CHAPTER – III

HISTORY OF THE SOCIO – ECONOMIC AND CULTURAL
PARTICIPATION OF THE WOMEN IN KERALA

This chapter makes an attempt to analyze the status of women in Kerala during the past and at present in the context of the changing socio-cultural and economic conditions prevailing here.

The cultural heritage and dramatic changes that have taken place in the socio-economic conditions of the people and very high access to advanced countries in the world through the migration of labour force have made the people in Kerala to have an entirely different outlook towards various spheres of activities. The increased interactions with different people all over the world over a very long period of time has made Keralites to have a gradual diffusion of various cultures. These also got reflected at the family as well as the individual levels of Keralites. These socio-cultural and economic changes that have taken place in Kerala over a long period of time have also influenced the women to a great extent, which could be discernible, if we make a close examination of the status of women in Kerala during the past and at present.

This chapter deals with the status of women in Kerala during the Pre - Twentieth and the Twentieth century respectively.
STATUS OF WOMEN IN KERALA DURING THE PRE-TWENTIETH CENTURY

During the earlier days of Pre-Twentieth century (1 – 500 AD), martial spirit of a very high order had prevailed not only among men but also among the women of Kerala. The women in Kerala played a decisive role in preserving the morale of the fighting forces in times of war. Women even went to the battlefield in order to encourage the males who were fighting against the enemies. Death on the battlefield was considered a great honour for a soldier. If a king or commander-in-chief died in the battle, the fighting was at once stopped and a war dance called 'Kuravaikuthu' was performed. "Thunangaikuttu" and "Amala" were certain other forms of war dances performed on the battlefield. Women dancers took part in "Kuravaikuttu" and "Thunangaikuttu" but not in "Amala".

Another striking feature of social life in the early period was the high status accorded to women. The 'Purdah' system was unknown. Women enjoyed complete freedom of movement as well as the right to education. They took part freely in all the amusements of social life. In view of the high level of female literacy, this period produced many gifted poetess. "Auvvaiyar" who lived about 500 AD was the most outstanding poetess of the period. Child marriage was unknown during this period and adult marriage was the normal rule. However, widow marriages were permitted. The "Gandharva System" of marriage, which allowed the voluntary union of man and woman in secrecy was
very popular. Elopement by girls who did not approve the choice of their husbands by parents is alluded to in many works.\(^4\)

During this period, women also enjoyed the freedom to follow the occupation of their choice. While many of them took to weaving, several others engaged themselves in the sale of fish, salt, etc. They were employed as shopkeepers, domestic servants, agricultural labourers and gardeners. Women were fond of jewels such as necklaces, bangles, anklets, etc. Women wore cotton fabrics as well as silk and woolen clothes. On festive occasions they used to get themselves attired in the best of clothes and ornaments but widows would not participate in the festivals. The ‘leaf skirt’ was quite popular during this period; even the princesses were wearing it. It is significant that this custom is prevalent even now among some of the hill tribes of Kerala like the ‘Koragas’ of North Malabar.

During this period, music, poetry and dancing provided entertainment to the upper classes and they were systematically propagated among them. There were poetesses who composed poems in praise of their patrons and were generously rewarded by the latter, while some of them like ‘Pananar’ of North Malabar stayed with their patrons in their houses, others were wandering minstrels who moved from place to place in search of patronage. Dancing was a common ‘pastime’ of the people of the period and it was performed on all occasions of rejoicing. Mixed dances in which both men and

\(^4\) Pananar, the great poet, originally belonged to the Pana Community and Panas were even superior to Brahmins in their intellectual and cultural accomplishments.
women participation were also not rare. Monarchy was the most important political institution in the land; the successions to the throne were regulated by the patrilineal (makkathayam) system of inheritance.

There were references to Onam, the national festival of Kerala in ancient literature and inscriptions, where high degree of involvement of women and children could be observed. There were some games peculiar to the women folk also during this festival such as ‘Thiruvathirakali’, ‘Kummi’, ‘Mudiyattam Kali’, ‘Oonjal swinging’, etc. The women and children who were on the swing had sung a number of folksongs. ‘Thiruvathira’ is another festival exclusively for women, a day of restricted fasting and women avoid, the ordinary rice meal, taking only little millet or wheat. ‘Poothiruvathira’, the first Thiruvathira after a girl’s marriage was celebrated on a large scale in the house.

The introduction of caste system (Chaturvarnya) (500 AD – 1000 AD) during Aryan period had brought about a decline in the level of general literacy of women. Sudras, the members of the socially relegated caste were denied the right to education was also restrained from enjoying other social privileges. The social status of a person came to be determined on the basis of the occupation in which he/she was involved. Dignity of labour no longer commanded any recognition during this period. Those who were engaged in occupations involving physical exertion were relegated to the lowest strata of society and came to be looked up on as low castes. Side by side with the social degradation of the Panas, the Parayas and other classes of earlier days, the status of women, especially of these classes also underwent a worsened stage.
Female education was neglected, even though the education of the Devadasis received special attention. Child marriages took the place of adult marriages and women were compelled to take to family life and they had been denied of intellectual and artistic pursuits at a very early age. Women no longer enjoyed the social freedom and equality of earlier days. The life of widows were quite deplorable due to their alienation in the society.

During the period (1000 – 1500 AD) the caste system became more crucial. The period witnessed the origin of Janmi system, Marumakkathayam system, Joint family system and the institution of Polyandry. This period also witnessed the evolution of the feudal polity in Kerala. Devadasi system had its worst features during this period.

‘Thalikettu’, ‘Tirandu Kalyanam’ and ‘Pulikudi’ the ceremonies associated with women were prevailed among the Marumakkathayam communities in Kerala.

During the period (1500 – 1900 AD), women enjoyed considerable freedom in the society in one way or other. Except the women of the Namboothiri community, none of the others observed the ‘purdha’ system. The Nair women used to dress themselves in the best of clothes and adorn the most attractive ornaments and throng public places in the company of their spouses.

* The tying of a ‘tali’ round the neck of a girl by a member of the same or higher caste, but it was not a real marriage. This ceremony intended to invest the girl, with marriageable status; the person who tied the tali had no claim on the girl.

** This was the ceremony connected with the first menses of the girl.

*** This was the ceremony performed in the 9th month of the pregnancy of a woman. The woman, was given a juice prepared from the leaves of ‘Ambazham’. (Hong plum – Spondias Mangifera)
Ample examples of the involvement of women in the cultural and educational scenario of Kerala can be cited during this period. Rani Gangadhara Lakshmi, was the only lady who administered the Cochin Kingdom (during 17th Century). There were poetesses during this period. They include Manorama Thampuratty (16th Century), Kuttykunju Thankachi (1820 – 1904) and K.M.Kunjulakshmy Kettلامma (1877 – 1947).

Modern industry, started in Kerala in the middle of 19th century by the German missionaries and British planters, were providing ample scope for the deployment of women labourers. The first cotton mill was started in 1881 in Kollam, which paved its way to the participation of women in the industrial sector in this area.

In 1898, even 19 per cent of women in Travancore and 14 per cent of women in Cochin were educated in schools.
STATUS OF KERALA WOMEN DURING THE TWENTIETH CENTURY

The socio-economic status of the women of Kerala during the Twentieth century are categorized into two, viz.,

1. Socio-economic status of the women of Kerala during pre-independence period (1900 – 1947) and

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Twentieth century witnessed high degree of women involvement in public affairs. In the early 20th century, they involved in public activities and acted efficiently in areas like education, medicine and literature. As part of the campaign for the upliftment of the socially backward communities, their education also received special attention.

In 1919, women in Travancore obtained partial voting rights. In 1922 – 23, they were allowed to enter into ‘Sreemoolam Prajasabha’ and ‘Legislative Council’. Even though, there were no voting rights in Cochin, there were demand, for considering them by giving peculiar or special participation and were published in leading newspaper. In 1924, Dr. Mary Punnan Lokos was appointed as Superior Officer in Medical Department and she occupied the
position of council. In 1930, women in Kerala occupied the position in legislatures. The famous women of Kerala who acted as members of Legislative Assembly and participated in the debate for women's rights and management include. T. Narayini Amma, Thottakkattu Madhavi Amma, Annachandi, Smt. K.K. Kuruvila, Gouri Pavithran, etc.

Women of Kerala who obtained higher position in law, medicine journalism and education during this period include Annachandi, Dr. Mary Punnan Lukos, Dr. Mettilda John, B. Bhagheerathi Amma, Gouri Sankunni, etc. Annachandi was the first women who obtained degree in law and many newspapers gave blessings to her for obtaining such a degree. Suriyani Christian community gave 'Suvarna Mudra' to Mary Punnan, who obtained degree in Medicine. During this period, each community used to give blessings and encouragement to the women who got higher education. Many communities during this period were also pressuring on the Government for giving preferences to women in Government employment. There were women owned and administered schools such as Agasta Blan Ford in Trivandrum and Mrs. Baker School in Kottayam and these schools provide better education to womenfolk.

The new ideas about employment reservation and financial assistance to women, especially for technical education were very much discussed during this period in Legislative Assembly, medias, public speeches, etc. There were a large number of eminent women in the sphere of social reformation and compassionate activities. Mudukulam Parvathy Amma, Arya Pallam, Parvathy Nenmeni Mangalam, Devaki Narikkattiri were some of the
prominent persons during that period. K.Chinnamma, the founder of 'Hindu Mahila Mandiram', located in Thiruvananthapuram, was another praiseworthy woman who was engaged in compassionate activities during the same period.

In the early period of this century, women were providing services in the fields of supervision, education, teaching, etc. In 1941, 15 per cent of teachers in Travancore schools were women. In Cochin 30 per cent of women were provided with modern education and a large number of women who obtained traditional education were engaged in modern literature after obtaining their traditional education.

Women had very active participation even in productive sector. In 1911, 30 per cent of plantation labourers in Travancore were women. In the beginning of 20th century out of 81,000 coir making labourers, 61,000 were women. Ambalapuzha coir making labourers union was the first women labour union whose secretary was Smt. K.Devayany. The first agitation by women agricultural labourers near Ambalapuzha was organized in 1930s.

Women were in the forefront in political agitations during 1930, which include Smt. Makkapuzha Karthianiamma, Smt. T.C. Kochukutty Amma, Smt. A.V. Kuttimalu Amma, Smt. k.E. Sarada, Smt. C.R. Devaki Amma, Smt. Akkamma Cheriyan, Smt. Ratnamayee Devi, etc. In the Marxist Communist party, there were so many women leaders during this period, which include Smt. Suseela Gopalan, Smt. K.R. Gouri Amma, etc., who had assumed leading roles in the party. Special Committees for women in factory, Women’s Sangams in
connection with annual functions of the union were in practice and 'Mahila Sangam' was organized in one of such functions.

When the attitude of the society towards persons engaged in dance and drama were changed positively, so many women artists had started to enter this field, especially the women in the upper-class and having high social status in the society. Moreover the existing danseuses have been obtaining high recognition in the society.

In 1927, an organisation named "Women Health Service" was established to ensure more participation of women in health sector also. In Travancore (Thiruvananthapuram) a large number of women were also started to assume professions as nurses in hospitals, exclusively for the services in connection with pregnancy.

In 1924, Rani Sethu Lakshmibai took administration as Regent in Thiruvithamcore. In 1925, by introducing 'Makkathayam', the Nair Regulations were changed. In 1934, the first widow marriage in Namboothiri community took place.

Even though, women have participation in the above fields such as legislative assembly, political agitation, productive sectors, literature, etc., there were so many unfavourable factors, which constrained them to enter into social activities. Opposition from cynical criticisms from family members, community

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* Indira Bai Thanakachi was an eminent danseuse of Travancore during this period.
** Uma Antharjanar (Nangema) the widow became the wife of M.R.B; Malayala Manorama Year Book, 2000.
and religious organisations were some of them, which prevented the women in entering into public activities.

2. Socio-economic status of the women in Kerala during the post-independence period

During this period women in Kerala generally obtained educational gain, safety and better status in society. But the attitude and outlook of society towards the problem of women lacks something in all fields. The constitution provides equal rights to women and men, but religious superstition and caste-wise groupism has destructed the rights of women today.

Women entrepreneurship of Kerala has proper education and access to capital. They have a high degree of motivation and entered into business as a result of the encouragement received from husbands, relatives and Mahila Sangams. Many of them are deficient in the requisite technical knowledge and are forced to employ technicians and managers. A majority of the women entrepreneurs seek rewards for good returns in investments and find the work satisfying and challenging.

The educational standards of women are generally high in the State, but with regard to economic, social and cultural field they are in a relatively backward position. The women infictions and other discriminations are increasing along with this.

For the empowerment of women so many schemes were introduced by the Government during the post independence period. The
schemes include IRDP, TRYSEM, DWCRA, etc. Of this DWCRA is a sub scheme of IRDP is exclusively for women, which is introduced in all the districts in Kerala.

The State of Kerala is bestowed with leading women consultants, eminent scientists, mathematicians, doctors, artists, educationalists, managers, administrators, politicians, poetesses and business entrepreneurs, during this period.

Women writers like Madhavikkutty and Sugathakumari, Sara Joseph, a feminist writer, Ajitha, a women liberation activist, etc., are some of the glaring examples of leaders in their respective fields in Kerala.

Now women entrepreneurs in Kerala State are entering in the field of producing sophisticated electronic items like inverters, televisions, stabilizers, computers, etc. Technical and managerial personnel are hired by women entrepreneurs as most of them do not have the requisite industrial know how, though they are highly educated.

Irene Sundaram, an entrepreneur in “Vanitha Electricals at South Kalamassery; Mrs. Achamma Joseph, Kochi started and registered a small scale industrial unit as software system; Pamela Anna Mathew having the complete responsibility of “OEN Co.” producing computer instrumentation, telecom, etc.; Anna Kandathil, owner of various organizations like Navajeevan Computer and Communications, Navajeevan Printing and Publishing and Navajeevan Institute of Career Guidance; Vasanthi having a small scale unit of ‘Tuti fruity’ in Angamaly; Tulasi Ramanathan a dealer in Caltex. Malappuram district, etc., are
some of the dynamic and innovative women entrepreneurs acting as agents of economic change in their respective roles in the State of Kerala.

There is very high women participation in connection with the activities of “Janakeeyasoothranam”, i.e., peoples campaign for planning. Still with regard to labour participation and economic self – independence, today women in Kerala are not in a better position.

Participation of women in entrepreneurial activities in Kerala has attained a good momentum after the independence. Several enterprises promoted by women have come into existence in Kerala during the post independence period when compared to the women enterprises in other States. There were 782 women’s industrial units on 31st March 1984, as against the number of 358 units in 1981 in Kerala. Of these 782 units, 592 units were sole trading concerns, 102 co-operative societies, 43 partnership concerns, 42 charitable institutions and 3 joint stock companies. These industries were classified with the respective number of units in brackets, as food production and processing (77), ready made garments (281), book binding (106), matches (27), candle making (33), chemical items (18), handicrafts (28), electronic radio assembling (25), rubber items (25), chemical laboratories (18), engineering works (4), handloom textiles (32) and miscellaneous (108).  

Various forms of financial and other assistance from the State Government, Financial institutions, Local Bodies, Non Government organizations, etc., facilitated the emergence of women entrepreneurship in Kerala.
Women in Kerala are skilled in traditional and self acquired crafts like embroidery, lace, toys and doll making, weaving and so on. The dominant crops of Kerala are coconut, rice, tapioca, pepper, tea, rubber, betel nuts, cashew nuts, etc. Most of the industrial units set-up by women utilize the raw materials that are locally available.

The Nationalized Banks and State Financial Corporations advance loans to women entrepreneurs on preferential basis for empowering them and to make them involved in innovative economic activities. State Industrial Development Corporations and District Industries Centres provide loans, subsidies and grants to small-scale industries and women entrepreneurs. State level agencies assist women entrepreneurs in preparing project reports, buying machinery and building, training and hiring staff. All these have contributed positively towards the strengthening of women entrepreneurship in Kerala, especially during the post-Independence period. Post independence period also witnessed a congenial environment for the growth of women entrepreneurship in the State, especially due to the person-oriented approach of the Government rather than the project-oriented approach, which was prevalent during earlier days.
REFERENCES


2. ibid.

3. ibid.

4. ibid.


6. ibid., p. 344.

7. ibid., p.344.

8. ibid.

9. ibid.