Chapter I

Introduction

"Every decision is to be taken with the involvement of the people concerned. It could be direct or through the elected representatives. This is the primary import of democracy and keeping a section of society off the decision making process is its negation."

The above observation by Arther Lewis underscores the spirit of democracy. Among all systems of government, with all its shortcomings, democracy is the ideal dispensation. The direct and active involvement and participation of the whole body politic is to be assured if the ideals and goals of democracy are to be realised, and this is sought to be done fervently in every democracy.

That popular involvement has been scant in the Indian democracy is stressing the obvious. The lesser the involvement the lesser the vigilance of the people. Philosophically speaking, democracy has got a three dimensional manifestation: it is a form of government; it is an economic ideal; it is a way of life. Whenever and wherever people's vigilance flags and fails democracy declines and dies.

Decentralisation goes a long way in ensuring maximum popular involvement in the democratic process. Democracy becomes meaningful only when power, instead of getting concentrated on a few, percolates down to even the lowest stratum of society. To a great extent, the largest democracy that India is, oriented itself in this direction right from its genesis.

The Directive Principles of State Policy enshrined in the democratic constitution of India inform all the sublime ideals of democracy, including the principles of democratic decentralisation. Article 40 of the Constitution reads as
follows: "The state shall take steps to organise village panchayats and endow them with such powers and authority as may be necessary to enable them to function as units of self-government." The federal as well as state governments have been endeavoring to fulfill these ideals in many ways, which touched the high watermark when the historic Constitutional Seventy Third and Seventy Fourth Amendment Acts were passed in 1993. It was a giant leap forward in the direction of maximum popular involvement in every aspect of governance, providing that there shall be a three-tier panchayat system throughout the country. That it has the constitutional sanction and protection is great indeed.

Dynamic popular involvement in the working of democratic institutions is the cornerstone of democratic decentralisation. It is a universally acknowledged principle. Real participation does not confine itself to mere discussions, debates and deliberations. Decentralisation becomes a meaningful ideal only when people are well equipped to make decisions in matters of formulation and implementation of governmental policies.

Politics is usually considered as a male preserve. The fact remains that notwithstanding the progress made in other fields of human endeavour, the involvement of women in politics has been consistently minimal. Women's participation in politics is closely related to their level of empowerment. The political awareness and involvement of women can be considered as a yardstick of their empowerment.

Women empowerment is conditioned by the socio-economic and religio-cultural ambience. It could be achieved with or without governmental assistance and support. Nonetheless, in the Indian context women empowerment remained a distant dream for a good five decades till the 73rd Constitutional Amendment Act, began to be implemented. The passage of the above Act is a landmark in the march of women towards the ultimate goal of self-fulfillment.
This study seeks to make an investigation into how much women in Kerala could make use of the opportunities which the Act provided and how much it helped them empower themselves. The hallmark of the Kerala society is its diversity and socio-economic imbalances. The vestiges of the feudal past still persist in this society. Women who constitute more than fifty percent of the state’s population are a marginalised lot despite half a century of independence.

In literacy as well as healthcare, Kerala women are far ahead. However, their presence in the political arena, even at the grassroots level, was not at all conspicuous until empowerment was, as it were, thrust upon them by the 73rd Act. The Act made the involvement and participation of women in politics mandatory. Thirty three percent of the total seats and posts in the three-tier Panchayati Raj system are now been filled by women. This is the background which prompted the identification of this topic for study and to pay maximum effort to delve into the different dimensions of rural democracy and women’s political participation and involvement in them.

An Overview of the Chapters

The introductory chapter deals at length with the relevance of the study and its objectives, presents the hypotheses and explains the methodology. Notwithstanding the fact that, India is the largest democracy in the world, it had to wait for nearly five decades to realise the ideals of true democracy at the grassroots level, thanks to the passing of the 73rd and 74th constitutional Amendment Acts. It is an epoch making and historic event in the annals of the constitutional history of India and a leap in the direction of the goal of women empowerment.

The second chapter enquires into the origin and development of the local self-government institutions in India. It is universally accepted that local self-government is the infrastructure upon which the super structure of democracy is erected. Down the centuries the concept of local self-government manifested itself
in various societies with its own local characteristics, and they must have influenced one another.

The study covers the entire gamut of the history of decentralisation during the ancient period, the colonial era, the post-independence decades and the contemporary developments following the passage of the Seventy Third Constitutional Amendment Act. This chapter lays special emphasis on the story of democratic decentralisation in Kerala.

The third chapter seeks to provide the theoretical implications of the concept of political participation in general and attempted to understand the attitude and role of women in it from a historic perspective. Democracy implies equality of all human beings. As against this basic notion of democracy, what is normally seen is that women are excluded in different walks of life, more visibly in the political arena. For the attainment of true democratic spirit women will be given access to politics and political participation. The equal treatment to women in political life, to be meaningful and effective, should start from the bottom. To provide training and practice in the process of decision-making, the rural democratic institutions are the ideal structures to start with. One of the aims of the 73rd Constitutional Amendment Act is to accomplish this purpose.

As the study focuses on the Kerala situation, emphasis has been given to the study of the political participation of women in Kerala vis-a-vis their social status in terms of their educational standards and healthcare consciousness.

The fourth chapter is an empirical study of the participation of women in Kerala in some of the major areas of the political processes. The interactions of individuals provide the raw material for political activity. As a general concept, political process embraces all the activities by which people attempt to gain and wield legitimate influence within a society. It is often used as a synonym for politics. In a more specialised sense, it may denote an approach to political studies
whose perceptions and concerns overlap substantially with those of political
behaviour. The political process may, therefore, be conceived and studied in terms
of multiple, parallel, collaborating and competing patterns of interactions linking
citizens as active participants in the key positions of decision-making.

The study is based on the data regarding Kerala women’s general political
awareness and their attitude and involvement in voting, campaigning,
organisational and agitational activities. Women’s attitude to audiovisual media
has also been enquired into.

The fifth chapter is an enquiry as to women’s participation in the meetings
of Gramasabha. The institution of Gramasabha, which resulted from the 73rd
Constitutional Amendment Act, represents an attempt at the restoration of the
concept of direct democracy at the grassroots level. Now a study regarding
people’s political participation at the rural level necessitates an enquiry into their
attitude to and interest in the Gramasabha meetings.

In India, Gramasabha has long been recognised as the lowest unit of
democracy in one form or the other. The 73rd Constitutional Amendment Act
elevated this concept to the status of a constitutional reality. Women’s awareness
about the institution of grama sabha, the factors that motivated them to participate
in it and the level of their participation were enquired into as part of the study.

The sixth chapter deals with the idea of reservational empowerment. India
has now provided one-third representation to women at the grassroots level
democratic bodies, that is, local self-government institutions. Nearly one million
women were elected to such bodies immediately after the 73rd and 74th
Constitutional Amendment Acts. For the one million women elected to these
bodies, at least four to five million might have contested the elections. Thus a vast
segment of our female population has moved forward to active political life. With
such involvement of women in public life, a silent revolution has been ushered into the rural areas.

An enquiry has, therefore, been made in detail as to the level of internal awakening and external effectiveness of the elected women panchayat representatives as part of the reservational empowerment, thanks to the 73rd Constitutional Amendment Act.

Chapter seven is the concluding chapter. In the light of empirical study based on direct interactions with the respondents, with the help of a detailed questionnaire, on different aspects and dimensions of women’s political participation, attitudes and involvement in the grassroots level democratic institutions and political processes, the chapter presents the inferences that have crystallised from the study.

The chapter also contains the observations and findings of the study. In fine it dwells upon some of the suggestions and recommendations with a view to ensuring maximum women’s political participation in rural democratic institutions.

**Objectives of the study**

The overall objective of the study is to understand the level and extent of the political participation of women in Kerala. The following specific objectives may be noted.

1. To examine the factors that generally influence the political involvement and participation of women.

2. To study the participation of women in elections, campaigns, organisational and agitational activities.

3. To understand the general and political awareness of women in Kerala.
4. To understand the level and extent of women's Gramasabha participation.

5. To understand how the women panchayat members made use of the vast opportunities opened before them by the 73rd Act.

**Hypotheses**

1. The 73rd Constitutional Amendment Act has brought women's empowerment down to the grassroots.

2. The gender sensitivity of elected women representatives promotes women empowerment.

3. Women's political participation manifests itself most in the exercise of franchise.

4. The political participation of women is influenced by their age, religion, caste, education, marital and occupational status.

5. The political institution of Gramasabha acts as a valuable means for women's empowerment and political participation.

6. Reservation of seats and offices of chairpersons for women in Panchayati Raj institutions helps them in their internal awakening and external effectiveness.

7. Women's participation in Gramasabha meetings has been conditioned by their level of political enlightenment.

**The Universe of the Study**

The universe of the study constitutes ten panchayats (Appendix-II) in the district of Kottayam in Kerala. The district of Kottayam lies between latitude 9°,
and 10°, 21 and longitude 76°, 22 and 77°, 25. It has a total area of 2204 sq.kms., which forms 5.7% of the total area of the state. According to the 1991 census, the total population of the district is 1828271 of which 9,12,860 are males and the remaining 9,15,411 are females.

The district of Kottayam has two revenue divisions viz., Kottayam and Pala, each under the control of a Revenue Divisional Officer. Vaikom, Kottayam, Changanassery, Meenachil and Kanjirappally are the Taluk divisions in the district. There are four municipalities, eleven block panchayats and 73 grama panchayats. Out of the 73 grama panchayats (now 74) ten were selected for the study. While selecting them care was given to see to it that the panchayats selected for the study belonged to different blocks and that five of them had women as presidents. The selected panchayats were: Maravanthuruthu in Vaikom block, Thalayolaparampu in Kacuthuruthy block, Arpukkara in Ettumannoor block, Kidangoor in Uzhavoor block, Bharananganam in Lalam block, Moonnilavu in Erattupetta block, Kumarakom in Pallom block, Vazhapplayy in Madappally block, Kangzha in Vazhooor block and Mundakkayam in Kanjirappally block. The selection was made by taking into account, the geographical and women presidentship factors.

Methodology

This study is based on a field level investigation done among women electorate and elected representatives in ten panchayats in the district of Kottayam and relies more on primary data and whenever necessary secondary data. The method used is broadly descriptive and analytical.

The primary data have been collected from the respondents. For the present study there are two categories of respondents, such as, all the elected women panchayat members of the village panchayat committees during 1995-2000, come under the universe of the study and the 400 women selected on the basis of
stratified random sampling from the same panchayat areas. Of the 400 women respondents, 40 each were selected from each panchayat coming under the purview of study.

Exhaustive interviews were conducted with them with the help of a detailed questionnaire. The questionnaire schedules were pre-tested. Keeping in mind the two types of respondents, the researcher drafted separate questionnaires. Each question was explained to them and maximum care was taken to collect as much data as possible. The reports of various commissions and committees have been of immense help in the study. Sources on the internet have also been made use of.

After proper editing and coding, the data collected during the field work were processed electronically. The relevant materials obtained from the primary and secondary sources were analysed to bring out the different aspects of the central theme of the study.

The study made use of the statistical test of independence using chi-square test. Here the null hypothesis is that the two characteristics considered are independent. Under the null hypothesis various cell frequencies are estimated and the chi-square value is calculated using the formula \( \sum (O - E)^2 / E \), where ‘O’ is the observed frequency of various cells and ‘E’ is the expected frequency of various cells calculated under the null hypothesis. The degrees of freedom is \((r-1) \times (s-1)\). Where ‘r’ is the number of rows and ‘s’ the number of columns of the table. If the Calculated Value(C.V.) of the chi-square exceeds the Tabled Value(T.V.) at 5% significance level, the null hypothesis is rejected, otherwise accepted. This test is applied only for those tables, which are the results of two-way classification. For tables which permit multiple choice answers, chi-square test is not directly applied but applied only after making it as a two-way contingency table.

In this study, wherever average estimates are taken for the detailed explanation of the table, the pooled average system is employed.
Limitations and future prospectus of the study

This study has certain limitations. It was confined to just 10 panchayats in one district. The study was based and the inductions were made on the basis of responses of 438 women, who constituted only a miniscule minority of the area. However, this study opens up exciting vistas for further research in the field.