CHAPTER VI

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Having done a review of the commendable body of literature available on the subject of Women Religious Congregations in Kerala it is possible to conclude that women spirituality in the general sense of the term is a topic of serious sociological analysis and theoretical depth. The experience of the study of the primary sources is that the particular historical context of the subject is equally important for its empirical richness too. Broadly, the present research reaffirms that woman spirituality in its institutionalised setting was not the spontaneous manifestation of a natural course. A general conclusion that the study arrives at the outset is that though spirituality has no gender, its social actualisation for women always encountered patriarchal biases. Christianity does emphasise the recognition of the dignity and status of women on the principal of equality with men. However, in the system of patriarchal domination, the lofty religious ideal remained rhetoric.

The study holds the perspective that traditional scholarship excluded women from the main stream of history and literature. Women have been silenced, marginalised and perceived as being unessential to the making of civilization. Women’s deeds have been left almost entirely unrecorded, leading to historical and literary invisibility. Traditional male scholarship perpetuates the exclusion of women by making men the
normative and dominant representatives of humanity and placing women as subordinate and secondary to men. As a result, the record of the past is not only a partial record, since it omits the past of half of the human species, but it is also distorted, because it gives the wrong impression that women have never done anything that is worth mentioning. Thus, the study seeks to underline the need for deconstructing patriarchy in its social, cultural, political and ideological aspects as a necessity.

As the first step, the study attempts to question the historical exclusion of women from historical and religious leadership. For centuries, the basis of such discrimination was women’s alleged physical, mental and moral weakness. Women were generally placed on the side of irrationality, nature, silence, privacy and the body. Men, on the other hand, were identified with reason, culture, discourse, public and the mind. This dualistic comprehension of the world establishes a hierarchy in which men are believed to be superior to women. The second step is the search for an alternative history and tradition to support the inclusion of women as full historical beings. It starts by acknowledging that although women have been basically written out of history and excluded from texts, without recognition of women’s acts or deeds, women are, indeed, participants in the process of culture and society. To identify their contribution is, however, a matter of perspective, an intentional focus to
unearth the unknown and concealed womenhood. This research work is an earnest attempt and answer to this process.

The study argues that the consciousness of exclusion becomes a force that leads women to challenge the institutions that justify women’s exclusion. In the process of recognizing that women are historical beings, the question of the untold history comes up. In spite of patriarchy’s attempt to keep women’s participation concealed and forgotten, feminist scholarship has been able to catch glimpses of a tradition of women as full persons, as subjects of history, actors in their own rights, and agents of God in their ministries. The third step is, therefore, the attempt to formulate a prescriptive criticism, so that the contributions of feminist studies can be mainstreamed curricula and cease to be a topic restricted to women alone. This shift of women from objects of studies to women as subjects implies a dramatic change in the way women relate themselves to tradition and to culture in general. At this stage, it functions not only as a critique of the past and a quest for the lost stories of women. It becomes also a reconstructive, re-creative and revisioning exercise by using women’s experiences of oppression and struggles for liberation as the starting point. It insists on the reconceptualisation of intellectual frameworks by not taking man as the paradigmatic human being, as androcentric scholarship tends to do, but including women’s experiences as well. The task is to bring women back into history and to reinterpret
traditional terms from the perspective and the experience of women. Finally, it points to the contemporary contributions of women, towards the need to find new expressions and new ways of bringing theological meaning to the lives of women.

Very little is known about the large majority of women whose contributions to development are considerable yet invisible. Hence skimming the pages of history to discern the truth becomes a necessity. During the last thirty years, the issues which received great attention are women and work, women labour force participation, women's unequal access to education, problem of employed women, women's income and health etc. In recent years, gender inequality has become the most important area of study. So do themes like violence at home, dowry deaths, rape and sexual abuse etc. One neglected area is women and spirituality, women and religion or women and mysticism. Attempts are yet to be made to study spirituality of women in the context of Kerala. The present venture has been to highlight the origin of women religious congregations and the various apostolic activities undertaken by them and how they managed to create a spiritual space for them in the society and see its proper historical perspective. The study reveals the evolution of Kerala women from the status of housewives and mothers to women religious nuns.
In south India, especially the catholic community was forgotten by scholars and historians. If at all there are some works regarding or about Christians, women and their contributions were not recorded. At the same time it was a historical fact that, women of the catholic community, especially the nuns of various religious congregations emerged as a new force of Kerala society and they dedicated their life for the service of society in various ways as teachers, nurses, social workers, administrators etc. Almost all educational institutions, especially schools were run by them in the villages in the last quarter of the nineteenth and first half of the twentieth century. The State statistics stand testimony to the major part played by these religious congregations for the hundred percentage literacy of Kerala and the subsequent empowerment of girls to become the back bones of Kerala family and society.

When the present researcher examined the literature connected with church history, it was a shocking realisation that there is hardly any church history written by women. Almost all the books were written by men of various capacities. When the contents of the books were again scrutinised, a few have recorded the missionary activities from sixth to the twentieth century. Still some books contain the struggle which existed here in Malabar church for nearly four centuries i.e., sixteenth to the twentieth century. Women’s contribution to the growth of the Catholic Church in Malabar was not recorded in any historical treatise.
The study seeks to explore the radical changes which took place in the society due to the contributions of women religious. The nineteenth century was a period of transition for the society as a result of the cultural interaction with the European countries and the consequent spread of western education. A few women religious congregations with the objective of the uplift of women came up during this period. They played a significant role in the upliftment of women, which, in fact, also has been left unnoticed by most historians. The CMC, FCC, SVM, SABS, SH and CHF came forward to educate women and empower them, to occupy a better position in the society. No doubt, the congregations played a vital role in transforming the conservative society of Kerala.

This was particularly true in the specific context of the history of Kerala. Though the Christians take pride in the fact that Christianity recognizes the dignity and equality of women, in practice, it has not been so. The Church historian Fr. Bernard records that Kerala Church had not considered the equality of women even in religious matters. It may seem astonishing that women were not permitted even to attend the retreats conducted for the spiritual growth of the people of God in every parish. Even the radical visionary Fr. Chavara Kuriakose Elias excluded women from attending public activities. Fr. Chavara advises in Kudumpachattam, that girls need not attend Church festivals and family gatherings such as Sraddham, Adiyantiram etc. Women were forbidden from having
membership in the Palliyogam or the Nazarenes, which was considered as a representative body of the parish Church. They were forbidden access to the school run even by the missionaries. Catholic women were discriminated in the sharing of family property. The absence of women’s religious freedom is a part of their poor socio-economic status.

The feudal oriented and caste-ridden society of Kerala began to feel the pulse of change with the advent of Women Religious Congregations. The establishment of convents exclusively meant for nuns rather revolutionised the concept of womanhood. The newly erected convents became the centres of learning, benevolence and asceticism, which radiated the genuine spirit of love and compassion beyond the barriers of caste, community, sex, linguistic, regional and other variations. Being the citadels of selfless and dedicated service, these congregations empowered the women folk to bargain for their legitimate status in the society. These women religious congregations tried to enhance the position of women not only in our state and country but also in the whole world. The diversity of charismas of these different sections became a blessing for the world at large and the church in particular. Through their divergent expressions of their spirituality they contributed to the well being of the humanity, especially to the downtrodden in the society. The transformation made by the work of these religious women is visible all over the world.
Religious women contributed much to the transformation of society by bringing education within the reach of the womenfolk. This area was not opened to women for centuries. They were traditionally meant for the kitchen and for bearing children. But women began to question this discrimination, which was imposed upon them through generations. A few women took the risk to break these fetters through education. Thus knowledge opened their eyes and later they became the torch bearers of the future generation. The newly emerged women religious congregations took special interest and decision to start schools in the premises of their convents. These religious women tried to disseminate knowledge through starting schools in the nearby areas. A good number of children from different parts of the country flocked to these convent schools for their education. This helped the promotion of not only literacy in general but also women literacy in particular even in the remote villages of Kerala in the second half of the nineteenth and first quarter of the twentieth century. Gradually, social evils which enslaved the women folk for the past centuries such as child marriage, female infanticide, denial of girls education, polyandry and ban on widow remarriage disappeared from the society and a perceptible advancement was effected in the social, economic, moral and intellectual condition of women in the state. It increased their political consciousness and participation in public life. It also raised the self-confidence of women.
along with economic independence. Thus, education transformed the social, economic and cultural life of the society and credited Kerala with the title of a model state with cent percentage literacy.

A few women religious took the apostolate of medical care and they looked after the health and sanitary condition of the locality. Through their hospitals and clinics they tried to improve the health of the public especially the health of the women and children. Family is the basic unit of the society. Some women religious dedicated their life to the challenging mission of family apostolate. They visited the families, especially those families, where there were problems. Through their frequent visits and constant counselling they helped the families to lead a successful life. Still some others dedicated their life to the destitute of the society. They cared the orphans and the abandoned ones in the society. A few religious institutions specifically dedicated their life for the abandoned – by running old age homes, orphanages, schools for mentally retarded and physically handicapped, houses for street children etc. Thus, they reached out to the marginalised in the society. For the benefit of the drug addicted, a few sisters work in the de-addiction centres and Alcohol Anonymous groups. They took initiative to fight against drug addiction and alcoholism. Still a few others do the jail ministry and work in the relief centres. A few took to the risky life of fostering community togetherness through selfless service. Leadership role of women religious
is another area where they give consultations to the official authorities to redress the grievances of the women folk. They even initiate reconciliation programmes where there are communal conflicts. Women religious imprint their mark in the inter-religious fellowships. Their voice is heard in the self-help groups and in the exploited areas, where no public help comes.

All these contributions made by women religious and the subsequent changes effected hardly find any mention in the well known texts of history. It was rather left unnoticed by scholars and historians. The researcher has made a bold attempt to unravel the legacy of women religious congregations during a period of half a century (1876-1926), based on original data collected in the course of research. It is true a number of writings have appeared of late on the topic of women and women related issues, but the history of women spirituality and their service to humanity has been almost overlooked or neglected. The historians and scholars, both secular and church, who have done extensive research into the general history seems to have hitherto paid only scant attention to this topic. The present scholar has designed the study in such a way as to highlight this particular theme.

The present research has found out from hand written manuscripts that there exists enough evidence to disprove the traditional notion of 'female inactivity' and submissiveness. The study seeks to assert that
there is much evidence to show that the contributions made by the women folk are substantial and worthy of recording. The 'invisibility' of women is not due to her passiveness or inactivity, but because of the strong traditional patriarchal domination, and authoritarian control over all that is existing in this world, and the wrong notion of the male that they were the centre of the universe.

Church historians too strongly believe that women need not come to the public sphere, for traditionally that area was reserved for the male section. Church being a hierarchical institution that commands more discipline from the flocks in the initial years, disagrees the concept of women equality with that of men. This attitude of the church historians is typical of the age. But we cannot justify this attitude, for Jesus taught and showed a revolutionary break in the traditional setup. Jesus took the side of the downtrodden and marginalized, especially the women and stood for their cause and showed justice to all. He did not show any discrimination; instead he accepted every body without any distinction. But the Church failed to live the life and example shown by Jesus.

Even though women, through their own efforts managed to take decision regarding their life, in the ecclesiastical set up they should get consent and sanction from the authorities. Women slowly managed to get the necessary approval and looked after their own affairs. Once the women-religious started functioning, the Church too benefited through
their service, for they are running schools, charitable institutions and doing many welfare activities. This proved to be a positive gain for the Church. So they slowly began to support the undertakings of the religious congregations. Through women religious the Catholic Church managed to achieve a renaissance, especially among women folk. This facilitated the institutionalisation of women religious life. After the establishment of convents, schools and such other welfare institutions, the religious began to use autonomy and authority to increase their power. Women religious is a real powerhouse of the Church and the country. Their contributions are worthy of recording and they constitute a real source of inspiration to posterity.

Mother Mariam Thresia exemplifies a rare case of higher spiritual accomplishment. Starting as a village girl and passing through a hard life-course of vicissitudes full of ordeals, she ascended the pinnacle of spirituality by dedicating herself to the service of the poor. What is not always mentioned amidst the glorification of the Mother’s holiness, is her identification of family’s centrality in the nuns’ service, which is, indeed, a realisation much ahead of her time.

Mother Mariam Thresia was a wise woman who could read the signs of the time and act accordingly. So she was far ahead of her age. She showed unusual insight and courage in starting CHF and the Family Apostolate and this testifies to her uncommon wisdom and foresight. The
growth of CHF and the development of Family Apostolate programmes and the family counselling centres run by Holy Family sisters are the beneficial fruits that proclaim the far-sighted wisdom and prudence of the foundress. There is a pressing need for them today in a society, where families are broken, relationships disintegrated and individuals confused due to lack of unity. Mother Mariam Thresia's new ministry of Family Apostolate is a revolution that has generated universal and unending values for families.
Bibliography