

The Status of Women in the Pathway of Developmental Set Up in Kerala –An Eye View for Analysis

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Abstract

Kerala, a state of thirty odd million people in the southern tip of India, has been hailed as the epitome of women's development in a country that does not fare too well in terms of UNDP's gender development indicator.² Unlike many other states in this country of billion plus people, literacy levels are high among women as well as men in Kerala, and the differences between the two are relatively low, thereby contributing to a high level of recorded GDI in the state. Health indicators are equally impressive, with high levels of life expectancy for women and men, and indeed a fairly strong positive tilt towards women, which is as the case is in all developed countries and ---- given the greater biological vulnerability of the male of the species as compared to the female ---- is what it should be in all relatively gender neutral societies. Even those health indicators that do not enter directly into the GDI calculations, such as maternal mortality rates for instance, are pretty good in Kerala, the estimates being significantly lower than those in many other Indian states. It is little wonder that experts have cited the instance of Kerala as one that can and should be emulated as a case that ensures high levels of gender development and consequently a high status for women. Although initially investigations into the Kerala case was not part of the project design, somewhere during the first phase of the Gender Network, a number of contradictory signals from the state made it imperative that one looked into the Kerala story in some detail.

Keywords: Women, developmental mainstreams, feministic attitude.

Introduction

Despite the obvious achievements of the state in terms of the standard indicators of gender development, a little exploration outside these indicators brought up more questions than could be answered. One discovered that Kerala has one of the highest rates of recorded crimes against women, including among the highest incidence of domestic violence. Even if one allowed for considerable reporting bias, the figures were far too high for comfort in a state that boasts of a high status for women. There is growing evidence of female feticide in Kerala, which suggests that, like in many other places in India, female babies are less been getting worse over the years. Kerala has been one state where historically, sex ratios have not been adverse against women. But things are changing. Infant sex ratio in every single district in Kerala had declined between the Census years 1981 and 1991, something that one discovered in the course of mapping age-wise sex ratios across all districts of India in the early stages of GN research. It is this unexpected discovery that had initially set the alarm bells ringing. Although the trend has been halted in some of the districts in the later decade, this was too disturbing a piece of evidence to set aside without further probing. Soon one became conscious of warning signals from other areas as well. In spite of high female literacy, as per the data provided by the quinquennial surveys carried out by the National Sample Survey Organization (NSSO), the state also has among the lowest female labour force participation rates. Detailed interviews with women from varied socioeconomic backgrounds under different contexts revealed that contrary to popular belief, women do not enjoy the kind of 'freedom' that one would expect to go with high levels of human or gender development. The Gender Network research agenda slowly acquired a new agenda item, namely unraveling the puzzle of the Kerala woman. We needed to understand why, and how, such high levels of standard (or 'conventional') gender development indicators could co-exist with these other signals of women's powerlessness.

One of the important concerns of the activists of the area of women's issues and the academics world over has been to understand the cause of women's subordination. Both activists and academics agree that women at present have a lower status than men; that socially, economically and politically women are discriminated against and this state of affairs is unfair-injustice and must be changed. An analysis of the origin of subordinate status of women; why the lower status has still persisted; what strategies are to be devised to end this subordination and such queries are most relevant today; Both in the universal societal phenomena and the society of Kerala.

Atrocities on women

In spite of hundred percent literacy and increased rate of women education, atrocities against women have become the most serious social evil of the contemporary Kerala society. If though literate (the effect of which is

statistical data but not in practical day to day life) common women of the very social reality of Kerala are unaware of the dynamic concept of equality of sexes which the Indian constitution guarantees. Few women of those who are aware use the law to fight back, they being traditionally oppressed and serve in all social institutions like family, caste, community, religion, politics, etc. subjugated to man. Despite the promises of legislative favours the identities like women, Dalit and Tribal etc., experience discriminations involving cultural resources in forms subtler than that the commonsense can grasp. The relevance of knowing how the social structure reproduces such forms of discrimination is only proportional to the urgency of resisting such discriminations.

Violence against women in Kerala

Violence, or its credible threat, as the key indicator of powerlessness

The first step in addressing the 'enigma' of the Kerala Woman has been to recognize that there is clear, incontrovertible evidence of extensive violence against women (VAW) in Kerala society. This was garnered from the review of a number of recent studies and sample surveys on VAW, as well as several case studies and individual interviews that were conducted by other researchers and by the Gender Network research team under various projects. It was felt that whatever be the extent of the 'recording bias', even if a fraction of the evidence was true, it raises serious questions about the supposed high status of women in the state, for there is no better indicator of the powerlessness of an individual or a group of people in a society or community than evidence of systemic perpetrated violence, or a credible threat of such violence. It needs to be emphasized here that it is not just evidence on actual perpetrated violence that one should be looking at. Even if there is a credible threat of such violence that is endemic to the society, a threat that may not even be carried out in a majority of cases, but which keeps women 'in place', and which acts as a powerful deterrent dissuading women from crossing the socially ordained boundaries of 'good womanhood', it is evidence that should tell us that something is not quite right with women's status. A community that tacitly tolerates systemic violence against women, or covertly supports a credible threat of such violence, cannot at the same time, boast of ascribing a high status to those at the receiving end. Extensive interviews with Kerala women from varied backgrounds using a range of qualitative methods such as case studies, focus group discussions and detailed life histories over the course of the research convinced us that not everything is right for women in 'God's Own Country'. Even at the very beginning of launching the Gender Network Project, before the Kerala studies were initiated, one had been aware of the possibility that for a variety of reasons, high levels of 'conventional' gender development indicators such as those that are included in the GDI, may not necessarily translate into high 'status' of women in a particular context, however defined. In order to get a fuller understanding of the elusive phenomenon of status, one has also got to look into other indicators, which for want of a better term, we had called 'non-conventional' indicators of gender development, ---- violence and its credible threat being the most important component of the latter set.

'Measuring' Violence

The next issue is to figure out how best to 'measure' this phenomenon. This was deemed necessary so that violence, and its credible threat, could be mapped against other, more conventional indicators of 'status' to bring possible contradictions into clearer focus. It was felt that it is best if it could be done without having to go after the sordid task of counting how many times a woman gets beaten up, by whom and under what circumstances, or what are the tangible forms of mental torture she is subjected to: questions which are barely ever answered truthfully in standard household surveys. Instead, it was felt, that one could take an altogether different course. One could argue that violence and a credible threat of such violence, in overt or in muted forms in one's daily life, is likely to raise the levels of stress and anxiety in women, *other things remaining the same*. If this argument has some validity, then one could induct available instruments of applied psychology to measure levels of stress and anxiety, and use these indicators as surrogates, so to speak. These psychometric variables could then be used in conjunction with other standard socio-economic variables in order to explore a range of issues using available multivariate quantitative techniques.

This course has some advantages and some disadvantages. The advantages are that there are well established measures of stress and anxiety, and also of mental well-being, which are believed to be reasonably 'culture free' and which have been tested and widely used by applied psychologists in a large number of countries. The major advantage is of course that these indicators being quantitative, or more accurately categorical in nature, they can be used in conjunction with standard socio-economic variables from household surveys in multivariate analysis.

Table 1
Forms of violence experienced by tribal women throughout their lifespan

Source: Adapted from Heise

Phase	Type of Violence Present
Pre-birth	Sex-selective abortion; battering during pregnancy; coerced pregnancy.
Infancy	Female infanticide; emotional and physical abuse; differential access to food and medical care.
Girlhood	Child marriage; genital mutilation; sexual abuse by family members and strangers; differential access to food, medical care and education
Adolescence	Violence during courtship; economically coerced sex (e.g. for school fees); sexual abuse in the workplace; rape; sexual harassment; arranged marriage; trafficking.
Reproductive age	Physical, psychological and sexual abuse by intimate male partners and relatives; forced pregnancies by partner; sexual abuse in the workplace; sexual harassment; rape; abuse of widows, including property grabbing and sexual cleansing practices.
Elderly	Abuse of widows, including property grabbing; accusations of witchcraft; physical and psychological violence by younger family members; differential access to food and medical care.

High female literacy in Kerala from a feminist perspective

historically, literacy for women in Kerala came with notions of social development that consisted of not merely the functional ability to read and write, but also how that functionality had to be used for the good of the family and society, and also the state. It is not as if some women, brave and brilliant in their own right, did not question the one-sided message. Writings of women like Saraswati Amma and Antarjanam referred to in the paper, bear testimony to assertions of the self. Such assertions, though powerful and courageous in their time, had no chance of developing into an alternative paradigm. The atmosphere was inundated by ideological messages propagating 'enlightened domesticity' for women: not for the development of the self per se, but for the good of society. These messages have had such a powerful hold on the public psyche that even when the first generation of educated feminists in Kerala succeeded in negotiating some space for women in the public sphere, they could do so strictly within the bounds of the ideological framework defined for the 'good' woman. Benevolent patriarchy has had a long history in Kerala, and social reformers have been especially active. The strength and resilience that this ideology has enjoyed over the years is apparent from the essential similarities in outlook shared by pairs of Kerala women from two generations separated by decades, as shown in a recent publication (Devika 2006). Instead of signs of abatement, some of the mutations of the ideology that are being manifested in recent years are alarming. Apart from domestic violence, there is clear evidence of rampant sex-selective abortions of the unborn female foetus all across

Kerala. Evidence suggests that it is more widespread especially among the more affluent and educated households from the southern parts of the state. Clearly, such things can happen only with the connivance of the woman. One needs to understand why women, even or especially the educated ones are willing partners in this act. Why does the state -- that is supposed to be the haven of gender development in India, and has had a long record of high sex ratios in accordance with the normal biological outcomes prevalent in gender sensitive societies ---- display such an upsurge in the preference for a male child. Is it a result of the perceived 'credible threat of violence' that the daughters are likely to face as they grow up? Or is it the result of soaring dowry rates in Kerala that explains why daughters are no longer wanted as much as sons? Perhaps it is a combination of factors that have been cited earlier. One thing that is clear from this evidence is that Kerala women, even educated Kerala women who can afford the cost of sex-selective abortions, are willing to be a party to destroying the female foetus; they put less value on their unborn daughters than they do on their unborn sons. There is clear evidence to suggest, therefore, that the average Kerala woman subscribes to the superiority of the male in the social order.

According to the 2001 Census, women as an independent target group account for 495.74 million in actual numbers and represent 48.3 % of the total population of the country. Depending upon the developmental needs of the individual age-group, the entire female population projected for 2001 can be categorized for the

planning purposes into the following five distinct sub-groups:

- i) Girl children in the age-group of 0-14 years who account for 169.03 million (34.6%) deserve special attention because of the gender bias and discrimination they suffer from at such a tender age;
- ii) Adolescent girls in the age group 15-19 years who account for 51.39 million (10.5%) are very sensitive from the view-point of planning because of the preparatory stage for their future productive and reproductive roles in the family and society;
- iii) Women in the reproductive age group of 15-44 years numbering 230.35 million (47.1%) need special care and attention because of their reproductive needs;
- iv) Women in the economically active age group of 15-59 years, who account for 285.22 million (58.4%) have different demands like those of education/training, employment, income generation and participation in the developmental process, decision making etc.; and
- v) The elderly women in the age group of 60+ numbering 34.36 million (7.0%) who have limited needs mainly relating to health, emotional and financial support.

The principles of gender equity and equality and protection of women's rights have been the prime concerns in Indian thinking right from the days of Independence. Accordingly, the country's concern in safeguarding the rights and privileges of women found its best expression in the Constitution of India. While **Article 14** confers equal rights and opportunities on men and women in the political, economic and social spheres; **Article 15** prohibits discrimination against any citizen on the grounds of sex, religion, race, caste etc; and **Article 15(3)** provides for equality of opportunities in the matter of public appointments for all citizens. Yet another **Article 39** mentions that the State shall direct its policy towards providing to men and women equally the right to means of livelihood and equal pay for equal work. **Article 42** directs the State to make provisions for ensuring just and humane conditions of work and maternity itself.

Article 51(A) (e) imposes a fundamental duty on every citizen to renounce the practices derogatory to the dignity of women. To make this *de jure* equality into a *de facto* one, special legislations have been enacted from time to time in support of women. The realization of the significance of investing in the nation's women has grown over the plan periods. Women as a separate category for planning interventions came to focus upon increasingly over the plan periods as it became clear that the development of women has a direct bearing upon the country's total development. Women who represent 90% in the Informal Sector have been the backbone of the rural economy, but unfortunately their contribution to the economy and to development process remains invisible. They are, in fact, getting adversely affected in the wake of the changing developmental paradigms, especially those of economic liberalization and globalisation, besides their own sufferings of social backwardness. Therefore, they form a priority group requiring special attention of the Government.

History centered on men's lives, activities, and events does not represent a history for all. It is argued that only white, middle class, heterosexual men count in history and that non-white, non-middle- and upper-class/caste men as well as women have been removed from our view of the past. Women are either completely absent from historical narratives, or their presence is described in ways that are insignificant to the important events of history. The invisibility and marginalization of women in history is a problem keeping the study of history from realizing its full potential. Before 1970, women's history was rarely the subject of serious study. Two significant factors contributed to the emergence of women's history. The women's movement of the sixties caused women to question their invisibility in traditional history texts. The movement also raised the aspirations as well as the opportunities of women, and produced a growing number of female historians. Carroll Smith-Rosenberg, one of the early women's historians, has remarked that "without question, our first inspiration was political. Aroused by feminist charges of economic and political discrimination. . . . we turned to our history to trace the origins of women's second-class status."

Conclusion

In exploring the gender question in Kerala, the Gender Network has sought to find an explanation for this seeming paradox, and backed by multi-disciplinary research, has provided some plausible answers. In a way, understanding the 'enigma' of the Kerala woman has been central to the whole spectrum of research under the Gender Network, since it has involved the contentious issue of defining 'women's status' in an essential way. The Kerala case clearly demonstrates that if one has to choose one indicator for this elusive factor, it has to be in terms of the human dignity accorded to women by the society she lives in, and not in terms of some instrumental indicator like literacy which may, for a variety of reasons, fail to perform its transformative task of empowering the individual.

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