
EDUCATION AND EMPOWERMENT OF WOMEN IN KERALA

MEENA J. PANIKKER

Abstract: Kerala boasts of a completely different status of women empowerment, higher human development and gender development index, while the whole scenario of the rest of pre-colonial and post-colonial India depicts women and their empowerment in the dim light. India, a country divided by different classes of people and castes makes the system further complicated. In most parts of India, the women of lower castes were deprived of education and hence they were not empowered contrary to the situations in Kerala where education, literacy and empowerment were completely denied for the women of the upper strata (brahmins). This paper tries to trace the line of women empowerment in the state, focusing especially on why the government needed to implement such schemes like “*kudumbasree*” on the first phase, and its effectiveness. The women empowerment schemes of the Kerala government have now been adopted as a success model in many other states. Women empowerment cannot really happen with mere jobs alone. There must be a real progressive change in the society (alterations in gender conventions) and the way it looks at women. This paper also examines whether the statistics of women empowerment in the Kerala society really goes on to define empowerment in its real essence.

Keywords: About four key words or Education, empowerment, gender conventions, Kerala society, patriarchy, progressive change

Introduction: Social, cultural and political securities are the chief parameters of women empowerment which becomes feasible through education and financial security apart from gender equality in any society. This paper tries to trace the line of women empowerment in the state, focusing especially on why the government needed to implement such schemes like “*kudumbashree*” on the first phase, and its effectiveness. This paper also examines whether the statistics of women empowerment in the Kerala society really goes on to define empowerment in its real essence.

Women in Kerala Society: Kerala boasts of a completely different status of women empowerment, higher human development index (HDI) and gender development index (GDI), while the whole scenario of the rest of pre-colonial and post-colonial India depicts women and their empowerment in the dim light. Dehejia points out that the women’s literacy rate in this southern coastal state is 88% contrary to men’s literacy rate which is 94% but far higher than the national average of 54%. Life expectancy for women is approximately 76 years, when compared to 71 for men but again far higher than the national average for women – 63 years. The HDI for the state is the highest in India-0.63 compared with the national average of 0.47. Pluralistic India torn apart by various caste and creed, each with its own unique system of inheritance, marital laws and social tie-ups makes the whole link of gender conventions a much more complicated issue.

Pre-Colonial & Colonial Times: The Pre- colonial times record that in most parts of India, women played equal roles in family planning, important decision making, and decisive roles in family earnings in agrarian societies. Women’s education was

favoured till the Upanishadic ages notes Thayattu Sankaran after which there was a gradual deterioration in the system of women education chiefly because of two reasons. One was brahminical patriarchy and the other was the marriages of Aryan youth to non- Aryan women whereby this system of patriarchal supremacy got so permanently etched into the social system which deprived women of their previous liberty of education. Shankaran also points out that this deterioration was higher after the decline of Shramanism (Buddhist monasteries) though attempts of recovery and revitalizing the system was re initiated only with the advent of the Christian missionaries (53-56). This observation has been critically countered by Kerala historians like Sreedhara Menon and P. Bhaskaranunni, who suggest that women maintained only minimal literacy levels in Kerala.

It must be however understood that education should not be conceived as a proper formal system as it exists these days and one cannot deny the fact that the medieval women in Kerala were educated. The education order started from the vernacular alphabets, followed by grammar and basic Mathematics, (Bhaskaranunni, 1053-55). Bhaskaranunni says that girls were taught texts like ‘*Srikrishna charitam*’, ‘*Manipravalam*’, ‘*Seelavathippattu*’, and dance forms like ‘*kaikottukali*’ etc., (1054). The women of the Kerala social strata starting from nairs (shudras) were educated according to their respective areas of vocation which is considered to be an important parameter of women empowerment. Castes in India, especially so in Kerala is largely based on occupation and as such it was very important that women be educated in the respective spheres of their caste vocation so as to be able to

shoulder the responsibilities of a man in the family or at least be a helper to him.

The colonial times record that the women of lower castes in most parts of India were deprived of education and hence they were not empowered contrary to the situations in Kerala where education, literacy and empowerment were completely denied for the women of the upper strata (brahmins). Dharampal in his *The Beautiful Tree*, notes that the percentage of educated women in the Malabar area, though is much lower than the male population, surprisingly enough, is comparatively higher in Kerala when compared with that of the other states, especially so, among the shudra and the Muslim communities. The entire study was based on the survey conducted by J. Vaughan, the then Principal collector in the early eighteenth century, dated 5 August, 1823. The shudras here included mainly the nair (martial caste) and the ambalavaasi (temple workers) category and the survey report records 707 women educated against 3697 men. The survey also records a total of 758 schools and 1 college, the one being the Veda paathasaala at Thirunavaya, only meant for brahmins' religious study of the Vedas. So, it could be well assumed that the women in Kerala were not deprived of education in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries.

Social reformist and Malayalam writer, V.T.Bhattathirippad's autobiography, *Kanneerum Kināvam* expresses how embarrassed he had felt, when he found he could not read a single word when the little daughter of Theeyadi Nambiar asked him (while he was working as a priest in the *Shastamkaavu* temple) her doubt in arithmetic (85-86). Critic, K.N. Ganesh notes that "After the initial introduction of letters, Malayalam was not taught at least for the brahman children. Similarly arithmetic was not emphasized for brahman children," (*Cultural Encounters*, 158). Since the post of priest-hood in temples was exclusively a 'male-area' among the brahmins, the males of the community were taught the Vedas and rituals whereas brahmin women's education in Kerala was restricted only to learning domestic duties. J. Devika in her book, '*Kulastreeyum*' '*Chanthapennum*' *undayathengane?*, says that the lower castes like nair and ezhava women enjoyed more freedom than the namboodiri women, who were restricted in everything, ranging from education to independent thinking and the complexity of this situation heightened as they went up the ladder of their status.

The Dark Ages in Kerala brought a strict marginalization of the various classes in matters of education and the cultural fabric of Kerala was rugged by different lines of caste restrictions and feudal impositions, especially so on grounds of education and empowerment, superstitious beliefs

and evils. The lower caste women had to suffer lots of other social atrocities too in Kerala, for instance the breast tax (*mulakaram*). The society was not just to the upper class women also- *pulāppedi*, *parappedi*, *maññāppedi*, and polygamy in the brahmin society etc were some to quote a few examples. It took lots of effort by social reformists, and the state and centre government to efface these lines off the social fabric of Kerala which is why lots of schemes had to be introduced to upgrade the status of women of lower class. It is a fact that when compared to the movements initiated for the emancipation of the women of rural and lower classes in Kerala, not much was done for the upper class women who are few in number and mostly ignored, chiefly due to their 'upper class' status irrespective of whether they are financially backward or not, perhaps till date.

The Present Statistics: Presently, it may be argued that due to the various schemes by the central and the state government in India, the social gap between the women of different castes in matters of education is at its minimum in Kerala. As per the 2011 Kerala population census data, the female: male sex ratio is 17,378,649: 16,027,412. The literacy levels of male are 96.11% while females have a literacy rate of 92.07%. The state records the highest literacy rate of 94%. Anganwadi Karyakatri Bima Yojana, Udisha Training Programam and Ujjawala are the three programmes brought by the central government in Kerala, aimed at women empowerment in the state according to the website of the Kerala Government's Social Justice Department. Finishing School for women, Gender Awareness programmes for women, Vocational Training programmes for the inmates of Women Welfare Institution, financial support and nutritional assistance to deserving pregnant and lactating mothers (as in '*janani janma raksha*' scheme in Attappady) and to HIV infected mothers and children respectively, financial benefits to Anganwadi workers etc are some of the schemes of the Kerala Government apart from Mangalya- a scheme of widow remarriage.

Kudumbashree: Among the various schemes for women empowerment brought in by the Kerala Government, a success story worth mention is that of 'Kudumbashree' launched in 1998 integrating 41,00,000 women from over 50% of the households, mainly rural. The very term 'Kudumbashree' carries the connotation of respecting women as per the Indian culture as women are believed to be the prosperity icon of any family. This joint initiative by the Kerala Government and NABARD implemented through CDSs (Community Development Societies) operates through Neighbourhood Groups (NHG) and Area Development Societies (ADS). The Kudumbashree website says there are "2.58 hundred thousand MHGs, 19,700 ADSs, and 1072 CDSs"

involved in the project. This three-tier structure of the programme caters to the integrated roles of micro finance, entrepreneurship and women empowerment for which the program stands and has already triggered massive revolution in the state. Today, because of this very reason, Kerala's Kudumbashree- a successful model of women empowerment is trying to be adopted not only in various other states in India including Madhya Pradesh, but in South Africa too reports the *New Indian Express* (01 Oct, 2014 & 17 Oct, 2014).

A completely women- led Kudumbashree is today an epitome of constructive reformation of the Kerala society in terms of social, economic and cultural pathways which exerts a strong influence in (women) citizen centric governance and representation of women's problems in the society. They have launched various schemes from agriculture to IT, including the development of children ('balasabha' and 'balapanchayat'- ventures of the children belonging to the Kudumbashree units and Buds, a school for special children etc are such initiatives). 'Samagra' is a scheme in which the Kudumbashree aims at increasing the productivity, marketing of goods through better packaging and placements and operates in all three levels of local self governance- panchayat, block, and district levels. Some projects are also run on contract basis with private players. An example could be the initiative of footwear uppers (at Calicut) set in collaboration with private sector enterprises like VKC. Another venture under 'Samagra' - 'Nature Fresh' at Idukki has a milk unit, but the greatest challenge for the members of the society is getting grass to feed cows and also to meet the demands of milk needs. A large amount of milk, poultry, fish, meat, vegetable and fruit supplies are still met by the neighbouring states of Tamilnadu and Karnataka. One reason being the land scarcity in Kerala having a high population density and the second reason, the structure of the Kerala market. Every small village in Kerala is set up as a small town contrary to the physical conditions in Tamilnadu and Karnataka, where they have clear cut spaces for agricultural rural sectors and urban commercial sectors. It would not be wrong to say that these states have areas where agricultural expanse stretches miles and miles without a single shop on the road, be it even petty shops which sell bottles of mineral water. It is through Samrudhi shops that Kudumbashree caters to the procurement and supply chain managements of perishable and non-perishable items. Hotels and cafeterias run by Kudumbashree is yet another example of women entrepreneurship.

The Destitute Identification Rehabilitation and Monitoring Project, Ashraya, a scheme intended for the emancipation of the poor families and to eliminate poverty addresses the problems of food,

shelter, medical and nutritional aids, education and empowerment needs after the successful identification of such destitute families through transparent risk index developed by the mission which gained the Kudumbashree, the PM's award of Excellence in public Administration in 2007-08. The Kudumbashree website details a cumulative list of 890 gramapanchayats and 32 urban local bodies where the program is implemented to rescue 72116 destitute families under various projects worth 41, 075.82 hundred thousand rupees. A gender self learning program, is also launched under the portal, www.sreesakthi.org which has 22794 registered users, 63049 posts and 247888 views as on October, 2015.

Even though women have been quite successful in displaying their strengths and talents over the time, it must be questioned whether women empowerment is taking place in Kerala in the right direction? Kudumbashree as a multi faceted single program initiative is enough to prove women's caliber in a patriarchal society, but the Kerala society voices a different tale. "Kerala ranks among the highest group of states in the matter of cruelty at home and a continuous increase in the rates of cruelty at home has been reported between 1995 and 2002" (*Kerala Development Report*, 416). This shows the ineffective implementation of the Domestic Violence Act 2005 in the state. Renowned social activist, Aleyamma Vijayan, states that Kerala seconds the list with respect to cases registered under the PWDVA (Protection of Women From Domestic Violence Act 2005)- Rajasthan tops the list. *The Hindu* reports that the study by the Institute of Social Science for Kerala Police released by the State Police Chief, K. S. Balasubramonian, reveals that Domestic violence (51.4% of the total cases) dominates the crime list against women. There is reported violence due to dowry also in the state which is still continuing despite of the implementation of the Dowry Prohibition Act.

Conclusion: The entire milieu of the "gender paradox" has to be understood in terms of the old and the new. Commercialization of agriculture and urbanization has lowered the scope of women's traditional roles and thus decreased women empowerment. Moreover, Kerala has explored the possibility of hiring cheap labour from economically less developed states like Orissa, Assam etc. In addition to this, women are paid less wages when compared to men- the reason being their physical incompetency. The patriarchal dominance in Kerala is successful in keeping women away from the bargaining of power and influence. Panda reports that the "women's work participation is lower than in other south Indian States with less than 25 percent of women in the work force" (15). The result is perpetual gender imbalances in Kerala despite the high HDI

and GDIs. Even the representation of women in popular media is in consensus with the stereotypical roles assigned to women in patriarchal society as having neither an influential identity nor powerful voice to shatter the typical roles assigned to them since ages.

Suggestions & Recommendations: Since it has been proven by researchers that apart from financial security the right to immovable property also lowers the aspect of domestic violence (physical, psychological and sexual) against women, the Kerala development with respect to women education and empowerment shall be deemed successful only when matriarchy is reintroduced as this is the only system where women would automatically be successors to land and property. More importantly an increased awareness about gender equality need to be introduced in the school curriculum so that girls and boys at an early age realize what the different forms of violence are and also understand that marriage or

any such relationship is not a license to legalize any such violence by way of any cultural ascertainment of automatic self-yielding. It could well be concluded that though women in Kerala are far more advanced than the women in other states in matters of education and empowerment and though they have proved their mettle through the success of mass projects like Kudumbashree, these cannot be considered as adequate parameters that reflect progress in the women empowerment level as the Kerala society is still in the clutches of conventional patriarchy which exploits women. *The Hindu* reports that while we have succeeded in educating our girls to become boys, by providing them a platform to study and work, we haven't taught our boys to become girls and this is where our civilization has become unsuccessful. This is completely true with regard to the conditions in Kerala, which is why despite of all these successful schemes, it is still (dis) empowerment of women.

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26. If on some particular days a Brahmin woman, (even if by accident) sees a man of the lower caste belonging to the pulaya, paraya or mannan community, she would be ostracized from the community. She could either chose to live with that man or die. Her family would perform her last rites symbolizing that she is now dead for the family.
27. Save the mother and child- a scheme for expecting mothers.
28. "According to Ms. Bindu Surendran, a member who has three cows, "we are not able to expand the number of cows as fetching enough grass to feed them is a problem," (G. K., 20)
29. "Kerala which consumes 80lakhs of litres of milk a day is importing a quarter of that from neighbouring states..." *ibid.*,p.20
30. Gender paradox relates to a situation where despite high levels of education among women their participation in the work force is really low, (Panda, 15).
31. "Among those who did not own property, about one-half experienced physical violence and 84 percent experienced psychological violence. In contrast, those who own both land and house reported substantially lower physical (7 percent) as well as psychological (16 percent) violence" Panda, p. 34

Meena J. Panikker/ Adhoc Faculty/ School of Management Studies/
National Institute of Technology Calicut/