband, and told the court how she put her trust in Caly Doss, who expressed his concern for her: 'As I was then distracted from the sorrow that befell me, I remained, trusting the third Defendant would carry on all affairs on my behalf in conformity to my commands.'³¹³ The image which Rungama tries to present here was very consistent with the orthodox Brahmanical ideal; the woman who becomes helpless without the firm control of her husband, and comes to depend on other males in her surroundings. She continued this when she

³¹¹ Vassareddy XII p.372

³¹² Vassareddy III p.26

³¹³ Vassareddy XII p.361

described her and Lutchmeputty's desperate situation, and she appealed to the judges and the court in general to provide the protection they needed, as if she was appealing to the protection of a husband:

Now myself and adopted son have no means whatever for our maintenance. We lived with my husband, and we should have been provided for ever since his death. It now rests with our Court to fix an allowance for us, payable from my husband's estate from the date of his death, till we get possession indisputably of the said estate.³¹⁴

Rungama's pleader continued to appeal to the paternalistic responsibilities of the colonial administration, as a representative institution of the colonial administration that had attached the property which had again implied that not only Rungama's physical well-being was in danger: perhaps even more importantly, her honour was at stake:

If a court of justice give no countenance to a party praying it, to allow maintenance during the time her acknowledged property is in attachment, the party must suffer a great deal, for she must give up the cause and leave the country altogether in search of maintenance, or must kill herself on account of her rank and respectability, or must at last be obliged to obey her adversaries, and give them possession of her rights.³¹⁵

This portrait of Rungama as a helpless widow, unable to function without the guidance of a man is far from consistent. The different versions of the events surrounding Jaganadha's death confirm that Rungama was in charge of the estate. Rungama initially refused the guards to let Ramanadha enter the gates. Caly Doss convinced her to change her mind. Atchama was initially denied access to the estate too, a fact she did not deny. And since Atchama arrived at Amarvaty before Ramanadha did, this could not have been his decision. Consequently, only Rungama had the authority to give orders to the servants, something which she confirmed in the testimony above. The guards must have recognized Ramanadha as the late zamindar's adopted brother, but they nevertheless supposedly denied him access. The young widow Rungama must have been considered as the natural manager and decision maker after her husband's demise. This was despite her position as a childless widow. This is indirectly confirmed by Rungama who does not claim that Ramanadha took control by violent means, but rather that he manipulated documents in order to acquire official control over the estate.

Atchama again argued her utter loyalty to her husband, despite the fact that she had left him six years earlier and initiated a suit that gave the impression that she had no intention of returning. Despite her reluctance to conform to the ideal of an obedient wife who accepts any action from her deity, the husband, Atchama now claimed to be the model wife. As Jaganadha contacted her, she

³¹⁴ Vassareddy XII p.748

³¹⁵ Vassareddy XII p.749

supposedly accepted his advance immediately.

Ramanadha on the other hand expressed some surprising loyalties. Even though he at one point argued that Rungama had been a disobedient wife and should be removed of all rights as Jaganadha's widow, he never repeated this statement nor did he make any attempts to alter the will. Ramanadha denied only those parts of Rungama's story which were a treat to his own claim, and stressed the point that he believed that she had been under the influence of bad advisors. This contrasts gravely to his attitude towards Atchama, who he saw as unworthy of even maintenance. This display of loyalty towards Rungama could be an expression of Ramanadha's loyalty to his late adoptive brother because of the affection he knew Jaganadha had had for Rungama. More likely however, this loyalty was a result of Ramanadha's marriage to Rungama's sister. The two had most likely lived together at Amarvaty during Vencatadry's reign and the wife of the surviving brother probably influenced her husband to make sure that her sister Rungama was provided for regardless of the outcome of the suit.

Rungama, similarly to Atchama, displayed her utter devotion and loyalty to her husband. The devastation she experienced after his death might have been genuine, but regardless it served the purpose of portraying Rungama as the ideal, utterly devoted wife. She did express critique of the decisions of the Provincial court because they enabled a disobedient and undeserving woman like Atchama to be recognized as the heir to a man she had left. However, she displayed confidence in the judges as she expressed that she firmly believed that the Court would disregard the prevailing laws and realize that Atchama was not deserving of having the title of senior wife. There are some apparent contrasts in Rungama's testimony. From the narrative presented by her and the other parties, it seems evident that the servants at Amarvaty consulted Rungama on questions regarding the estate; the control of the gate etc. Simultaneously, Rungama attempts to portray herself in accordance to the colonial sociology of women. Her trust in Caly Doss was presented as an extension of her loyalty to her husband. As the marital commitment extended the life on earth, Rungama continued to honour that commitment by trusting the most trusted servant of her husband. This served as an excellent explanation as to how she could be fooled, while at the same time reflecting positively on her virtues as a devoted wife. As I mentioned in the introduction, Price has argued that the colonial courtroom represented a continuation of the competition for rank that had been a significant element of pre-colonial monarchical politics in south Indian politics. It is plausible that Rungama and Atchama both experienced the prescribed roles for women that were argued in court as alien to their existence. Consequently, the images they attempted to portray could be a mixture between their localized perception of correct female behaviour, and what the women

believed was expected by the colonial courts.

Another interesting feature of the women's testimony is the lack of reference to their positions as widows. Considering the miserable status of widows in India in general, discussed at the beginning of the chapter, it appears odd that this is not reflected in the proceedings. There is no indication that the women were now living restricted or ascetic lives. This might be because their status as widows and their virtues as widows were not considered as material to their claims, whereas their positions as wives were. It appears from the testimony that one of the primary concerns to both women in court was to portray the co-wife as unfavourable as possible. I find it hard to believe that these women would refrain from describing the other's ability to live as a good widow in a negative manner. There are a couple of references in the text to the widows of Vencatadry Naidoo, both of whom were questioned by the Provincial court. One letter that was presented as evidence is a letter from Yerema to Caly Doss requesting his help in resolving a conflict at the fort. In another account, a witness describes an episode where Yerema supposedly walked to a dangerous place where dead animals were burned. This happened as she was taking a walk, an activity that was not commented upon. She was supposedly brought back from this place by several male servants, including Caly Doss.³¹⁶ Put together, these loose treads indicate that the Vassareddy widows did not live according to the strict prescribed regulations a widow supposedly had to honour in order to be auspicious and honour her husband. Also, because this was not commented upon by anyone, this could suggest that royal widows in the Vassareddy zamindary were not expected to live according to the regulations presented by Tryambaka.

³¹⁶ Vassareddy XII

4: Mother

Elder sister, the barren one, comes
towards us
The children will develop sores
The demoness, the demoness, comes
towards us
The children will develop sores.³¹⁷

In her book *The High Caste Hindu Woman* Ramabai described the life of a woman as miserable and undignified in all the periods of her life. The one exception was when a woman became a mother. Ramabai claimed that the Indian respect and honour for the mother was unparalleled in any other country.³¹⁸ She described the mother as a queen in her son's household, and that she enjoyed great respect from her daughter-in-laws. Ramabai was not alone in stressing the respect and significance of motherhood as the significance of the mother as a symbol had long traditions in India. 'The divine mother' represented a totality of the female powers of the universe and all the goddesses of orthodox Brahmanical Hinduism. In the bhakti tradition, the 'mother' deities were widely worshipped for their great power and fertility that was considered a prerequisite for the prosperity of society and the world in general. The ancient traditions of mother worship was recognized and utilized in the colonial period. Historians have stressed how the symbolic preoccupation with 'the mother' was used by nationalist reformers who by using the symbol of the mother tried to mobilize people emotionally to the benefit of the nation. As all women contained sakti, they were all symbols of 'the motherland'.³¹⁹

Within the south Indian tradition, Reynolds has divided womanhood into six different identities. The most respected and coveted identity is that of *cumankali*, a term that literally means 'auspicious'. This identity is that of a married woman, who is powerful through her subordination to her husband. However, although a woman becomes cumankali on her wedding day, this is only a temporary status that needs to be confirmed through motherhood. The status is confirmed by giving birth to children who survive infancy and lives beyond their fifth year. Although a husband is necessary for a woman to be auspicious, she cannot be auspicious if she is barren or dies during childbirth.³²⁰ Although the status as widow is the most feared position for a woman to be in, being a

³¹⁷ Beck 1984 p. 155

³¹⁸ Ramabai, 1888 p. 51

³¹⁹ Dagmar Engels, *Beyond Purdah? Women In Bengal 1890-1939*, Oxford University Press, Delhi 1996 p.23

³²⁰ Holy Baker Reynolds, ,1991 p.37-8

barren woman was definitively the second most feared identity.³²¹ There is good reason why barrenness was feared. The law of Manu instructed that ‘...a barren wife may be superseded in the eighth year, she whose children all die in the tenth, she who bares only daughters in the eleventh.’³²² In the same way that a wife and mother was the source of fertility and general prosperity, a barren wife was believed to prohibit prosperity.

The distinctions between the different female identities clearly illustrate the gravity of the situation the two Vassareddy women faced at the death of their husband. Not only had neither of them produced an offspring; they were now childless widows, the least respected and most feared identity for a south Indian female. Although widow-remarriage was theoretically allowed for the Sudra caste, this did not apply for the Vassareddy women.³²³ Although the Vassareddies were defined as Sudras in the judiciary system, this category had little relevance in the south Indian context. In the case, Atchama claimed that they were Sudras of a purer blood than the Sudras of Bengal. The Varna categories were quite foreign in Telugu country where the two middle Varna castes were practically non-existent. As mentioned in the first chapters, the little king was in pre-colonial south India of politically and ritually of higher rank than Brahmans, despite that they belonged to a lower Varna caste. To reinforce and integrate their status, noble families defined as Sudras had long traditions for adopting the customs of the upper castes. One example in the Vassareddy case was how Atchama claimed that Lutchmeputti's natural family belonged to a different *gotrum*³²⁴ than the Vassareddies, thus making him improper for adoption. In the Sudder Adawlut court it was argued that only the Brahman caste had gotrums, as their gotrum represented the saint from which the lineage originated. This was applied by other groups by adopting the name of the lineage's ancestral village as their gotrum name.

The position of the Vassareddy women

Atchama and Rungama were thus in a miserable condition as the childless widows of the deceased zamindar Jaganadha. Because their social status would remain low the possibility of inheriting their husband's estate was thus the best, or maybe even only, chance at securing a comfortable future.

³²¹ Holy Baker Reynolds, 1991 p.39

³²² Manu ix, p.83 in Ramabai, 1888 p. 61

³²³ Rosalind O' Hanlon, , 'Issues of Widowhood: Gender and Resistance in Colonial Western India' in *Contesting Power: Resistance and Everyday Social Relations in South Asia* ed. by D. Haynes and G. Prakash, Oxford University Press New Delhi 1991, p.65

³²⁴ In the Vassareddy glossary, the term is widely defined as, 'Family, lineage, kin. The term is applied to kindred of the same general family, who partake in offerings to deceased ancestors.' Glossary p.7

Although the laws of Manu stated that a disobedient wife could be expelled from her husband's home and that a barren wife may be replaced or expelled after ten years, the Provincial court recognized Atchama's position as senior wife. After a discussion on her alleged misconduct and the established fact that she had remained outside her husband's home for six years, the Provincial court reached the conclusion that her right as senior widow could not be harmed even if the allegations against her were true.

Consequently, only two factors could prohibit Atchama from inheriting the estate of her husband. If Ramanadha's adoption was considered as valid he could raise a claim on the estate of his father and his brother. Ramanadha claimed to be a re-united brother, a status that gave the undivided brother the right to inherit his brothers. As discussed in the fourth chapter, a senior wife's position could only be challenged by a junior wife if the senior wife was childless and the junior wife gave birth to the zamindar's child. Although Rungama had supposedly been pregnant twice, she was unable to produce a male heir. This was not an uncommon phenomenon; bareness and sonlessness had been a reoccurring problem in the royal houses of Telugu country. One way of adapting to this problem was to resort to other means. In stead of depending on biological reproductive abilities, adoption became a common way of securing an heir. This was not unfamiliar in the Vassareddy family. Vencatadry Naidoo's father Juganna had been adopted by his father Chinna Ramalingana.³²⁵ In the fall of 1826 Rungama allegedly continued the family tradition of adoption when she appeared in the Provincial court as the legal guardian of her and Jaganadha's alleged adopted son Lutchmepetty Naidoo.

The politics of adoption

Adoption was a very common phenomenon among royal houses in India, both in the pre-colonial and the colonial period.³²⁶ Considering the social, religious and political implications of being childless, adoption was a strategic option that could secure the future of the lineage or royal family. The adopted child should preferably be of the same ritual status as the adopting family. This was evident in the ancient orthodox law books where endless regulations concerning adoption could be found, and equally strict regulations appears to have applied in south India. Consequently, having a number of sons could prove to be a valuable commodity in the unstable political environment of the pre-colonial period. As a consequence, a smaller zamindary could make important strategic

³²⁵ See Chapter 3 Part I and Table 1

³²⁶ For a brilliant account of adoption in contemporary India, see Audhild L. Kennedy, *Born of My Heart: a study of the process of unrelated adoption in Delhi*, Hovedoppgave i sosialantropologi, Universitetet i Oslo 2007

alliances with more prominent royal families by supplying them with sons. This was the case with the zamindary of Nuzvid, a little north of Guntur. The royal family had numerous sons for several generations and several influential zamindars adopted their sons including the royal houses of Bobbili and Pittapooore. However, being blessed with a number of sons proved to be disastrous when the zamindar died in the late 19th Century leaving seven sons. They all filed for the estate in court and the zamindary was in the end split into seven parts.³²⁷

There was also a religious aspect of adoption. Not only was a male heir necessary to secure the continuation of the family name, a son was needed to perform his father's funeral rites and the monthly and yearly ceremonies honouring the memory of the deceased. A son was necessary to ensure the father '...everlasting felicity.' The father, by handing over the leadership of the family to his son, had been released of the debt he owed his ancestors. This debt was transferred to the son who would in turn transfer it to his son. Having a male heir was thus important to secure the future honour and prosperity of the family name and estate and for the afterlife of the father.

The conflict between two adopted brothers was, as discussed in the previous chapters, the origins of the Vassareddy case. The debate on the adoption of Ramanadha would dominate the case throughout its course until it was finally decided in the Privy Council in 1853. The discussion concerning Ramanadha's adoption was of a quite different character than the discussion on Lutchmeputty's adoption. The court quickly established that Vencatadry Naidoo had performed the adoption of Ramanadha with the intention of making him his second heir. He had, in his usual manner, communicated all aspects of the adoption to the colonial authorities. He had also communicated his wishes shortly before his death and had even invited company officials to witness his death to insure that his wishes were respected. Although Vencatadry Naidoo's intentions had been established, his right to adopt a second son was greatly discussed. None of the law books contained regulations concerning the matter, and the Brahman pundits answered according to the best interest of the party that called them as witnesses.

The debate regarding the adoption of Lutchmeputty was concerned with other issues. The court was quick to establish that Jaganadha had been in his full right to adopt a suitable boy as his heir, because he had no children by either wife. The court did however doubt the truthfulness of Rungama's story about the alleged adoption.

³²⁷ Pamela Price, 'Varieties among Politics in Early Modern South India: An Exploration of Kinship and Kingship', paper presented at the conference: *Autorita e potere nel subcontinente indiano* in Trieste, Italy November 1984, p.10

The alleged adoption of Lutchmeputty Naidoo

According to Rungama, she and Jaganadha had discussed the possibility of adopting for a long time. He had been certain that he would not be able to produce a son from his own body. Jaganadha had suffered from a variety of conditions, many of which were related to his obesity.³²⁸ Rungama told the court that ‘As my husband was well aware of my not being barren, by reason of my having twice before brought to bed dead infants, he adopted a son conjointly with me.’³²⁹ Several doctors who had attended Jaganadha testified in court about the zamindar’s physical state. They even discussed the size and state of his reproductive organs and the judges speculated that he might have been unable to be intimate with his wife the last years of his life.³³⁰ Rungama however refrained from answering the questions about the physical nature of their relationship, and instead moved her testimony over to the adoption process. Apparently, the couple first tried to find a boy within the family that was suitable for adoption. For a boy to be suitable for adoption, he had to be under the age of eighteen and not the oldest son of his father. The sin of giving a first son in adoption was described as equal to ‘... a man who plucks out his eye with his own hand.’³³¹ Furthermore, the boy should be unmarried as the marriage ceremony confirmed the position of the child’s parents. According to Rungama, no boys were available within the Vassareddy family, as no one had more than one son under the prescribed age. Rungama claimed that Jaganadha consequently consulted two Brahman pundits to ask them if he could adopt a boy of another gotrum. They supposedly answered that because only Brahmans had gotrums, he was free to adopt any suitable boy of the Sudra caste.³³²

During the time of Atchama’s supposed incarceration, the couple was informed that a male child had been born to a member of their extended family.³³³ This boy was the father’s third son and he was born in March 1819. The couple decided to adopt the boy. With Jaganadha’s blessing, Rungama wrote the father of the boy Chava Naidama and requested to have his third son in adoption. He complied with their request and the date of the adoption was set on the baby’s 37th day on the 26th of April 1819, the period of pollution of newborns of the Sudra caste. Rungama and Jaganadha supposedly travelled separately to the boy’s village Eralapaudoo. Rungama and Jaganadha received the infant boy, and exchanged documents with his natural parents. Jaganadha supposedly executed a

³²⁸ Vassareddy XII p.360

³²⁹ Vassareddy XII p.381

³³⁰ Vassareddy XII p.421

³³¹ British Library: E.F.Moore 1846-1850, p.58

³³² Vassareddy I p.10

³³³ Vassareddy XII p. 381

document to Chava Naidama where he confirmed the adoption and that he was now responsible for the boy, and that he promised that he would make him the sole heir of his estate and wealth. Chava Naidama executed a similar document where he renounced any future claim on the boy. The little family left for Amarvaty the very same day.³³⁴

After the adoption, Rungama claimed that the three led a normal life. On August the 18th the adoption ceremony, *datta homam*, and the ceremony of giving a name, *the nama carama*, was performed in the presence of many witnesses. The guests included cousins, other relations and several Brahmans.³³⁵ Fourteen of the guests testified in the Provincial court where they confirmed that they had been present at the ceremony and that the adoption had been performed according to the local custom.³³⁶ The occasion was duly celebrated with guests, fine clothes and food. The zamindar bestowed gifts of fine clothing and jewellery to the guests, according to the guests who testified in court. One witness, Yanamundra Veereswara Sastrolloo, a fifty year old Brahmin who was supposedly sent for to attend the adoption, gave the following account of the adoption:

Against my arrival there Jaganadha Baboo's purohitoodoo or Brahmin, name Mullady Venkata Siva Somayazooloo, assuming the headship called achareyevum, made homam by placing sacred fire on a pile, and worshipped the same, by pronouncing certain words from the Pooranam or divine code; he not only worshipped the *muntapum* and *Adhta-die-palahooloo*, but also he placed on the said *muntapum* certain deities, and worshipped them respectively by giving them sandal or gundum, flowers, *dopum* or perfumed smoke, *deepum* or light, and *nyvadum*, &c., sixteen sorts of offerings; and afterwards he made Jaganadha Baboo and Rungama to offer to the said deities mantra pooshpum, (viz., flowers with gold coins, at one pagoda each) during which time four or five sets of dancing-girls, taussamurfas, &c., musicians made pleasant noise. When Jaganadha Baboo and Rungama put on new clothes and after their purohitoodoo pronounced such words as to exclude the adopted son from the line or connexion of his original maternal grandfather, the said Lutchmeputti Naidoo was given to them by his natural father through his hands. As the said boy was thereby duly considered to be their own son, they not only performed the ceremony of birth, but also gave him the name "*Lutchmeputti Naidoo*". Afterwards they both gave compliments and respect to those of their own caste and to the Brahmans who were then present, and then delivered the boy to the hands of all of them, saying, "*here is our boy*" and took him again from them. Afterwards they received general blessings from all the Brahmans who were present. Afterwards their purohitoodoo removed the sacred fire, muntapum, &c., from the places where they were. This is what I have seen. They performed the said ceremonies according to the rules ordained to the Sudras.³³⁷

In the following months, Jaganadha and Rungama performed the *annaprasana*, the giving of rice to the child for the first time, and the *chuda-carana*, the tonsure ceremony, at the appropriate times.³³⁸

³³⁴ Lutchmeputti's natural father Chava Naidama confirmed Rungama's story in his testimony in the Provincial court. Vassareddy XII p.431

³³⁵ Vassareddy XII p.360

³³⁶ Vassareddy XI p.12

³³⁷ Vassareddy XII p.430

³³⁸ 'Chuda-carana,- The ceremony of tonsure, performed in the second or third, or no later than fifth, year after birth, and consisting in cutting off the hair, except one lock, called the *chuda*, in the middle of the crown. This ceremony

Rungama furthermore claimed that Jaganadha had bestowed the zamindar honours on him, in which he was designated as the heir to the zamindary. Jaganadha had communicated this to his friends, other zamindars and the district collectors. On a visit to the collector of Guntur Mr. Charles Robert, Jaganadha had brought Lutchmeputty and introduced him as his adopted son and heir. This was according to Rungama, and the collector, communicated to the Court of Wards in Mr. Roberts's report of March 25th 1825, and this provided the most important evidence for Rungama's claim.³³⁹

When Jaganadha realized that he was approaching death, he supposedly wanted to ensure that his adopted son would be his heir. He thereby executed a will on the 20th of February where he expressed that Lutchmeputty should '...succeed to his whole estate and debts, agreeably to Hindu law and his own design.'³⁴⁰ He continued by stating that Rungama should act on behalf of their son until Lutchmeputty reached maturity. She should receive 2000 rupees each month of the estate's income to cover her charitable expenses. Furthermore, the will stated that the allowance of 350 rupees a month that had been awarded to Atchama in the Provincial court, but that not anything more should be awarded to her. According to Rungama:

The Courts passed their Decrees, awarding to her (first Defendant) a separate maintenance of 350 rupees monthly during her whole life; but as my husband did not consent to pay her even that allowance, he continued to make Appeals to your Court. Therefore, to say that my husband (who was thus disposed) had authorized her in writing to inherit his whole estate is totally unworthy of credit. Besides this, she had not the courage of even coming to Amravaty until he was actually dead.³⁴¹

Furthermore, Rungama was to continue the cases pending in court on behalf of Lutchmeputty Naidoo. Jaganadha gave Rungama one copy of the will. He had three more copies made; one for the collector of Masulipatam and another for the collector of Guntur. A third copy was written for Tirmul Row, Jaganadha's pleader in the Sudder Adawlut court. They trusted the task of sending the documents with the head manager of the estate Puttory Caly Doss, the third defendant in the suit. According to Rungama, he told Jaganadha and Rungama that he had sent the letters when he in fact had not. In the following days, Jaganadha's condition worsened, and he lost the use of his limbs and his senses. At nine o'clock in the morning 28th of February, Jaganadha supposedly drew his last breath. During Jaganadha's funeral, the appropriate ceremonies were conducted by a servant in the name of the son of the deceased, Lutchmeputty Naidoo according to Rungama.³⁴²

is generally held to determine the family of the child; so that a boy cannot be adopted after it has been performed in the family of his natural parents.' Vassareddy Glossary p.4

³³⁹ Vassareddy XII p.360

³⁴⁰ Vassareddy XII p.394

³⁴¹ Vassareddy XII p.361

³⁴² Vassareddy XII p.361

After Jaganadha's death, Atchama came to the fort and was according to Rungama allowed entrance. The next day Ramanadha also came to the fort. Rungama was at first reluctant to let Ramanadha into the fort since she considered him to be an enemy of her husband. However, Caly Doss convinced her that Ramanadha, who was married to Rungama's younger sister, came to the fort to console her. '...having thus persuaded me by many ways, he made him come into my fort.'³⁴³

In the following days, Ramanadha and Caly Doss both gave the impression of taking care of the grieving widow. They told Rungama that there were conspirators that were after the estate and recommended her, because of the state she was in, to entrust the practical management of the estate with Caly Doss.

I was absorbed in grief at the time my husband died, and the third Defendant, at that juncture, came and said to me, "that there are different conspirators endeavouring to molest the transactions at this critical juncture, and that if full authority were conferred on him regarding the whole of our affairs, he would with care and attention manage the same so that they may not be injured." He having thus assured me, I, trusting those words, conferred full authority on him respecting all affairs, and directed all of our servants to obey his orders.³⁴⁴

Ramanadha and Caly Doss also informed Rungama that the death of Jaganadha and Lutchmeputty's rights would have to be communicated to the authorities. In order to free Rungama from the burden of the administrative work, they supposedly had Rungama sign several blank papers with the intention of using them to report the said circumstances to the authorities. After some time however, Rungama was supposedly told by servants at the fort that the two were not conducting business in accordance to what they had told her. She realized that the papers had been used for other purposes. The final straw was supposedly when she was informed about the suit between Ramanadha and Atchama, and the fact that Ramanadha had claimed the estate for himself without any reference to Lutchmeputty. Rungama confronted Ramanadha and Caly Doss with the information, and they rejected having conspired against her. Supposedly, Ramanadha was afraid that the Court of Wards would take charge of the property during the twelve remaining years of Lutchmeputty's minority. They feared that Lutchmeputty would have troubles getting the property back after such a long time, fearing that the ancestral property would then be lost.

Ramanadha and Caly Doss presented Rungama with a proposition that would solve these problems. Ramanadha would act as manager for the remaining twelve years in the exchange for 24.000 rupees a year. This would be continued throughout his life. When Lutchmeputty turned eighteen, Ramanadha would hand over the management to him. A contract stating these circumstances was

³⁴³ Vassareddy XII p.361

³⁴⁴ Vassareddy XII p.361

executed, and Rungama trusted their sincerity on the matter.³⁴⁵

However, Rungama discovered that they had deceived her, and in February 1826 she left Amarvaty with her adopted son. She travelled to neighbouring Masulipatam with the intention of filing a suit. She was however prohibited by the defendants, who supposedly followed her there. Ramanadha and Caly Doss then proposed to Rungama that they could settle the matter outside the court room. When Rungama refused, Ramanadha used his influences to make sure that no persons would lend her money to file the suit. Rungama explained the situation in the following words:

Owing to the second and third Defendants having by their conduct, as stated above, deceived me, not only the right of my adopted son was prevented from reaching public notice, but these Defendants were able to make away the property. The first Defendant, but pretending there is no son to my husband, has thwarted the right of my adopted son, and has been the causelessly carrying on a suit, in order to get herself appointed heir. For these reasons I have preferred this complaint against these three Defendants.³⁴⁶

The opposition to Rungama's story

Not many in the Provincial court appeared to believe Rungama's story. Her case was however admitted because the Judges established that even though they did not find Rungama's story credible, in the event that the adoption of Lutchmeputty was proved, his right as the heir of Jaganadha would be superior to the claims of both Ramanadha and Atchama. Atchama opposed that Rungama's suit should be admitted but when it was, she argued that the adoption was an invention and that the other two defendants were conspiring with Rungama against her:

Whereupon, the Plaintiff, finding her above efforts to be ineffectual [she had supposedly conspired with Ramanadha to put him in charge], determined to expose me to trouble by any other means; so she, in direct opposition to the acts done by her lately with her free will, and contrary to every precedent, law, and local custom, gave the name "Vassareddy Lutchmeputty Naidoo" to the boy name "Chava Soobiah" son of Chava Naidama, and pretending that the said boy was adopted by my husband, and that she is adoptive mother and guardian; and resting this plea on a report which the collector of Masulipatam had, through mistake, made to the Board of Revenue, after the demise of my husband, has now lodged this Complaint, including the second and third Defendants, who are still in her interest in private. Your Court will, from the face of the said Complaint, be easily convinced that it is quite false and preposterous.³⁴⁷

Atchama would naturally oppose the adoption which was a grave threat to her status as Jaganadha's heir. She claimed that if Jaganadha would have desired to adopt a boy he would doubtlessly have performed an adoption that would not be questioned in any court. Jaganadha had experienced this

³⁴⁵ Vassareddy XII p.363

³⁴⁶ Vassareddy XII p.364

³⁴⁷ Vassareddy XII p.367

first hand knowledge of the court system. According to Atchama, Jaganadha would never adopt a boy of Lutchmeputty's background, particularly as she claimed that there were several suitable boys within the Vassareddy family. Atchama furthermore told the court that the right to adopt was not vested in the junior wife and that Jaganadha thus granted that right to her, so she could adopt a suitable boy after his death.³⁴⁸ Atchama appealed to the Provincial court that they would recognize that the adoption of Lutchmeputty was an attempt to deprive her of her right to inherit Jaganadha.

Ramanadha and Caly Doss shared the same objections to Rungama's story. They claimed that there had been no conflict between Ramanadha and Rungama until after she had left for Masulipatam. According to Ramanadha, Rungama was well aware that Jaganadha had recognized Ramanadha as his heir two days before he died on the 26th of February 1825. She had supposedly been present when Jaganadha wrote the will favouring Ramanadha, and was trusted with the original. After the will was written, Rungama supposedly wrote and sent a note to Ramanadha stating that Jaganadha had left the estate for him and that he should immediately come to Amarvaty to take charge of his estate. She also sent copies of the said will to the collectors in Guntur and Masulipatam. Ramanadha reached Amarvaty on March 1st and assumed management of the estate in compliance with Rungama who voluntarily put Ramanadha in possession.³⁴⁹ The conflict did not appear until Rungama had received the bad advice from somebody in Masulipatam to file a suit claiming the whole estate after her husband. This was supposedly the first time Ramanadha heard of Lutchmeputty, a boy he claimed he had never seen before. He thus argued that the absurd story of the alleged conspiracy in itself proved the unreliability of Rungama's story:

The Plaintiff invented many extraordinary stories; but I neither held such conversations with her, nor passed any kind of agreement to her. There is nothing more extraordinary than the assertions of the Plaintiff, that I who, after my brother, am the sole heir to the whole estate, both real and personal, left by my late father, have wilfully executed to the Plaintiff an agreement paper, excluding myself from the hereditary right of my zamindary, which yields yearly about 9,00,000 lacks of rupees, setting forth, "That I do hereby agree to conduct the affairs of the zamindary, as manager on behalf of Chava Lutchmeputty, holding myself answerable both for such profit and loss as may arise from the whole zemindary until twelve years, on condition to receive from the Plaintiff a monthly allowance of rupees 2,000 for my trouble." Should the assertion of the Plaintiff in this number be true, there would be no reason for the Plaintiff to retain the said document in her possession, without communicating it either to the superior authority, or to any other person whatever, until thirteen months elapsed since the date on which the Plaintiff was acquainted with the circumstances of my having, in conjunction with the third Defendant, deceived her.³⁵⁰

The eighteen months that elapsed from Jaganadha's death until Rungama presented her claim to the Provincial court was the main argument that ensured that none of the judges believed her story to be

³⁴⁸ Vassareddy X p.303

³⁴⁹ Vassareddy XII p.374

³⁵⁰ Vassareddy XII p.376

true. The judges did not even attempt to hide their opinions as they reluctantly accepted Rungama's suit:

In the event of the adoption not being proved, the second point falls to the ground. It is very difficult to understand or believe that Rungama could have been so imbecile and blind as not to have known what was doing; but supposing that she knew and partook, as it is alleged she did, and that she was a party, and even if it should appear that she entered into the conspiracy to compromise the rights of Lutchmeputty Naidoo, and to sacrifice them for the benefit of Ramanadha Baboo and herself, it does not follow that the boy's rights can suffer if the adoption did actually and lawfully take place.³⁵¹

Rungama's suit was consequently accepted in the Northern Division of the Provincial court. However, Rungama was under the impression that the Judges had decided on the matter from the onset of the suit. She claimed that the judges openly discriminated her as they refused to accept most of her evidence and did not allow for her witnesses to testify. So when the Provincial court pronounced their decree dismissing Rungama's claim, she filed an appeal to the Sudder Court where she prayed that the case should be retried on the grounds of the judges discriminatory behaviour. The Sudder Adawlut accepted her appeal and decided that the judges had not reviewed the relevant evidence presented by Rungama. The Sudder Adawlut thus ordered the Provincial court to re-admit the case and determine the cause *de novo*.³⁵² Rungama thus got a second chance to convince the judges of her and Lutchmeputty's rights, but it was to no avail. The case was dismissed by the Provincial court a second time and Rungama appealed the decision to the Sudder Adawlut on the 6th of April 1831.³⁵³

Ideological expressions

In the Sudder Adawlut court, Rungama's pleader answered the critique against her claim in the following manner:

The second reason for the conclusion of the Provincial court with regard to the adoption is its alleged improbability. These Appellants, however, humbly submit that so far from there being any improbability that Jaganadha would be disposed to take such a step, every circumstance appears to render it probable and reasonable, inasmuch as Jaganadha had been married many years, and had no issue by either wife, that there was no probability of issue, and from his extraordinary corpulence he was not likely to live to an advanced age; Jaganadha was therefore in that situation in which, according to the religion of the Hindus, it became his duty to avoid the consequences of dying childless. It is, moreover, probable in the highest degree, that he would take the step best calculated to avoid such questions as have now arisen with respect to the inheritance of his vast property, and which would most effectually preclude that inheritance from devolving, by means of any misapprehension of law or fact, upon either of the Respondents, Atchama or Ramanadha, towards both of whom it is perfectly evident, from

³⁵¹ Vassareddy III p.30

³⁵² See the quotes on this matter in the Introduction.

³⁵³ Vassareddy II p.6

the records of the Court, that up to the last day of his life he continued in a state of decided hostility.³⁵⁴

Rungama thus dismissed the stories of Ramanadha and Atchama as desperate attempts to convince the court of their rights, although it had supposedly been proven that Jaganadha considered them both as enemies. Jaganadha adopted Lutchmeputti to secure Rungama and the estate's future. Similarly, Rungama argued that her claim was completely selfless and that she filed the suit merely out of a necessity to protect her son and the honour of her late husband. Rungama argued that she could have claimed the right to inherit Jaganadha even if she had not adopted a son with Jaganadha.³⁵⁵ She claimed that this would have saved her much trouble, but that she filed the suit to honour the wishes of her husband. Furthermore she stressed that it was important that Lutchmeputti's adoption was confirmed:

If such an adopted son is not made heir to the estate of your Appellant's husband, there will be an entire stop to the performance of [...] the obsequies of you Appellant's husband and of herself after the death as well of their ancestors, because those ceremonies are considered as the means of securing to them everlasting felicity. Thus your Appellant's husband, as well as her father-in-law, who acquired large estates and fame, will be deprived of everlasting felicity, and the celebrity of your Appellant's husband's family will not continue.³⁵⁶

Rungama argued in court as an ideal wife who had the best interest of her son, late husband and the families' honour in mind. Her testimony gave the impression that she had acted as a faithful and devoted wife throughout her husband's life, supposedly unlike the senior wife Atchama. Rungama seemingly continued to honour her obligations towards her husband, even after his death. In the story of the alleged conspiracy towards her, Rungama argued that she was struck by sorrow that she was unable to conduct the management of the estate properly. Caly Doss was her nearest male support and she argued to the court that she put her faith in him and that he betrayed that trust by deceiving her. Through this testimony, Rungama gave the impression that she was lost without her husband and that she needed the firm hand of another man in order to function. Her reaction would be in accordance to the female role of colonial sociology. She furthermore argued that the seclusion she as a royal female lived under enabled the two defendants to succeed with their plan to put Ramanadha in management. Such an argument would also be in accordance with the colonial concept of the separate spheres that restrained the participation of royal women in public life.

However, the circumstances around Rungama and the defendant's testimonies suggest that

³⁵⁴ Vassareddy I p.15

³⁵⁵ Vassareddy XI p.16

³⁵⁶ Vassareddy XI p.29

Rungama was not as powerless and restricted as she gave the impression off. When Rungama and Jaganadha supposedly wanted to adopt Lutchmeputti, Rungama made the request through a letter in her own name. In the many discussions regarding adoption in the court files, the law books quoted always declared that an adoption was the act of a man. According to the orthodox codes applied in the case, the wife's consent and participation in an adoption was desirable, but not necessary. Even when a wife wished to adopt a son after the death of her husband, a documented written permission from the husband was required. Such an adoption was thus performed in the name of the late husband with the intention of securing the '...everlasting felicity' of the late husband. Some thirty years earlier, the same procedure was apparently followed when Vencatadry Naidoo and his wife adopted Jaganadha. According to the proceedings, Yerema initiated the adoption of Jaganadha, convinced her husband, and made the request to Jaganadha's natural father.³⁵⁷ No parties in the suit denied or argued against that these adoptions had been initiated by the royal wives. Considering all the defendants tried to dismiss the adoption of Lutchmeputti Naidoo, this suggests that this was appropriate behaviour, or even traditionally the task of the zamindar's wife.

Furthermore, Rungama's testimony reveals that she was considered as the authority at Amarvaty after her husband's demise. Caly Doss supposedly had to convince Rungama to let Ramanadha into the fort also convinced her to let him in charge of the servants. Although it is recognized that the zamindar's wife was in charge of the household, Rungama's power appears to have extended beyond the domestic sphere. All the defendants confirm that Rungama was in charge of the gate at the fort and that she decided who was allowed entrance. Furthermore, she told the Provincial court that Caly Doss was to manage the estate according to her commands. In compliance with the testimony of several servants, this suggests that the servants at Amarvaty were not unfamiliar with taking orders from the young Rungama. Although Rungama attempted to present herself as an obedient and naive wife, her testimony indicate that she might have enjoyed more than merely informal power in the management of her husband's vast zamindary.

Rungama also claimed that the two defendants were able to deceive her because she, as a chaste wife, remained within the zenana while she was mourning her loss. However, in Rungama's account of the circumstances around the adoption of Lutchmeputti, Rungama stated that she and Jaganadha were both at other places than Amarvaty before they met in Lutchmeputti's natural village. She did not provide the details of where she actually was, but it appeared from the

³⁵⁷ Vassareddy VII p.217

testimony that she and Jaganadha were at separate locations, and had been travelling separately for a number of days. None of the opposing parties commented upon this other than denying the truthfulness of Rungama's account. A zamindary woman would not travel without a large retinue, and would be careful not to appear in public on her travels.³⁵⁸ But still this account suggests that it was considered appropriate for a young zamindar's wife to travel without her husband.

Again it appears as if Rungama's testimony expressed conflicting solidarities. She continued to express her everlasting loyalty to her husband and his wishes, although her deceased husband's brother would probably be considered as the appropriate male authority for the childless widow.³⁵⁹ Rungama trusted Caly Doss who her husband had trusted for many years.

Furthermore, she also expressed her loyalty to her alleged adopted son, claiming that it would have been easier for her to claim the estate in her own right. By showing loyalty to her adopted son she simultaneously displayed loyalty to her deceased husband's decisions. By doing this, Rungama also expressed that she conducted herself in accordance with the colonial sociology of women applied in the courtroom. She also displayed her loyalty to the Anglo-Indian court as she argued for the family's status as Sudras. This was necessary in order for Lutchmepetty's adoption to be recognized in court.

Atchama similarly expressed her loyalty to her late husband as she claimed that she filed her suit to honour her husband's last wishes. She claimed her right because of her status as senior wife, a status that the court had already acknowledged as undamaged. Atchama did however also utter critique as she claimed that the court did not understand the Vassareddy family's rank and status. Although the family were undeniably Sudras and were judged accordingly in the Anglo-Indian court, Atchama claimed that the family was of a higher rank than Sudras according to local practice. The goal was that Lutchmepetty should be judged as an inappropriate candidate for adoption. If this was recognized, then establishing the factual events of the alleged adoption would be meaningless.

Rungama's newfound status as mother served the purpose of lifting her from the degrading state of widowhood while simultaneously enhancing her chances of inheriting the estate after her husband. Atchama claimed that an adoption should be conducted with the senior wife and claimed that Jaganadha gave her permission to adopt a boy after his death. One of the great

³⁵⁸ I build this perception mainly on the accounts of the Hyderabad women's travels described by Dalrymple, William, 2002

³⁵⁹ See page 56

mysteries of the Vassareddy case is why Atchama never did.

Epilogue

Rungama appealed the decision of the Sudder Adawlut in Madras to the Judicial Committee of the Privy Council 17th October 1832 in a 55 page long appeal petition.³⁶⁰ 14 years later, the case was accepted and heard before the Court of the Judicial Committee of the Privy Council in London. This court changed many of the decisions made by the Courts in India. Most importantly, they first decided that Ramanadha's adoption was not considered legal and valid. This Court did on the other hand decide that the adoption of Lutchmeputty should be considered valid. The judges in the Privy Council argued that they were more accustomed to reviewing evidence and decided that enough evidence had been presented in the case of the alleged adoption. Particularly the statement of the Collector of Guntur, Mr. Roberts, was considered as sufficient evidence to prove Lutchmeputty's adoption.³⁶¹ The case was once again appealed by Ramanadha and was finally decided in 1852, with the same result. After the Courts in India had all labelled Rungama's claim as preposterous and false, the adoption of Lutchmeputty was finally recognized.

The victory must have had a bitter taste for the now adult Lutchmeputty. After 30 years of litigation, the estate was ruined. The Kistna District Manual described that already two years after the death of Vencatadry; the copper plates were torn off from the roof at Amarvaty to finance the growing legal expenses.³⁶² The enormous costs involved in litigation ruined many zamindaries. The Maharaja of Bobbili warned his readers about litigation:

Litigation now-a-days is a very ruinous proceeding. Some Hindus assert that it is, in another sense, as disastrous as wars. But in fact it is more disastrous. In battles, the conqueror, though his expenditure may be equal to that of his enemy, annexes the enemy's country, or secures certain commercial privileges. But in litigation, except in a very few instances, the winner gets nothing. Both parties are generally losers.³⁶³

The Maharaja of Bobbili's quote above had an illustration to prove his point. In this illustration, litigation is presented as a cow. While the plaintiff is pulling the cow's horns, the defendant is trying to make the cow move by pulling its tail. While they are busy with this futile operation, the two vakils are happily milking the cow. This served to illustrate that the only winners in this suits were the pleaders and vakils. During the Vassareddy case, the British judges implied several times that they believed that the pleaders were the true initiators of the suit. One pleader was at one point

³⁶⁰ Vassareddy XI p.1-55

³⁶¹ British Library: E.F.Moore 1846-1850, p.111-112

³⁶² Kistna District Manual, p. 312

³⁶³ Maharaja of Bobbili, 1905 p. 194

even fined and removed from the case for presenting irrelevant evidence to the court.³⁶⁴ One judge expressed his opinion about this pleader:

It will appear that the Decree has been enlarged, by the mere repetition of the pleadings of the parties in the first part thereof [...] Thus he did, both in order to make it appear to common beholders, or readers of the said Decree, that in the pleadings of the opposite parties there are pleas sufficient to dismiss the suit [...] in the event of the reader, however intelligent he may be, being vexed with perusing the useless circumstances contained in the first part of such a long Decree, so that he might be induced to pay little attention to the unsupported grounds recorded in the last part of the said Decree.³⁶⁵

The longer a suit would last, the larger the fee involved for the pleader would become. Another great cost was the production of false evidence and bribes for witnesses. The financial implications of such suits were recognised by the Company administrators among who was the noted Thomas Munro who expressed in a letter that these suits generally left the land-holding families in large debts, only to the advantage growing number of professional money-lenders.³⁶⁶ Price has argued that the large amounts of cash needed to finance litigation were raised on the expense of other important aspects of estate-management, like maintenance of irrigation works and general management.³⁶⁷ This doubtlessly had a negative effect upon the productivity and profit of the estates land.

This was most certainly the case for the Vassareddy estate. It appears that the famine of 1832 served as the final blow to the Vassareddy zamindary's ability to pay the demanded revenue to the colonial administration. The ancestral estate that Lutchmeputty was appointed as heir to had been attached by the government in 1832 until Ramanadha had voluntarily handed over the management permanently a few years later. As a result, the newly appointed zamindar of the Vassareddy family estate was awarded a meagre 1000 rupees a year in annual maintenance from the Court of Wards.³⁶⁸

³⁶⁴ Vassareddy XII p.944, the pleader Venalakunty Narasana supposedly had been employed by several members of the family before he advised Rungama to file this suit.

³⁶⁵ Vassareddy XII p. 821

³⁶⁶ Pamela Price, 'Ideology and Ethnicity under British Imperial Rule: 'Brahmans', Lawyers and Kin-Caste Rules in Madras Presidency', *Modern Asia Studies*, Vol. 23, No.1 1989 p.173. Price has also written about the increased significance of cash and the consequently growing wealth of lawyers and money lenders in *Kingship and Political Practice...* 1996

³⁶⁷ Pamela Price, 1989 p.173

³⁶⁸ Kistna Distric Manual p.313

Conclusion:

In Part II the different conflicts of the Vassareddy succession dispute were presented. I have illustrated the complexity of the case and that it was not simply a question about the adoption of Ramanadha as the Moore report gave the impression off. Part I was a structural approach to womanhood in early colonial India. In this section I presented the development of colonial sociology with a particular focus on women. Colonial sociology of women applied in the colonial courtrooms had only one appropriate female role; the chaste wife. According to this view a woman's actions always had the sole purpose of benefiting her husband and children. Consequently, a woman's subordination to her husband provided the capacity for acting. The condition was always that her actions should profit the wellbeing of her family. The state of acting was strictly regulated so a woman could overcome her natural inclination to act against the prescribed ideal. The following chapter presented some alternative approaches to south Indian womanhood. The Telugu epics and poetry expressed a more localized ideological view which allowed for a greater variety of female characters than the Sanskrit epics of the orthodox Hindu tradition. This does not imply that orthodox ideals expressed in colonial sociology of women were completely foreign to south Indian elite women. Brahman rituals were part of the ritual activity of the Vassareddy zamindary, for example at the adoption ceremonies. However, the orthodox colonial sociology is insufficient to explain the agency displayed by the Vassareddy women.

In Part II, I first presented a background history of the Vassareddy family and estate before turning to the case study of the succession dispute in the Vassareddy family that followed the death of renowned zamindar Vencatadry Naidoo. The Vassareddy women appeared at first sight as chaste and devoted wives in accordance with colonial sociology of women. However, the testimonies of the different parties in the suit together suggest that these women enjoyed greater independence than colonial sociology of women allowed for and that this behaviour was considered appropriate. Furthermore, both these women claimed to live in accordance with the ideals of colonial sociology applied in the local courts. However, their actions revealed that this was not always the case. Through identifying the different solidarities, it appears that Atchama and Rungama expressed their solidarity with the Anglo-Indian court and the colonial sociology it utilized as long as it served their cause. They appealed to the paternalistic social structures inherent in the colonial sociology and portrayed themselves as quite naïve and gullible.

However, pragmatic considerations made these women express critique towards the Anglo-Indian

courts and the ideals of colonial sociology applied when deciding cases. Atchama for once claimed her position as senior wife, a position that had special recognition within Hindu law. But orthodox Hinduism also expressed that a wife who was disobedient to her husband would lose all her marital rights. Nevertheless, Atchama appealed to the Anglo-Indian courts to be recognized as senior wife despite that she had not seen her husband during the last six years of his life. Similarly, Rungama made a significant effort to portray herself as a chaste wife in accordance with ideals of colonial sociology of women. However, she appealed to the courts to be recognized as senior wife despite that Atchama held that status as a result of a religiously sanctioned ritual at their wedding ceremony. Rungama also tried to taint Atchama as dishonourable because she had left Amarvaty and supposedly stayed at several different locations. One detail that was not discussed during the case was that Rungama supposedly travelled independently before she and Jaganadha met at the home village of Lutchmepetty's natural family. Rungama did not provide the court with a reason why she was travelling without her husband, nor was this questioned by the opposing parties. In a case where details could be discussed in great length, the lack of attention given to Rungama's independent travel suggests that her rival litigant believed that other issues were more important to argue. Consequently, such behaviour was not considered remarkably indecent.

This may suggest something similar to what Roghair argued about the ideological expressions and the female characters in the 'Epic of Palnadu'. Roghair argued that these different characters suggested a selective rather than complete integration of Brahmanical roles for women.³⁶⁹ This appears as a fitting description on the Vassareddy case, as Rungama and Atchama utilized the female ideals inherent in the colonial sociology of women according to pragmatic considerations. Without arguing that Rungama and Atchama took a conscious strategy, I suggest that these zamindari women portrayed themselves according to the orthodox ideal as long as it served their purpose. However, as soon as their narrative or claim was in opposition to colonial sociology, these zamindari women turned to different strategies. They thus applied a selective integration of orthodox values.

The localized view of women discussed in the third chapter in Part I appear more suitable to explain the agency displayed by the Vassareddy women. In the epics from Telugu and Tamil country, the female characters displayed political agency and independent action without compromising their honour and virtues. Even the chaste wives were far from obedient to their husbands or male kin as they followed their own conviction in order to achieve their goals. Similarly, Rungama and

³⁶⁹ Roghair 1982, p.130

Atchama both initiated action themselves, and their objectives were not always consistent with the best interest of their husband. The capacity to act could come from their subordination to their husband, but sometimes their capacity to initiate action originated in more individual considerations. The best example was probably when Atchama left Amarvaty. This decision could be a result of the supposed threat to her life, because of her feeling of inferiority to Rungama or because of the threat to her personal honour. Regardless, the condition and state of Atchama's actions after she left Amarvaty was certainly not in accordance with orthodox regulations, nor were they intended to serve the interest of her husband.

Also, the dissonance between the women's testimony and what we can ascertain of the narrative events suggests that the ideological restrictions on appropriate behaviour for zamindary women were more relaxed in an early 19th century zamindary than the colonial sociology of women allowed for. I have already discussed the events subsequent to Jaganadha's death and how the different narratives all suggest that the servants at the fort considered Rungama as manager. Furthermore, according to the Anglo-Indian law, adoption was for the benefit of the husband and did not require the participation of a wife. A wife however, would need a written permission from her husband in order to make a lawful adoption. However, the adoptions of both Jaganadha and Lutchmeputti were initiated by the wife of the Vassareddy zamindar, but more importantly the formal requests were presented by these women in their own name.

In conclusion, the study of the Vassareddy case suggests that the elite women of this early 19th century zamindary estate enjoyed a level of freedom and opportunities for political agency within the framework of appropriate female behaviour.

Why then did the zamindary women adapt to the colonial sociology of women applied in the Anglo-Indian court? This is a question beyond the scope of this thesis, but it is tempting to present a few suggestions. The Anglo-Indian court applied colonial sociology of women universally although this implied a narrow definition of female agency which was largely alien to the zamindary women of early 19th century Telugu country. The uncertainty and unpredictability of the decisions of the Anglo-Indian courts, illustrated by the proceedings in the Vassareddy case, suggests the accuracy of the 'battle metaphor' presented in the introductory chapter, and by the quote from the Maharaja of Bobbili in the Epilogue. Price argues that the battle in the Anglo-Indian courtroom represented a continuation of the competition for rank and honour central in the late pre-colonial royal court.³⁷⁰

³⁷⁰ Pamela Price, 'The "Popularity" of the Imperial Courts of Law: Three Views of the Anglo-Indian Legal Encounter'

This argument is developed further by Niels Brimnes in his article on the early development of the Mayor's Court in Madras in the late 18th century.³⁷¹ Brimnes argues that the Anglo-Indian judiciary system had to long been regarded as an alien invention imposed from above into the foreign environment of Indian civilization. He claims that this approach has overestimated the level on control the colonial administration had on the development of the Anglo-Indian judiciary system, and that this system represented a continuation of indigenous forms of dispute settlement. In accordance with both Price and Dirks, Brimnes claims that the Anglo-Indian courts could be, and was used to serve indigenous interests but that both colonial and indigenous interests would be altered through participation in the judiciary system.³⁷²

Colonial sociology served the purpose of legitimizing the colonial presence in India. Post-colonial research has attempted to do Indian colonial history justice by taking a different approach. This has frequently resulted in a victimization of Indian civilization and population; in the studies of minorities in general and women in particular. The focus on India as an inactive receiver, or even victim, of the colonial administration prohibits rather than enables our understanding the impact of colonialism in India. Guha and Raheja have both emphasized the value of a more nuanced approach to understanding the voices from the past. As Raheja argued in the quote in the chapter 'Wife', detaching the individual actors from what she terms 'the dichotomous modes of analysis' makes it easier to study what these voices are expressing without reproducing familiar colonial categorization.

An increasing number of scholars are conscious of the need for new categories. One example is the relatively young discipline of studies on the Indian family in the colonial context.³⁷³ This social category underwent changes during the colonial period. Several scholars now recognize that knowledge on the development of the Indian family is crucial if we are to achieve a fuller understanding about the impact of colonialism on the Indian population. One very recent publication dealing with the Indian family has, similarly to this thesis, drawn on documentation from the Anglo-Indian civil courts to demonstrate changes on the position of women and the socioeconomic role of the Hindu joint family.³⁷⁴ Only through many such case studies can we

in *European Expansion and Law- The Encounter of European and Indigenous Law in the 19th and 20th Century Africa and Asia*, W.J.Mommsen and J. A.De Moor (ed.), Berg Publishers, Oxford 1992 p. 198-9

³⁷¹ Niels Brimnes, 2003 p.514-8

³⁷² Niels Brimnes, 2003 p.517

³⁷³ Chatterjee, Indrani (ed.), *Unfamiliar Relations: Family and History in South Asia*, Permanent Black, Delhi 2004. It must be noted that Chatterjee argues that the term 'family' in itself is a colonial construction. See her introduction for a full discussion on the subject.

³⁷⁴ Mytheli Sreenivas, *Wives, Widows, and Concubines: The Conjugal Family Ideal in Colonial India*, Indiana

attempt to construct an alternative sociology of colonial India in general, and its impact on women's position and agency under the Company Raj more specifically.

University Press, Bloomington and Indianapolis 2008. Unfortunately, this book was released only a couple of weeks before this thesis was due. I got hold of the book as soon as it reached the University Library, but it was too late for me to read all of it and I was thus unable to incorporate potential relevant points in this thesis.

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