

## **Women and Politics: A Paradox in God's Own Country**

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**ABSTRACT:** This study sheds light on the women and politics in Kerala and possible reasons to why they do not have equal voice in political decision-making. Over 20 years and five assembly elections women have become better educated, led a variety of popular movements, voted in and contested elections in ever greater numbers in Kerala. Yet the number of directly elected female legislators have steadily declined. While good health and educational attainments are necessary for gender equality, the development experience in Kerala suggests that these accomplishments are insufficient to support gender equality, a Constitutional promise and right for all Indian men and women. Kerala has achieved enviable social development indicators which are laudable and a necessary condition for gender equality. Although they are necessary, they are not sufficient by itself as they remain equally if not more powerless and poor. Though there are changes, the progress is slow and insufficient for women to have meaningful participation in key decision making areas. And this is a paradox considering the achievements the state has made.

**KEYWORDS:** Women, Politics, Kerala

## INTRODUCTION

As an aftermath of women's participation in the national movement, public sphere and in political activity, which were all considered as male domain, slowly became the fora for women as well. With the given opportunity some women created their own space and rose to the stature of international figures. Independent India can boast of women public figures who became the synonym of Indian womanhood. Though they did not aim at materialisation of women equality, they did empower Indian women with their success and dedication in their respective fields. It needs to be noted that the Vedic literature claims that women in ancient India did not experience any kind of inequality with men of those times. Women were held in high esteem. Among the several gods of Hindu religion there were several goddesses who were endowed with remarkable grace, charm and dignity. During the period of Upanishads women enjoyed a high status in society with greater access to learning. But with the spread of caste system, the status of women too started declining. Many evil practices like child marriage, polygamy, etc. crept into the social customs of the time resulting in women to live under the weight of these practices until the end of 19<sup>th</sup> century. These women were socially weak, economically dependent and politically powerless. The discrimination and deprivations of women in society have not still left the Indian soil. Though movements for gender equality began long back and have been toiling for the cause of women, the patriarchal Indian society is still intact with its own caste hierarchy and social values.

**Historical analysis of the condition of women in Kerala:** The condition of women in Kerala over the years largely shows inequality dealt in the name of caste systems. Women suffered from the general male domination and this was aggravated by casteism and other social customs which were prevalent in the 19<sup>th</sup> century. Being uneducated and bound by superstitions it was easy for others to subject women to all kinds of domination and exploitation. Even women belonging to higher and richer caste families suffered on account of male domination. At times when women of the higher castes might have enjoyed a marginally better status than their counterparts in lower caste families, they were victims of sexual and economic exploitation by the higher castes. In short, women had to suffer more than men whether they belonged to the Hindu, Christian or Muslim religion or to the higher or lower caste. Being a woman of those days was a matter of little pride. Political awakening among women of Kerala began only during the first quarter of 20<sup>th</sup> Century. The arrival of Missionaries initiated the process of modernisation. English education and western liberal thoughts along with the efforts of the local rulers and social reformers to bring about social changes, gradually shaped the present social and political status of women of Kerala. With the spread of education, the

liberation of women from the traditional social order was initiated. The conditions of women in Kerala improved greatly compared to that in other states.

**Kerala Women and Freedom Movement:** With the freedom movement, a large number of people, irrespective of caste and creed participated in public conferences for the same. But women from aristocratic and middle families did not actively participate in such public activities and politics continued to be mostly a men's domain. But the seeds of women's political activities in Kerala had already been sown in the social reform movements of early 1920s. Active participation by women of Kerala thus traces back to early 1920s with Mahatma Gandhi's Civil Disobedience Movement (1930) as a base for the same. Major changes took place over the years and the active participation of women in socio-political arenas came to be seen. A noteworthy point is that most of the women leaders were able to enter politics because of the opportunity provided to them by the political activism of the immediate male relatives of their family. And most of the women who entered politics belonged to middle class or upper-middle class families.

Also some women's organisations like Women's Indian Association (WIA) (1917), Federation of University Women (FUW) (1920), National Council of Women (NCW) (1925) and the All India Women's Conference (AIWC) (1926) prepared effective ground for women's active participation in politics. These organisations actively participated in the Civil Disobedience Movement and in a way became the training field for certain women to participate in politics effectively in the later years. Women's participation in the various political parties that were formed can be seen but the access to significant decision making positions continues to elude women. Party manifestoes issued by major political parties show a complete agreement that women constitute a backward and oppressed section of society to whom special opportunities will have to be granted to make them equal with men. Yet all these parties were conspicuously silent on the greater participation of women in politics, while at the same time offered them opportunities for increased participation in economic and social activities.

## **NEED AND SIGNIFICANCE OF THE STUDY**

- Women of Kerala are portrayed as progressive 'female capital' with higher literacy rates and yet confined to the four walls of her home.
- Higher echelons of political and economic power in Kerala are still dominated by men.

## **OBJECTIVE**

To examine the paradox between women and politics in Kerala in spite of the remarkable progress the state has made for gender equality.

### **Malayali Women in the Freedom Movement- Role, Change and Organisation**

Few of the prominent Malayali women who participated in the Freedom Movement include Karthyayani Amma, Gracy Aaron, T. Ammukutty Amma, Padmavati Asher, A.V. Kuttimalu Amma, C. Kunjikkavu Amma, Akkamma Cherian, Ammu Swaminathan, Thankam Krishna Pillai, and A. Nafeesath Beevi. These women leaders predominantly from Malabar and Travancore have contributed much to the freedom movement and for women's welfare. The socio-religious reform movements enabled to alter the rigid caste hierarchy and downtrodden nature of women. Though the spread of education did not create sweeping changes, it emboldened them to fight for their basic rights. Unlike in other Indian societies compared to Kerala, education meant a direct means to securing employment. Communist ideology seeped in and paved way to change of role of women which gradually led to formation of women's organisations. Thus women of Kerala began to come out of the hearth and kitchen to treat themselves as human beings. These developments came to be known as the "Kerala model" of development. Emancipation movements of powerful women uprisings such as the Upper Cloth Revolt or Channar Rebellion was witnessed in 19<sup>th</sup> C, Travancore. The other notable movement was the Kallumaala Struggle for the lower castes, especially Pulayas. A large number of unrecorded agitations by the women of different strata for materialising their basic rights were a reflection of the then society.

### **Women and Politics of Kerala in the Recent Years**

The Constitutional promise in political sphere which constitutes of participation and voice of women in political and community matters, still remain a mirage. Percentage of female members of legislative assembly have fallen from 10.23 per cent in 1996 to 6.06 per cent in 2016 while the number of women candidates have doubled over these five elections. Over the years Kerala has produced many notable women politicians but very few who have tasted success at national levels. Female representation in the current cabinet has doubled from previous government's one woman, P. K. Jayalakshmi. But has reduced from the first cabinet in 1957 which consisted of five women. The current Pinarayi Vijayan cabinet's two women ministers are J. Mercykutty Amma and K. K. Shailaja Teacher. Few of the women politicians who have cut a niche for themselves in our society include C. S. Sujatha, Shoba Surendran,

Shobana George, Padmaja Venugopal, Sindhu Joy, Jameela Prakasham, Mercy Williams, and P.K. Sreemathi etc.

One name that needs to specially mention is K.R. Gowri, popularly known as Gowriamma. She entered into the public life in 1946 as a student activist, encouraged by her brother who was part of the Communist Party. Gowriamma holds credit for the longest serving member of State Assembly (11 times) and minister six times. She piloted the revolutionary land reform bills under the first E.M.S. Namboodiripad Ministry in which she was Revenue Minister. K. R. Gowri neither got elevated to the central leadership of the Marxist Party nor became Chief Minister. She was dumped by her own party after being projected as the probable CM candidate and declared E. K. Nayanar as the CM. She was expelled from the CPM in 1994 under the name of anti-party activities. K.R. Gowri views women of Kerala's entry into politics as difficult for no woman could freely think of entering the field. She added that schooling for girls and salaried job for women are considered desirable in this society but not the participation of women in politics. She said that a woman going for public activities become target of gossip and scandal mongering.

Meenakshi Thampan, a member of CPI and former MLA holds similar views with Gowriamma. She pointed out that tradition holds women back however educated they may become. She further added that the status of the major breadwinner of the family always goes to the man even though women also worked within the household or outside. And on the pretext of bearing all the financial responsibilities, the husband assumes himself to be completely free from all domestic responsibilities which is a major barrier for women entering politics. C. K. Janu, social activist and leader of Adivasi Gothra Maha Sabha, on the nature of female voters says, *"Voters are concerned whether women candidates can meet their demands after being elected because the responsibilities of women towards households cannot be broken easily. There are cases where husbands of elected women representatives are taking decisions instead of them."* Successful female politicians agree Kerala has a gender problem that extends into the family. K. K. Shylaja Teacher, the present Minister of Health, Social Justice and Woman and Child Development remarked that *"The male-female relationship should be reconstituted, and it should start from sharing domestic responsibilities. It has become vital to rethink the role of women as agents of change."*

The recent years have also witnessed the collective strength of women from Kerala in movements like Nilpu Samaram (2014) for specific demands of tribal communities and Pembilai Orumai (2015) which was the Munnar Plantation strike led by women of the Munnar Kannan Devan Hills Plantation Limited. The name 'Pembilai Orumai' came for being an all

women uprising and was a turning point in Kerala's political history. These uprisings have encouraged for similar ones in the later years in different parts of Kerala. These movements also reflect the immense strength in women that otherwise lie hidden or rather suppressed.

## **CONCLUSION**

Women have started to speak at panchayat level and have begun to gain votes and seats but they find are yet to find a place in key decision making arenas like the state governance which are highly male dominated. And this may seem surprising to be occurring in a state which was once matrilineal. Another point to be noted is the insufficient demand for gender equality even among women. They doubt the ability of a woman to meet their expectations. Patriarchal practices of political parties and the aggressive, adversarial dealing of men combined with social attitudes to women have brought only a few talented women into the political arena. The public defamatory statements on women by respected leaders further add to the negative environment. Even at the local levels, reserved seats are rotated every five years. A pattern that can be noted is that as soon as a woman learns the rope of job, the rug is pulled out from under her feet. The progress is slow and insufficient for women to have meaningful participation in key decision making areas. Public defamatory statements of women by respected leaders-negative environment.

## **KEY FINDINGS AND SUGGESTIONS**

Women have become educated and healthy, but remain poor and powerless (economic and political sphere). There exists an insufficient demand for gender equality, even among women. Tradition has played a key role in keeping women out of active politics. Home by tradition has been the key area of responsibility of women. A departure from this thinking is not easy and an evolving one. There is a marked difference in the number of daughters of politicians who have taken up after their fathers compared to sons. The need for collective ownership of gender equality or women's empowerment agenda and for more people to become aware that a gender equality agenda is not a feminist obsession, but a Constitutional vision which protects both men and women and one that is necessary for Kerala to emerge as a prosperous and modern state. While the Government has a key responsibility in this regard, equal responsibility lies with other development partners such as NGOs. An approach to achieving gender equality should focus on both men and women. Women's empowerment is an essential first step before effectively implementing gender equality. At the same time, it is important to recognize and understand the decreasing enrolments of men in the primary and tertiary education levels and to examine the need to address this issue. Finally, and perhaps

most importantly, there is the necessity to bring men into this equation. If the social change is to be harmoniously created, then men need to become part of the solution and the gender equation. As Mahatma Gandhi said: “the seers among men have recognised her equal status.” It is time for Kerala men to rise to the occasion.

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