

## CHILDREN OF INTERRELIGIOUS MARRIED COUPLES

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### **Abstract**

This paper has established that inter-religious marriages in Kerala are gradually eradicating barriers to traditional socio-cultural norms and, hence promoting multiculturalism. The purpose of this research is to identify the causes of interreligious marriages in the context of Kerala and to analyze the experiences of children raised in these families. Adolescents with interreligious backgrounds between the ages of 13-19 were interviewed using qualitative research methods, specifically snowball sampling to establish their views. Some of the questions that emerged focused on reasons for inter-religious marriages, the cultural belonging of children, and their socialization in the family and society. The study reveals that urbanization, education, and changing perceptions towards inter-religious marriages are the factors influencing inter-religious marriages in Kerala. These children face a process of social integration and family functioning in the context of two religious affiliations and both have positive and negative effects. The study also reveals that there is a need to increase the level of acceptance of interfaith marriages in Kerala. Some of the recommendations are to encourage cultural acceptance and support structures for such families to enhance the positive development and coping mechanisms of children in inter-religious families. If Kerala were to adopt these suggestions, it would help in creating a society that is more accepting of interreligious families and the children that they raise.

**Keywords:** Interreligious marriages, Kerala, religious upbringing, cultural identity, familial dynamics

### **1. Introduction**

Marriage and religion are crucial societal institutions deeply intertwined with the concept of family. Their interdependence is evident in how violations or deviations from these norms can lead to discord and tension within communities and nations. Hence, these institutions are often regarded as sensitive. Religion significantly shapes an individual's life, profoundly influencing their daily existence.

### **Interreligious Marriages in India**

In countries like India, despite being a secular state where people coexist harmoniously regardless of caste or religion, marriage customs predominantly adhere to endogamy. Interreligious marriages, or unions between individuals of different faiths, face significant societal resistance. Most religions prohibit such unions to safeguard their purity, devotion, and traditions.

Interreligious marriages pose unique challenges as they challenge established norms and values by uniting individuals from different religious backgrounds. In India, where elders and extended family members typically arrange marriages, interreligious unions often occur without their consent, making

them seem deviant.

Such marriages can lead to serious social and relational issues, and couples may even face threats to their safety. Additionally, after overcoming initial obstacles, new challenges may arise, particularly regarding the religious identities of the spouses and their children.

### **Study Focus: Children in Kerala**

Interfaith marriages have become common in the state of Kerala where people accept the diversity of the society and culture (Kurien, 2016). These marriages, which cut across religion, do not only alter the conventional family models but also shape the childhood and personal development of children born in such marriages. These children's experiences of living in families where parents have different religions give them a special insight into cultural accommodation, self-identification, and assimilation in a multicultural society.

The purpose of this study is to understand the experiences and attitudes of children, who are born to interreligious married couples in Kerala. It explores the complicated relationships of these families and how they deal with religious, cultural, and social aspects. Specifically, the planned research on Hindu-Muslim, Muslim-Christian, and Hindu-Christian marriage patterns will identify the difficulties, achievements, and the development of individual subjectivities in various types of families.

### **Background of Study**

Religiously, Kerala is a state that has always been a melting pot of various communities of people of different religions and cultures (Menon, 2020). Today, there is a trend of interreligious marriages as compared to the past, this is due to factors including urbanization, education, and changing social demographic factors on religious diversity (Cherian, 2018). This trend also sheds light on the changing dynamics of family formations in Kerala in which couples are now selecting their partners based on individual compatibility rather than religion alone (Gupta & Menon, 2020).

### **Significance of the Study**

The relevance of this study is that it can help unveil the process of identity construction and cultural adaptation among the children of interfaith marriages in Kerala. Thus, the research seeks to add to the knowledge of how religious diversity influences family relationships and personal identity formation through the sharing of the participants' stories. Further, the findings may help in the development of social policies and interventions that are geared toward the support of families experiencing inter-religious relationships in Kerala and other regions (Kuruville, 2019).

### **Research Objectives**

- To examine the factors that lead to interreligious marriages in the socio-cultural setting of Kerala
- To explore the prospects and difficulties of children in inter-religious families in terms of cultural orientation
- To examine how kids from interreligious marriages are raised and the experiences they go through in their families and society
- To enable the researcher to make recommendations that could help improve the social awareness and acceptance of families in inter-religious marriages in Kerala

## **2. Review of Literature**

The primary concern in interreligious or interfaith marriages often revolves around the religious identity of the children born from such unions. Exploring existing literature provides insights into how the religious identity and well-being of children from religiously heterogeneous parents are addressed. Literature on interreligious marriages from the 1930s to 2020, such as Baber (1939) and Rosdiana and Bahtiar (2020), highlights that a significant portion of conflicts in mixed marriages stem from religious differences. These conflicts often revolve around the upbringing and training of children, particularly when parents hold strong religious convictions.

When parents attempt to mitigate their differences by prioritizing moral values over religious doctrine, it can lead to the development of double consciousness in children from these unions, as observed by Kurttekin (2019). This phenomenon may result in a hyphenated identity or syncretism, where children navigate and integrate aspects of both parents' religious traditions into their own identity.

Landis and Landis (1958) revealed that individuals who have been exposed to a particular faith, even if they are not actively interested in religion, often find it challenging to disregard their religious upbringing. Consequently, they may struggle to remain indifferent about the religious education of their children. While some may neglect to provide religious training in their faith to their children, they might still resent the idea of their children being raised in a contrasting faith.

This attitude can lead to conflicts between families in interreligious marriages, as differences in religious beliefs and practices are often deeply intertwined with personal identity and cultural heritage. Such conflicts may arise from a sense of attachment to one's religious tradition and a desire to maintain its continuity within the family.

The body of literature on interfaith and interreligious marriages consistently underscores the challenges faced by children raised in such unions, affecting their emotional, psychological, and social well-being. Research by Rosdiana and Bahtiar (2020), Hamdana (2018), Sherkat and Ellison (1999), and Gordon (1960) highlights how religious differences between parents can have adverse effects on children, impacting their emotional and psychological health. Additionally, societal attitudes towards interfaith families, as discussed by Ciocan (2016), can further exacerbate these challenges.

Studies indicate that children from interfaith marriages may experience difficulties in socialization compared to those from intrafaith marriages, as evidenced by research by Sewenet et al. (2017) and Bisin et al. (2004). Furthermore, Petts and Knoester (2007) found that children of religiously heterogeneous parents are more likely to engage in risky behaviours such as marijuana use and underage drinking compared to those from religiously homogeneous families.

Blood (1969) observed that children of mixed marriages exhibit delinquent behaviour at a rate significantly higher than those from unmixed unions, while Pothen (1974) described the phenomenon as a "split personality" and noted challenges in cultural adaptation and personality development. Kannan (1962) highlighted the burdens of inadequate identification, marginality, and societal outcasting experienced by children of mixed marriages.

Moreover, Colaner et al. (2014) found that children with religiously heterogamous parents may experience decreased relational well-being, solidarity, and satisfaction with their parents, particularly when religious differences are present.

Sydney and James (1967) conducted a study titled "Religious Identity and Church Attendance of Sons

of Religious Intermarriages," which revealed that offspring from Catholic-Protestant intermarriages typically adopt their mother's religion. Supporting this, Landis (1949) suggested, based on research among midwestern Americans, that children often follow their mother's religion, particularly daughters, as they are typically closer to their mother than their father. Similarly, Leiffer (1949) argued, based on an analysis of urban intermarriages, that "the mother is more influential than the denomination" in shaping the religious beliefs of children. Jenkins (2003) further discusses the dynamics of inter-community couples, noting that children's classification tends to align with patriarchal norms, where the father's identity is often given precedence over the mother's, even in cases involving matriarchal communities. This underscores the influence of parental roles and societal norms on the religious affiliation of offspring in interreligious marriages.

Rosidana and Bahtiar's (2020) study further explores patterns of parenting regarding religious education in interfaith marriages. They identified three common approaches: first, parents may choose to teach both religions simultaneously; second, they may reach a mutual understanding where one parent teaches their religion, and the child follows that parent's faith; and finally, there may be an agreement to have one child follow each parent's religion.

Parents play a crucial role in shaping their children's religious beliefs and practices (Denton and Culver, 2015). When parents fail to transmit religious values to their children, it can negatively impact the children's religious and emotional well-being (Petts and Knoester, 2007).

Previous research has also noted a trend of fewer children born to intermarried couples, particularly those in interreligious marriages. Kilpatrick (1955) suggested that conflicts over the religious upbringing of children may contribute to this phenomenon, leading couples to have fewer children. Similarly, Golden (1954) observed that the child production rates in exogamous marriages are typically lower. Bambawale (1982) conducted a study in India and found that, on average, couples in interreligious marriages have one or two children.

However, a pertinent question arises when interfaith couples have only one child. In such cases, the decision-making process regarding the child's religious upbringing becomes more complex. Couples may need to negotiate and compromise to determine the best approach that respects both parents' religious beliefs while ensuring the child's well-being and sense of identity. This might involve discussions about the child's exposure to both religions, exploring opportunities for religious education outside the home, or considering the child's preferences as they mature.

In patriarchal societies, where traditional gender roles often prioritize the authority and decision-making power of fathers, the question of which parent's religion the children will follow may carry additional weight. While following the mother's religion may be more accepted in matriarchal societies, in patriarchal societies, there may be greater pressure for children to follow the father's religion, as it aligns with the patriarchal structure.

The conflict between couples over the religious upbringing of their children, as highlighted in previous studies on interreligious marriages, reflects the deep-seated importance of religion within familial dynamics. Indeed, interreligious marriages can introduce significant challenges to marital and family stability, with potential implications for the well-being of children.

However, it is essential to acknowledge that the impact of interreligious marriages on children's well-being is complex and multifaceted. While some literature suggests potential negative effects, such as

social-psychological problems and conflicts within the family, further research is needed to provide a comprehensive understanding of these dynamics.

Given the scarcity of literature on interreligious marriages in the Indian context, particularly regarding the well-being of children from such unions, there is a critical need for more research in this area. Understanding the experiences and challenges faced by children in interreligious families can inform interventions and support systems to promote their well-being and resilience.

### **3. Methodology**

#### **4. Research Design and Approach**

To achieve the objective of this research, the study uses a qualitative research approach to understand the experiences of children from interreligious marriages. This approach allows for an in-depth exploration of personal experiences, providing rich qualitative data that can offer valuable insights into the complex dynamics of interreligious families.

#### **Study Area: Kerala's Diverse Religious Landscape**

The study focuses on three interreligious marriage patterns: Hindu-Muslim, Muslim-Christian, and Hindu-Christian within the state of Kerala, India.

#### **Sampling Method and Participant Recruitment**

The participants were recruited through the snowball sampling technique, initially targeting 34 children aged between 13-19 years. This method of participant recruitment was effective in reaching out to participants by asking initial contacts to refer other participants to the study, thereby increasing the pool of participants with different views. The sample consisted of 34 children: 14 from converted parents and 20 from non-converted parents, according to the identified patterns of interreligious marriages.

#### **Data Collection Techniques**

The primary data were obtained through the administration of structured questionnaires, which allowed the researchers to delve deeper into the participants' experiences. Other research techniques, such as observation, were used to support interview information, while case studies offered rich qualitative information. These methods provided a comprehensive understanding of the participant's experiences and the challenges they faced.

#### **Method of Data Analysis**

Data analysis was thematic, involving the identification and interpretation of patterns, themes, and meanings in the collected qualitative data. In the present study, the data collected from the primary interviews were triangulated with data collected from books, articles, journals, and reports to enhance the analysis and provide contextual validity to the findings.

### **Ethical Considerations**

- **Informed Consent:** The author obtained consent from participants to record their interviews using a voice recorder. While some participants consented to the recording, others declined.
- **Anonymity and Confidentiality:** To safeguard their identity, the author altered the names and

locations of the respondents.

- Participants were given the freedom to discontinue the interview if they encountered any discomfort from the questions asked. However, none of the participants reported feeling uncomfortable during the interviews.

## 5. Findings and Discussions

The primary focus of this study is to investigate the religious affiliation, socialization, and well-being of children in interfaith marriages. While interreligious marriages have long been present in society, their prevalence is increasing globally. Over the decades, researchers have conducted studies on religiously heterogeneous marriages and consistently found that religious differences between couples can lead to challenges in the lives of their children.

### Demographic Overview of Participants

#### Sibling Count Among Participants

Kerala has witnessed a notable decrease in fertility and birth rates since the mid-twentieth century, surpassing the national average decline in India (Kerala Development Report, 2021). Recent research indicates that the child population in Kerala is declining, with over 70% of women reportedly using various family planning methods, and 80% of them undergoing sterilization (Kerala Development Report). Consequently, in Kerala, the number of children in interreligious marriages is comparable to that in intra-religious marriages. Therefore, it is not accurate to assert that children in interreligious marriages in Kerala are fewer than those in intra-religious marriages. Among the 34 participants in this study, 27 reported having at least one sibling.

#### Experiences of Children from Converted Parents

In this study, the researcher observed a trend where conversion rates among females exceeded those among males in interreligious marriages in Kerala. Among the 14 children from converted parents examined, it was noted that the mothers had converted to their husbands' religion. This finding is significant in the context of a patriarchal society, where children typically adopt the religious identity of their fathers. Consequently, these children may face social pressure or familial expectations to adhere to their fathers' religious affiliation, despite their mothers' conversion. This underscores the complex dynamics of religious identity formation within familial and societal structures, highlighting the nuanced interplay between gender, tradition, and social norms in shaping individuals' religious trajectories.

#### Response 1: Hindu-Muslim Marriages

“My mother followed Hinduism while my father practised Islam. However, due to some familial issues, my mother, sister, and I were forced to convert to Islam. My sister and I converted to Islam at the ages of thirteen and ten respectively. Before our conversion, we didn't prioritize religious rituals and happily participated in various events, including temple festivals like the annual 'pooram' festival in our hometown. Initially, our father didn't mind our involvement in different religious activities. However, after converting to Islam, he forbade us from attending temples or taking part in non-Muslim practices, causing distress for both me and my mother. Before our conversion, my sister enjoyed wearing a 'bindi' and matching it with her clothes. But after converting, she reluctantly started wearing the 'hijab' despite not being interested. I remember buying 'bindi' for her before we converted.

After converting, we enrolled in a Madrasa to learn about Islam. However, we faced discrimination there, being derogatorily called 'puthiya Islam' ('new Islam') by our peers and others. The harassment became unbearable, leading us to leave the Madrasa after three months. Nevertheless, my grandfather arranged for an 'Ustad' to teach us about Islam at home. Despite these *efforts, I struggle to accept the restrictions imposed by Islam, finding them suffocating. If I had been born into this religion or converted earlier, maybe I wouldn't have faced these challenges.* Unfortunately, our conversion strained our relationships with our old friends, and we lost touch with my mother's family. I often wonder why I must bear the consequences of my parents' decision." (Mohammed 19)

### **Response 2: Muslim-Christian Marriages**

"My mother was born in a Muslim community, but she converted to Christianity, my father's religion when I was just two months old. She explained to me that her decision to convert was influenced by concerns about my future, particularly regarding my marriage and upbringing. With both my parents practising different religions, they feared it might complicate my life. Thus, my mother chose to embrace Christianity. Growing up, I haven't encountered any difficulties with this religion since it's all I've known, and both my parents follow it as well. However, a source of sadness for me is that I am disconnected from my mother's side of the family. I have never met my maternal grandparents or any of her relatives. This absence becomes particularly noticeable during vacations when my friends visit their parents' and grandparents' homes, while I have nowhere to go as we reside with my father's family, and his relatives are nearby.

I often urge my mother to reach out to her parents and siblings, but my father prohibits her from doing so. He recounts how my mother's relatives reacted violently when they discovered their relationship before marriage. Despite this, I wonder why I can't visit my maternal grandparents. I believe they would accept me if they saw me, as I haven't done anything wrong. After all, it was their daughter who decided to convert, so why should they reject me?" (Ann, 17)

### **Response 3: Hindu-Muslim Marriages**

"I was born into a Hindu family; hence I identify as Hindu. However, my mother, originally a Muslim, converted to Hinduism after her marriage. The decision to convert was prompted by my father's parents, who made it clear that they would only accept her into the family if she embraced Hinduism. Reflecting on her conversion, my mother has shared with me that while she didn't face significant initial challenges, she had to make numerous adjustments over time. One major difficulty she encountered was adapting to Hindu food habits. Coming from a Muslim background, she was unfamiliar with certain dietary customs. I vividly recall an incident where she prepared an omelette for me, only to be chastised by my paternal grandmother for violating the dietary restrictions during 'Mandala Kalam,' a period associated with the Sabarimala Ayyappa temple pilgrimage, which necessitates adherence to vegetarianism. Witnessing my mother's distress, I felt deeply saddened. Despite the challenges, my mother endeavoured to impart Islamic teachings to me, despite the disapproval of my father and his family.

I have formed close bonds with friends from the Muslim community, including my best friend. During Ramadan, I have even observed fasting, a practice my mother supported. She often advises me to learn

from her past experiences and avoid repeating any perceived 'mistakes' she made in life. On my way to school, I often encounter my maternal grandparents, who greet me warmly. However, their warmth is limited to these fleeting encounters; they have never extended an invitation to their home or engaged in conversation with me in the presence of others" (Raji, 17)

### **Experiences of Children from Non-Converted Parents**

#### **Response 1: Hindu-Muslim Marriages**

"My mom is Hindu and my dad is Muslim. As for me, I was raised in a family where both religions were equally represented. We enjoyed Diwali and Eid with equal vigour and our house was a house of both religions' traditions. My parents never compelled me to make a decision and stay away from the two, which made me learn about both sides. However, such a practice was not without its drawbacks and the children grew up with two different sets of values. In school, I also sometimes felt like I did not belong because I was not sure of the religion I belonged to since the two religions did not mix. People of both faiths used to question me as to why I was involved in the practices of the other religion. Nevertheless, I think that being a member of two religions has its advantages; I have become more tolerant and accepting of other people's beliefs. It has also made me understand that Hinduism and Islam are similar in many ways and not as different as people make them to be. My parents raised me as a Muslim and a Hindu at the same time, so I have to defend one religion to the followers of the other. This has made me appreciate my identity and although at times it can be somewhat difficult to understand, it has been a blessing in disguise in my life. " (Sachu, 14)

#### **Response 2: Muslim-Christian Marriages**

"My father is a Muslim and my mother is a Christian though she is very religious in her practice. They agreed to remain non-converting and instead, they agreed to honor each other's religion. Thus, I grew up in a context where I went to both church and mosque services. I equally enjoyed Christmas and Ramadan festivals and was taught the principles of both Islamic and Christian religions. This upbringing has been a blessing and a curse. On the one hand, I have a rather extensive experience in spiritual life and I think I have a rather diverse vision of religious issues. On the other hand, I sometimes find myself in a position of being in the middle of the two worlds. For example, during the holidays, I am forced to spend my time in church and at the same time in the mosque; this is very tiring. Nevertheless, the decision of my parents to stay with their religion has been very informative to me on issues of tolerance and living together. I have friends from both religions and always end up being the middle man between the two. This has helped me to be more adaptable and strong-willed; sometimes I have identity crises but I am glad to embrace the spiritual and cultural background that has made me who I am today. " (Jenni, 16)

#### **Response 3: Hindu-Christian Marriages**

"My father is Hindu, and my mother is Christian. They decided not to change, which made me have a rather diverse religious background during my childhood. In our house, we have a small temple where my father does Hindu Pooja and there is also a corner with a cross where my mother prays. This way I was able to be a part of both sets of religious practices and learn them as well. The advantages and disadvantages of growing up in two different religious backgrounds. One major strength is that I have



a good knowledge of both religions and respect for their doctrines and practices. This has made me more understanding and less critical of people of other religions. However, it also means that I often feel that I do not belong to either of the communities because I am not a part of them. I remember when I was young, one time during Christmas was very special. My father's side would come over and participate in the Christmas festivities, which at first was uncomfortable for them but eventually became a tradition. Also, my mother and I would celebrate Hindu events, which made me feel that I belonged to that side of the family. These experiences have helped in the creation of unity and respect in our family despite the differences in religion. In conclusion, the lessons learned in a Hindu-Christian home are tolerance and the ability to stand up for oneself and others no matter their beliefs. " (Shalu, 15)

### **Comparative Analysis: Converted vs. Non-Converted Parents**

#### **Religious Identity and Practice**

One of the issues that children of converted parents may experience is the issue of conversion by force, which is usually a major cause of stress and conflict. For instance, in the Hindu-Muslim marriage, the mother and children had to embrace Islam because of family influence. This imposition of a new religious identity can result in the loss of culturally enjoyed practices as in the case of the father who stopped the family from attending non-Muslim events after conversion. In addition, these children also experience prejudice in their new religious groups most of the time. Labelling by peers as 'puthiya Islam' or 'new Islam' is derogatory, and this makes the children feel out of place and rejected. On the other hand, children of non-converted parents are raised in an environment where both religions are respected. They can partake in the practices and rituals of both religions without having to make the switch. For instance, children in Hindu-Muslim marriages are taught both Diwali and Eid so that they can be able to understand both religions. This balanced exposure makes them to be more tolerant and understanding as they embrace the similarities and differences of the various religions. The fact that children grow up in such an environment results in a more diverse and tolerant family structure, thus making children more accepting and understanding of the world around them.

#### **Family and Social Dynamics**

Religious families of parents who have converted are usually not very harmonious. Conversion can cause serious family and social changes and even the family becomes isolated from the rest of the society. The Hindu-Muslim example shows that the forced conversion severed the relationship with the mother's family, and thus, social isolation. Such children may also lose cultural activities they used to practice like dancing during temple festivals. Such cultural differences can be painful and lead to continuous conflict with the forced religious persona. However, children of non-converted parents are usually better off maintaining a good relationship with both the parents' sides of the family. These children get to learn the aspects of unity and respect within the family despite the differences in religious practices such as Hindu-Christian marriages. This makes them able to practice in different religions hence making them grow up with a cultural background. The opportunity to celebrate both Christmas and Hindu events allows them to learn more about both religions and thus, gain more respect for the other culture, which is a great asset in terms of adaptability to different cultural environments.

### **Personal Development and Identity**

Coercion can also cause children of converted parents to experience an identity crisis. They may feel that they have lost their roots and they are in conflict with the religious orientation that has been forced upon them, and this may make them feel like outcasts. This process is usually associated with resentment and even resistance to the new religious standards. For instance, a girl who is forced to wear a hijab even though she has no interest is a form of resistance and struggle within the child. Further, conversion leads to the break with friends and relatives from the original religion and as such, the converts suffer from loneliness. On the other hand, the children of non-converted parents end up being in a position where they have two different religious affiliations, which gives them a wider view of religious and cultural matters. They are well conversant with both religions and practice the two festivals for instance Diwali and Eid. This double vulnerability enables them to accept other people's beliefs and develop good interpersonal relationships with people of other faiths. Consequently, they can become more hardy and tolerant and accept the two conflicting aspects of their bi-cultural background. This broader perspective helps them to be more open-minded and embrace the differences and similarities between the various religions. Therefore, the children of converted parents experience certain difficulties in the sphere of identity, cultural loss, and isolation, while the children of non-converted parents have more opportunities to receive a more inclusive, balanced, and enriched education. This upbringing promotes tolerance, flexibility, and a wider view of religious and cultural matters, which underlines the distinctiveness of the children's experience in these two types of families.

### **Emotional and Psychological Impact**

The psychological and emotional experience of children in interreligious marriages depends on the conversion status of the parents. For the children of converted parents, there is always a sense of resentment, confusion, and loss. For example, Mohammed who was raised by Hindu-Muslim parents, said he felt choked by the religious dogma and had issues with the transformation after embracing Islam. Such resentment towards the new religious identity may cause an internal conflict and the feeling of being an outsider in both the old and new religious groups. Ann, from a Muslim-Christian marriage, also expressed sorrow and confusion over not being able to see her maternal grandparents, which is the social cost of conversion. On the other hand, kids who grow up with parents who have not converted are likely to have a better emotional disposition. They like the opportunity to learn about different religions and it helps them to develop their spiritual experience and become more tolerant. These children can grow with strong spirits and the ability to cope with difficult situations as evidenced in the responses of children from Hindu-Muslim and Muslim-Christian marriages. They refer to their childhood as a 'gift' although they admit that it is accompanied by some drawbacks that make them embrace diversity as a virtue.

### **Social Integration and Peer Relationships**

Peer relations and social interaction are essential factors in the development of a child, and this is not exempted from the way parents raise their children concerning religion. Born into converted parents, children struggle in society because of the forced religious label. For instance, Mohammed and his sister faced discrimination at the Madrasa where they were called 'puthiya Islam.' Such social

exclusion makes the child feel like they do not belong and have a hard time making friends. On the other hand, children of non-converted parents are in a rather peculiar position of being in between different religious groups. They make friends irrespective of the religion they practice and act as middlemen in their circles. For example, a boy from a Muslim-Christian mixed marriage shared how he was able to become more flexible and accepting of other people's opinions given that he had friends from both sides and he often had to mediate between the two groups. Thus, the ability to adapt and function in various social contexts is a major strength for children who grew up in non-converted families.

### **Influence on Future Generations and Identity Formation**

The upbringing in interreligious marriages also shapes the children's attitudes towards their religion and the religion of future generations. The children of converts are likely to experience a more clear-cut and distinct religious identity due to the family's conversion. This rigidity can result in a desire for self-governance and self-organization in their religious activities. For instance, Mohammed narrated how he was constrained by the religion of Islam and how he wished he could make his own decisions concerning the religion he wanted to practice. However, children of non-converted parents are more flexible and open-minded in their religious affiliation. They value the opportunity to be introduced to different traditions and many of them try to apply this diversity in their own lives. One respondent who grew up in a Hindu-Christian mixed marriage explained that the fact that both Christmas and Hindu festivals were celebrated in the family made the family members respect each other. This way of thinking is likely to affect how they rear their children and create a society that embraces diversity in the future.

### **Impact on Cultural Practices and Heritage**

The effect on cultural practices and traditions is another important discovery. The children of converted parents are at a disadvantage when it comes to the cultural background of their original religion. For example, Mohammed and his sister had to stop celebrating Hindu festivals and other cultural activities after embracing Islam. This separation from their cultural heritage can result in a desire for the practices that they had to leave behind. On the other hand, children who have parents who did not convert can practice and even embrace both religions. This makes them have a better cultural background and they can practice more traditions as they are from two different cultures. For instance, a child from a Hindu-Christian marriage narrated how both families over time got involved in each other's festivals hence they are cultured similarly. Such ability to accept and acknowledge more than one cultural background is way better and offers a more diverse cultural experience. In conclusion, the experiences of children in inter-religious marriages differ depending on whether the parents converted to the other partner's religion or not. Such differences affect their psychological and emotional health, social adjustment, development of identity, and cultural activities. Children who are born in a particular religion due to the conversion of their parents are likely to face problems of imposed religious identity and cultural alienation while on the other hand children who are born in a particular religion but whose parents are not converted are likely to have a more tolerant, flexible and diverse outlook towards religious and cultural issues as they grow up.

### **Gender Dynamics Identified in Children of Interreligious Marriages**

### **Gender-Specific Experiences and Expectations**

This paper aims to establish that gender dynamics are central to the lives of children in interreligious marriages, especially about religious and cultural prescriptions and their impact on boys and girls. For instance, in the Hindu-Muslim interreligious marriage response, Mohammed's sister pointed out where the 'hijab' was mentioned after they embraced Islam. The fact that she has to wear the hijab even though she does not want to illustrates the gendered norms that are placed on girls about dressing and conduct. This imposition can cause feelings of constraint and discomfort, especially if it contradicts their past behaviour and their choice.

On the other hand, boys in similar situations might face different challenges, for instance, they are compelled to assume more active participation in religious activities or they are likely to be questioned on their compliance to religious standards. However, the narrative often focuses on the aspects that are more tangible and that affect the girls daily, for example, changes in dress codes.

### **Impact on Social Relationships and Cultural Practices**

Another area that is affected by gender is social relations and interactions as well as involvement in cultural practices. Girls might experience more restrictions and pressure concerning their participation in religious activities and social relationships. For instance, Mohammed's sister was prohibited from wearing 'bindi' and compelled to wear 'hijab' after conversion implying that girls are subjected to differential treatment and are scrutinized to adhere to religious and cultural expectations.

Boys, as well as the change of conversion and religious expectations, may feel different social pressures. They might be required to practice religious observance in public places for instance going for Madrasa, and may be called names or discriminated against like Mohammed was. However, the specific cultural and religious restrictions that are placed on girls are often more distinct and individual, affecting the subject's sense of self and freedom more directly.

### **Familial Roles and Responsibilities**

In families, gender determines the kind of work that is expected to be done by a child depending on whether he or she is a boy or a girl. Girls may be forced to be more obedient to religious and cultural practices in the home, for example, on issues to do with dressing or religious practices. Such an expectation may put pressure and expectations on the individual to meet the expectations of the family and society thus affecting their well-being and growth.

Girls, however, might be allowed to engage in some cultural activities that are prohibited to boys but are forced to adhere to the family's religious beliefs in public and communal domains. The differential expectations can mean that boys and girls experience religious and cultural identity in different ways within the same family, and have different difficulties and ways of dealing with them.

### **Influence of Maternal and Paternal Roles**

The responses also focus on the importance of maternal and paternal roles in the religious socialization of children. Daughters may struggle with the role of being a mother while having to convert and change the lifestyle of the family to a new religion. This can be especially true for daughters who are likely to identify with their mother and the challenges she goes through. For instance, Mohammed's mother struggled to change her behaviour to fit the new religion and hence affected her daughter's perception

of the change.

In many cases, fathers are seen to be more strict in matters concerning religion and its practices thus affecting both the male child, son, and the female child, daughter. The narratives suggest that fathers set higher religious standards, and demand compliance with religious rules and regulations, which makes the religious socialization process more strict and influences the children's dual ethnic and personal identity.

### **Coping Mechanisms and Resilience**

Gender also plays a role in the ways children cope and the strategies they use to deal with stress. Girls may adapt in a way that allows them to negotiate their religious and cultural roles in a less confrontational manner, thus they may try to meet the expectations of their culture while at the same time doing what they want to do and interacting in the manner they wish to interact. For instance, Mohammed's sister who refused to wear hijab and who used to enjoy putting on a 'bindi' shows a conflict of the imposed religious identity on the individual.

Boys, who are subjected to different expectations and social pressures, may build up the ability to cope with the situation either by fighting it or by changing the imposed rules. The conflict with the limitations of Islam and Mohammed's decision to distance himself from the Madrasa illustrate a more clear-cut confrontation with the imposed religious persona. These gender-specific coping mechanisms are an indication of the different ways children manage diverse religious and cultural environments. Therefore, it can be said that gender relations are the key factors that determine the quality of life of children in interreligious families. Girls are subjected to more rigid regulation and more conspicuous transformations in their everyday lives, thus affecting their self-organization. Boys too are not immune to such pressures but they experience them differently and are expected to be different. These dynamics affect social interactions, family roles, and ways of dealing with stress, which proves the complexity of gender-related experiences in interreligious families.

### **Positives and Challenges of Children Not Following Any Religion**

The children who are being raised in non-religious or secular homes, that is, the children who have no religion that they practice, go through a different set of positives and challenges that define their perspective, relationships, and growth.

#### ***Positives***

##### **1. Freedom of Belief and Exploration:**

The following are some of the benefits of not being religious; There is no restriction on the kind of beliefs and philosophies one can entertain. The children, who grow up in secular homes, are free to develop their ethical principles with the help of personal observations, reasoning, and values. It also enables them to build a perception about life that is not restricted by religious doctrines as they are free to learn from different sources.

##### **2. Open-mindedness and Tolerance:**

It is a known fact that being non-religious generally creates a culture of tolerance and acceptance of

other people's beliefs. The children who grow up in non-religious homes can accept other people's opinions and beliefs and, thus, are more tolerant. This tolerance is based on the understanding of cultural differences and the respect for the rights of individuals to freedom of choice in the sphere of beliefs and religion.

### **3. Intellectual Curiosity and Skepticism:**

The non-religious children are likely to be very intelligent and possess a critical thinking ability. It is expected of them to doubt, to look for rationality, and to be sceptical about the existing culture and values. This creates a culture of critical thinking based on reason and scientific evidence which leads to the enhancement of the analysis of moral and ethical issues from a secular perspective.

### **4. Freedom from Religious Conflicts:**

Children with no religion have fewer problems with religious self-identity and religious conflicts within themselves. They are free from possible conflicts of interest that may be occasioned by differences in religious practices in families or among the members of a particular community. This freedom enables them to be more inclined toward self-development, education, and relationship issues without the issue of religion.

### **5. Flexibility in Lifestyle Choices:**

The final strength is the freedom of choice in terms of lifestyles that non-religious children have. They can decide on the type of food to take, the clothes to wear, and whether or not to attend cultural or social functions, without reference to religious teachings. This freedom leads to independence and individuality allowing them to appreciate various facets of life without the need to follow religious practices and standards.

#### ***Challenges***

#### **1. Social Stigma and Misunderstanding**

The non-religious children may face social isolation or lack of understanding from the community since most of the societies are religious. They may be discriminated against or denied services due to prejudice about morality, spirituality, or the absence of morality. This may affect their social interaction, acceptance within their peer group, and interaction with other relatives who consider religion as an important aspect.

#### **2. Lack of Community Support:**

In cultures where religion is the main focus of people's lives, secular children and their families may not have the support of religious groups that can offer them social, emotional, and practical support. This lack of community integration results in loneliness and a lack of social support during important life events or a crisis.

#### **3. Moral Guidance and Identity Formation:**

The lack of religious education can create difficulties in the formation of a clear system of values and the formation of the subject's identity, especially in the case of non-religious children. It is therefore up to the parents and caregivers to instil ethical principles and values that can be obtained from secular philosophies, humanism principles, or any other belief. This needs reflection and discussion to assist

a child in the process of learning the difference between right and wrong and in learning how to solve ethical issues in everyday life.

#### **4. Cultural and Traditional Disconnect:**

There are a lot of traditions that are associated with religion, and non-religious children may feel like they are missing out on something. Such a disconnection can be observed in the ways they perceive cultural traditions, in their involvement in cultural events such as festivals or ceremonies, and in their feeling of being a part of cultural groups. Managing these processes implies that parents should introduce their children to cultural diversity and help them understand that it is possible to appreciate cultural similarities while accepting the differences in religious choices.

#### **5. Coping with Existential Questions:**

Non-religious children may face questions regarding the purpose of life, death, and existence without the use of religious teachings or concepts of the hereafter. These profound questions pose the need for caregivers to comfort, reason with, and discuss with the child to enable him or her to come up with personal opinions on existential issues.

Lastly, non-religious children are free to learn different opinions and ideas, learn how to reason, and accept other people for who they are. But it also has problems concerning social acceptance, assistance from others, ethical values, cultural affiliation, and life reflection. Caring for non-religious children entails understanding their non-religious stance, and ensuring that they are well taken care of by providing them with a conducive environment to learn, explore, and interact with other children from different cultural and social backgrounds. It assists children in dealing with the issues of identity and moral reasoning while cultivating such virtues as caring, critical thinking, and self-governance.

#### **6. Conclusion**

The study of the cultural, familial, and social aspects of children from inter-religious marriages in Kerala has provided a new insight into the formation of identity for such children. This qualitative study reveals the dynamics of such family structures, the difficulties and possibilities of such family forms, and the range of situations that these children face. In Hindu-Muslim, Muslim-Christian, and Hindu-Christian marriages, questions of religion, acceptance in society, and family pressure come to the fore. The gathered stories raise awareness of how parental choices, culture, and personal strength impact these children. It is also important to point out the gender aspects of religious identity transmission, especially when maternal conversions are initiated by patriarchal values and family pressure. Although these conversions may temporarily solve the family's demands, they bring new problems associated with acculturation and the construction of new subjectivities for the children. However, the following are some of the positive aspects that the study found among children who grow up in interreligious families. Most show incredible physical endurance and flexibility, and while they practice more than one religion, they are very culturally developed, with a strong ability to incorporate aspects of their upbringing. Religious diversity makes them embrace other religions and cultures and be more sensitive to other people's beliefs which is a plus in their character development. Through the interaction with different religions in their families, these children become aware of the importance of respecting other people's beliefs, thus broadening their horizons and fostering tolerance in multicultural environments. In conclusion, it is possible to state that children from inter-religious

marriages in Kerala face certain specific problems related to religious diversity and cultural expectations, but at the same time, they are also rather resourceful and capable of developing a rather complex and rich cultural identity. This study therefore calls for the understanding and acceptance of these children's individuality and strengths in the context of their families, culture, and agency in creating welcoming environments for them.

## 7. Recommendations

- Develop a comprehensive approach to address the complex problems and opportunities of interreligious marriages among children in Kerala.
- Promote cultural exchange and religious education between people of different faiths from childhood.
- Support cultural and religious diversity through counselling services and support groups.
- Pay more attention to women's rights to make free decisions concerning their religion and ensure equal rights for men and women.
- Advocate for interfaith organizations that promote cultural and religious tolerance.
- Conduct more studies to establish the effects of interreligious marriage on children's welfare.
- Aim to make Kerala a model of religious understanding and acceptance for a better future.

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