

### **Chapter 3**

## **DALIT AND FEMINIST MOVEMENTS IN KERALA: A HISTORICAL OVERVIEW**

### **CONTEMPORARY DALIT DISCOURSES**

Identity is not as transparent or unproblematic as we think. Instead of thinking of identity as an already accomplished fact which the new cultural practices then represent, perhaps we should think of identity as a 'production' which is never complete, always in process, and always constituted within, not outside representation. This view problematises the very authority and authenticity to which the term, 'cultural identity' lays claim. (Hall 1990:222)

Dalit movements have begun to take shape during the 1980s by being greatly influenced by Ambedkar's thoughts. With all their limitations, these organizations started to address caste differently from the way the left imagined it. Unlike the left, who interpreted caste as lower class, these organizations approached caste as another important category, which they often called 'oppressed nationality'. Some other organizations existed in the form of caste organizations or subaltern organizations; they based their identity in terms of governmental categorization of caste. This was mostly under the leadership of educated young dalits who have achieved good academic education during 1960s and 1970s. The deprived situation of their community and their realization that the caste structure has been contributing

to such a status on the one hand and the sense of justice and equity they have learned through modern education on the other hand led them to establish such organizations. Mostly these organizations addressed caste discrimination, atrocities against dalits, and ensuring a timely distribution of government welfare programmes and schemes for the community. A firm belief in the good of the welfare programmes and their inclusive activities could be seen in the debates of this type of organizations. The names of these organizations were also based on governmental categories in which they placed their status; an example of such an organization is KSSA (Kerala Stipendiary Students Association).

During the 1980s, politics of dalits in Kerala underwent a shift with regard to their political approach. Translation of books of Ambedkar in the regional language as part of dissemination of information by North Indian organizations such as Dalit Panthers, made a huge influence on dalits in Kerala. This gave a new set of tools to analyse and address caste in a radically different way. The result was the emergence of new organizations based on dalit identity.

An attempt is made here to discuss dalit discourses in Kerala in such a context. The questions that this chapter address are: how did the dalits form a new space for discussing caste question in a left dominated space like Kerala and what are the arguments proposed by different groups who share dalit identity as a key category to intervene in the political space?

## **IDENTITY FORMATION: INITIAL PHASE OF DALIT DISCOURSES**

We could approximately draw this phase from late 1980s to the second half of 1990s. It is also a phase of consistent shift and changes in the ideology and praxis of dalit movements. Though the movements in this era were mainly constituted by lower caste organizations which ideologically shared a left worldview, they initiated talking about caste in the public space which the left always negated. These two decades witnessed dalit movements breaking away from left ideology and exhibited a resistance towards considering lower caste people as proletarian in the left discourses. The word 'dalit' began to appear in the socio-political milieu of Kerala only after the 1970s. The late appearance of the term in Kerala has much to do with the particular trajectory of the "renaissance that the state underwent which succeeded in camouflaging and silencing many discourses besides the marginalised" (Dasan 2011). It is noted that "the Dalit movements which emerged in this period gave priority to and projected mass movements, unlike the obstinate caste and community leaders of the earlier phase" (Baburaj 2011). Apart from the organisations based on prior imposed identities and categories given to dalits such as Depressed Classes, Scheduled Castes, Harijans from the 1960s till the middle of 1980s, dalits themselves moved towards relatively new modes of theorising caste in the later years (Satyanarayana and Tharu 2011). Most of them emerged in response to the left's failure in addressing caste experiences and tried to

analyse the Indian caste system by drawing on from both Marxism and Ambedkarism.

We could find emergence of different lower caste organizations led by dalits themselves. Some of them are rights-based organizations and they focused on the empowerment of community through the proper delivery of governmental programmes and policies envisaged for the welfare of the community. They have fought for constitutional rights; they took up cases of caste atrocities; they raised land issues and they also worked for internal reforms of the community. Some of them followed Gandhian ideology to address caste issues while others stood for Ambedkarite ideology. Examples of such organisations include KHF (Kerala Harijan Federation) and KSSA (Kerala Stipendiary Students Association). These movements more or less constructed lower caste people after the governmental notions about them. The title of the organizations and their programmes substantiate this observation. We could also find a sense of 'community' (not in a sense of the term which came to be used in later periods) feeling which was essentially the outcome of reformation discourses. These organizations addressed all dalit castes as a collective entity irrespective of sub-castes. The organizations falling under this category of movements of the initial phase are examined below.

### **Kerala Harijan Federation (KHF)**

It was Peerumedu Thaluk Harijan Federation (PTHF) which organized lower caste people living in Peerumedu taluk in the beginning, which eventually

became the High Range Harijan Federation, which functioned without the consideration of sub-castes, religion and politics. After two decades, this organization changed its name to All Kerala Harijan Federation (AKHF) by merging similar organizations. The All Kerala Harijan Federation (AKHF) changed its name to Kerala Harijan Federation (KHF) shortly. KHF was an organization aimed at working for the liberation of lower class in Kerala - dalit, adivasi and other depressed Christians- who were the target group; it was formed without considerations of party politics and hierarchies based on sub-caste. They worked more in the trade union mode since majority of its members were workers. Later they formed a trade union for dalit workers in order to strengthen the activities of KHF and political empowerment of dalits . Kerala Harijan Federation changed its name in to Kerala Dalit Federation in the late eighties, appropriating dalit politics that unfolded at the national level.

KHF had led various agitations during the seventies and eighties. In various dharnas, marches and fasting campaigns during these decades, KHF demanded equal rights for dalits in all spheres of life. Their major focus was human rights violations on dalits and adivasis. Their major demands were to consider any atrocities of 'Harijans' as crime, to give legal protection for dalits, and to implement the law pertaining to the restitution of land to adivasis in 1975 - which suggest giving back alienated land to Adivasis. Futher demands included reservations in cooperative societies, rejecting gift deed and formulating an integral agricultural land reforms in Kerala. On the issue

atrocities against dalits, KHF demanded establishing special courts or mobile courts, if necessary, in sensitive areas to check atrocities against 'Harijans' and deployment of special police squad under IPS officers to investigate such cases.

Other important interventions by KHF were their Guruvayur Padayathra (Guruvayur March) which started from Sree Padmanabha Swami temple in Thiruvananthapuram to Guruvayur temple and a march organised from Valiyathura church to Malankara Orthodox church. The former was a protest against the practice of keeping 'oottupura' (dining hall in the premises of temple) exclusively for Brahmins at Guruvayur temple. Lower caste people were not allowed to have meals from there. The church march was led by eminent leaders of KHF such as Paul Chirakkarodu and Kallara Sukumaran. It was to draw public attention towards the discriminatory practices that prevailed in Kerala churches towards dalit Christians. Reservation in the private sector, transparency in reservation policies of government jobs, filling up the back-log of SC/ST appointments in government jobs and reservation to dalit Christians proportionate to their population, were other crucial demands that this organization had put forward.

Parallel to these interventions, the political party which was formed out of the mass base of KHF, Indian Labour Party (ILP), also organized a series of agitations and struggles raising different sets of demands. These demands were more of a general kind. For instance, ILP organized a Secretariat March

demanding the implementation of an integral land reform law to get the ownership of agricultural land for the agricultural labourers. They also asked for implementing a ceiling on urban assets and plantations. Demand for pension for all labourers who completed fifty five years and reservation in government aided sectors were also important demands of ILP.

Indian Labour Party's decision to contest assembly election also shows the political orientation of dalit movements. They also tried for a new (third) front in Kerala in alliance with Congress factions and other groups. Though all these political experiments were a failure, it helped dalits learn to speak a new language on political power.

### **Students' Organizations**

Kerala Harijan Student's Federation (KHSF) is another organization which was formed in the southern part of the state during 1968. It was formed in order to protect the reservation rights of SC/ST students, but they focused on lower caste Hindus only. Their activities were focused around the city hostels in the state.

Kerala Stipendary Students Association (KSSA) became functional during late seventies. It stood for the stipendiary benefits of lower caste students. It was the first organization which was based on Ambedkarite ideology. They organized all lower caste students irrespective of sub-castes and religions. They have also participated actively in the struggles and protests by dalits.

They have conducted many All Kerala Marches on issues such as hike in the amount of stipend for SC/ST students and timely release of stipends, transparency in college admission, ensuring better students-friendly atmosphere in Harijan welfare hostels and protesting against caste atrocities. They also had organized marches for propagating Ambedkarism.

What follows is analysis of the history of various dalit organizations that contributed to the emergence of the dalit discourses of the first phase:

***Adasthitha Navodhana Munnani (ANM)***

Adasthitha Navodhana Munnani is an organization founded in 1987 under the leadership of K.M. Salimkumar. This organization focused on the self esteem of dalits and making dalits proud of their identity. It also rejected the idea of approaching dalits as lower class. They have conceived dalits and Adivasis as a common group and worked towards the politicization of both communities. They have conducted many meetings to discuss the internal issues of dalit community. They published a magazine *Adhasthitha Navodhana Munnani Bulletin* in which they have published many articles relating to dalit and adivasi issues. 'Burning of *Manusmriti*' was a protest staged mainly by the ANM to protest against the Hindu hegemony and the prevailing caste system. They have raised issues relating to land, protested against fascism by right wing Hindu groups and struggled for restoration of alienated Adivasi land. In analyzing and placing caste question, this organization depends much on left

ideology. ANM has created a corpus of writings on dalit issues through various publications such as bulletins, magazines, booklets and books

### **Dalit Christian Movements**

These are different kinds of organizations that include cultural and theological movements under the leadership of dalits in Protestant denominations. Two-folded activities happened in these movements- one is the struggle which demanded for welfare measures for dalit Christians and the other is protests which demanded for equal rights within churches and church-related institutions.

Satyanarayana and Tharu (2011) says,

The separate administrative movement (1960-1966) initiated by Stephen Vattappara, challenged uppercaste power structure of Syrian Christians and demanded a representative leadership for dalits in the church. The demand of the movements included proportional representation for dalit in jobs in church controlled schools, colleges, and hospitals, and opportunities and power in the church and its various bodies (30).

T. M. Yesudasan was one of the leaders of this movement. It conducted various discussions and invited world thinkers and leaders in their discussions. Slowly the movement linked itself up with other community people such as fisherfolk and Adivasis. They all were inspired by ideas of Christian liberation theology.

Groups like *Janakeeya Vimochana Vishwasa Prasthanam* (People's Liberation Faith Movement) and *Dynamic Action* took issues of dalit Christian representation with the church and its institutions. They also addressed land rights and questioned atrocities against dalits. Interventions in the field of making folk songs and theatre experiments were key activities of these groups. Publishing of two important magazines such as *Yuvalokam* (1983) and *Dynamic Action* was also important initiatives. One of the key focus areas of this group was conducting discussions and seminars on contemporary social and political issues.

### **Kerala Dalit Panthers (KDP)**

Kerala Dalit Panthers is the militant face of dalit politics in Kerala. KDP as an organization originated through campus activities and discussions among a group of dalit engineering students who were studying at NIT Calicut; their collective later led to the formation of the students group - Ambedkarite Students Movement of India (ASMI) and then a cultural group, Dalit Cultural Force (DCF). The political consciousness which was created by being in a campus of pan-Indian student representation and sharing experiences of caste, eventually showed the way to a different genre of organization; which owed much to the ideologies of Indian Dalit Panthers and Black Panthers. Though it started from a campus in the northern part of Kerala, its mass base was in central Kerala. From the experience of both students' and cultural groups, the leaders of the groups - K Ambujakshan and Anilkumar - decided to form a

political organization by merging both, the new outfit was named as Kerala Dalit Panthers. They also had units in Wynad district.

A team of youngsters, especially the educated youth from dalit communities, who reacted to left domination and violence in dalit habitats, effectively intervened in local caste conflicts. They have also initiated ideological debates and propagated Ambedkarism throughout state. KDP was organized under three principles of Baba Saheb Ambedkar, namely, 'educate, agitate and organize'. Its constitution says

to end all exploitations, oppressions and inequalities based on caste, religion, class, lineage and sex; to work for establishing the social, economic, political power for the liberation of dalit –bahujans; to build a democratic society based on the principals of equality, fraternity and freedom; to work for a democratic social which protect the human rights of all sections of people and which guarantees equal opportunities to all.

KDP aimed at organizing dalits and bahujans in Kerala through ideological education and fighting against caste atrocities and human rights violations. They operated at local levels. To build a society based on equality and fraternity was their motto. To them, only by attaining social, cultural and economical power could dalits overcome centuries old deprivation which caste system imposed on them. For this, dalits have to build political alliances with like-minded communities and other marginalized sections of society. In the

beginning of the 1990s, they conducted many programmes to establish Ambedkarite ideology in Kerala. For this purpose, they conducted many All Kerala ‘Pracharana Yathra<sup>1</sup>’ to propagate awareness on different themes connected to dalit issues. One of them was Ambedkar Centenary Yathra to propagate the idea of liberation through Ambedkarite thought.

They have staged many struggles and protest meetings raising different demands and issues relevant to the dalit lives which range from reservations in private sector, atrocities against dalits, complete and integral land reforms , distribution of agricultural lands to dalits, Adivasi land issue and so on.

### **SEEDIAN (Socially Economically Educationally Depressed Indian Natives)**

SEEDIAN, an organization which is formed by a group of intellectuals, worked for a new theoretical frame-work to address caste issues by blending Marxism with Ambedkarism. SEEDIAN represented an initial break from Marxist-Leninist Movements and later Marxism itself. The group published the journal ‘Seedian’ and initiated a book publishing firm, November Books, which published studies in history, aesthetics, etc. SEEDIAN as a group initiated critical thinking through their publications and discussions. Unlike other organizations of that period, they gave focus more to knowledge production. The magazine ‘Seedian’ published translations of many neo-

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<sup>1</sup> Long public awareness journey conducted by different organizations for the propagation of ideas or issues.

Marxist works and modern novels. There was space for creative Malayali writers as well. Many important articles were published in this magazine.

This organization is basically a left organization, but they gave thrust to caste issues. It was a group of intellectuals who tried to combine Marxist ideologies with theories of caste. One could define it as a group of disappointed Marxists who find communist ideologies as incapable of addressing Indian social realities while having trust in the ideological power of communism; therefore compelled to seek for a hybridity in theory and praxis. Thus the political disappointments created an ambience for new type of thinking. They started learning history and reading neo-Marxist thinkers. As part of the centenary celebrations of Dr. B.R. Ambedkar, India government published translation of Dr. B R Ambedkar's works in different regional languages. This made a paradigm shift in the dalit political movements in Kerala. The SEEDIAN group also underwent such a shift in the theoretical understanding of caste.

### **PRDS Progressive Council**

This group, Prathyaksha Raksha Daiva Sabha Progressive Council was formed out of disappointment of some educated and politically motivated people of the then existing priest-centered and unprogressive practices in PRDS. They challenged the existing power structure of the organization and warned that those practices are against the teachings of Poykayil Appachan. They initiated discussion on political and religious philosophy of Poykayil Appachan and tried to bring it to the world through PRDS. Their focus was to establish the

social philosophy of PRDS and make progressive changes in the practices of organization. They brought out some publications on PRDS history.

### **Dalit Students Movements (DSM)**

In the beginning of the 1990s, students belonging to dalit and backward communities studying in Maharajas College, Ernakulam and nearby colleges, grouped together to discuss the issues they face in campuses and the issues of their communities in general. Most of them have political background earlier with an anti-leftist position and thus faced issues in such left dominated campuses. It was a time when dalit groups were in protest demanding CBI enquiry on the suspicious death of dalit IAS officer, C.T. Sukumaran. These groups also participated in various levels of protest by *Dalit Ekopana Samithi*, which was a network of different dalit groups for pursuing the above mentioned struggle. Inspired by constant debates and discussions within such groups, this group of students formed a student's wing to the *Dalit Ekopana Samithi*, called *Dalit Vidyarthi Ekopana Samithi*. Though this was named as a dalit group, there were students from different communities and they all realized dalit issues as democratic issues and extended their solidarity. This network of students stood in college elections and won seats. Apart from campus politics, these groups actively engaged in dalit politics in many forms.

Later, this network of individual students and groups formed a student group called Dalit Students Movement. P.C Usha was the first General Secretary of DSM. Thus she became the first dalit woman in a key position of a dalit

political organization. DSM was formed on the basis of ideologies of three major movements inspired by Ayyankali, Poykayil Appachan and Ambedkar. So this organization believed in political assertion through community assertion, spirituality and liberal ideals.

Going through the debates from the early phase of dalit movement in Kerala, it is seen that there was an ideological affinity towards Ambedkarism. Many of the organizations published excerpts from the writing of Dr. Ambedkar. There were organizational initiatives such as camps, workshops and public awareness programmes to spread Ambedkarism among both dalits and the general public. Dr. Ambedkar's quotes were referred to in each and every meeting. Celebrations of birth anniversary and of death anniversary of Dr. Ambedkar became part of organizational activities. Photos of Dr. Ambedkar began to appear in houses of dalits; most often photos of left leaders were replaced by Ambedkar. It was a historical moment where dalits in Kerala ruptured from the left analysis of caste.

Other important shift was marked by the embracement of dalit identity; there was a strong articulation that dalits share a cultural identity irrespective of sub-caste differences. The history of oppression and slavery, commonality in social status, ritually formed subordination they face and outcaste status in established religions provide them scope for a collective feeling and claim for a common identity. Dalit identity created during this period was based on Ambedkarite ideology.

Caste atrocity and violence was onther area of concern in this phase. Cases of local caste conflicts and atrocities, doubtful deaths of dalits who were in powerful positions of governmental structures, were raised during this period. Human rights violations connected with caste were also an important issue raised by these organizations.

There were attempts to democratize the religious spaces by claiming equal access to such places. KDP and IDF took up such struggles not as a religious or spiritual matter but as an issue of democracy. Demand for reservation in private sector, inclusive development programmes in dalit settlements, reformulation of land reform bill and distribution of agricultural land for dalits were also important for these organizations. The idea of mass movements could be seen as an influence in these spaces. Many organizations were focused on expanding their power by allying with other groups. IDF and KDF proposed this idea.

Dalit identity at this time almost resembles the idea of class. Experience of discrimination and other kinds of violence were the key factors deciding identity. Other categories such as gender, cultural differences and religious differences were never a major concern in this phase. Both internal and external reform was another point of discussion. Demand for change in the practices of established religions and the necessity to rethink dalits' relationship with such religious organizations, were raised.

In short, dalit as an identity was articulated in three aspects - first is its relationship with modern spaces like educational institutions and community organizations. Second is its relationship with state and third is about internal reforms. Identity here was imagined in a collective way and rights are defined within community (Jayakumar 2000).

### **CHANGING DEBATES: SECOND PHASE OF DALIT DISCOURSES**

As Dalit theorists have amply shown, the category 'Dalit' has been historically arrived at, sociologically described and discursively constituted (Guru 2005). Contemporary Dalit discourses flourished during 2000s, further taking advantage of the conceptual apparatuses and terms from 'black criticism' and 'structuralism', and of arguments foregrounding resources and representation. These were more in the nature of initiatives by small groups, predominantly in the intellectual domain rather than mass based movements. Such political debates significantly altered the intellectual domain of Dalits and to a certain extent the domain of knowledge in the Malayali public sphere. Before going to the details of the debates that mark some twists from initial phase, let us discuss major organizations during this period. There are a lot of organizations formed during this phase, from which we are discussing only certain organizations, which have unique characteristics when compared to the initial phase discussed above. The organizations' details are as follows:

### **Dalit Maha Sabha (DMS)**

This organization is formed in 2000 and functions as a community organization. Community organization [Samudaya Samghatana] are crucial in building solidarity among its members, formulating codes and standards of both individual and community life. Sub-caste organizations have huge influence on common dalit people since they function as regulatory force among them. Community organizations are usually based on sub-castes. It generates some kind of negative pride among its members and limits the possibility of dalit identity formation and politicization of community. Sub-caste organizations are working within the Hindu fold in general and keeping a closed feature by promoting endogamy and other ritual practices imposed by Hinduism. DMS was formed to make a space for individuals who believe in dalit identity and provide them a community life with new ideals and moralities based on Ambedkarite ideology and a way of life as imagined by both Ayyankali and Poykayil movement . Here, rather than sub-caste identity, a new political self - 'dalit' - is considered for community identity.

### **DHRM (Dalit Human Rights Movement)**

This is the newest organization during the second phase of dalit discourses. The ideological positions and practice of DHRM show a total rupture from other contemporary dalit movements. It emerged as a cultural initiative in the 2000s and slowly turned into a political organization. It is closer to a sect rather than an organization; DHRM suggests some specific and strict moral

codes to its members. Study classes and participating prescribed workshops are mandatory for a DHRM member. They are following Buddhism- specifically Ambedkarite stream of Buddhism- as a belief system. They also created a uniform – blue jeans and a black t-shirt the with photo of Ambedkar imprinted for both male and female - for its members while appearing in public functions and programmes conducted by them. A kind of anti-intellectualism is prevalent in this group. This organization looks for dalit identity outside of Hindu religion. They worship Ambedkar at home. The recognition that our societal norms and cultural life is defined in terms of Savarna principles and that they dominate dalits through their ideologies, made DHRM stand for a counter-culture and life style, which is a blend of modern as well as traditional values. Devika (2013) observes:

DHRM , ironically appears to be movement,that aims not just raise to an identity, but to shape precisely a ‘deep self’ ,a new subjectivity through an array of new practices, including unisex dress code ,group singing ,cooking for each other’s family, new norms of marriage that refuse to call a sacrament ,and instead view it as union (*cheral*), have all lead to the circulation of horrendous stories about sexual excess. They also destabilize the given caste identities, referring to members of Pulaya or *Kurava* castes not with the usual *Pulayanmaar* (the pulayas) or *Kuravanmaar* (the Kuravas), but as ‘*Pulayarakkappettavar*’ (‘those who have been made pulayas’) and *Kuravaraakkappettavar* (‘those

who have made *kuravas*'). They have also refused the dominant mode in which the dalits have been inducted in to the present neo liberal welfarist regime in Kerala (16).

## **ARELI**

ARELI is a cultural group, which is based on Ambedkarite thought and focuses more on cultural interventions. It is a group of poets, writers and activists who are associated with dalit politics in multiple levels. They are initiating different discussions and seminars relating to dalit issues. This organization gives annual award for the excellence in the socio-cultural field and it was the first dalit award given by a dalit organization. T.H.P Chentharasseri - dalit historian , C .K Janu- adivasi leader and K.K. Kochu - dalit thinker, were given awards for their contribution to the democratization of Kerala society.

## ***Panchami Dalit Women's Collective***

This is a collective formed out of university spaces, where dalit women doing research have grouped together for discussing dalit and gender issues. In due course, these groups formed an informal collective named *Panchami*.

As a dalit feminist collective, it aims at creating space for critical thinking among dalit women. They have realized that in the current political scenario, it is natural for dalit women to become an activist considering her existing social status and everyday caste experience, which demands resistance against

oppression. Finding the 'dalit women' question is less articulated in both dalit and feminist debates and the invisibility of dalit women in intellectual domain of Kerala , this group of women decided to intervene in the area of scholarship through constant writing and other forms of expression. Apart from this, they have participated in various dalit struggles. For instance, a Women's March at Pathanamthitta by women activists under the leadership of *Panchami* Dalit Women's Collective took place during *Chengara* land struggle, to protest against the sexual molestation of dalit women participating in land struggles. *Panchami* Dalit feminist collective is an informal group, which aims at establishing effective method to address complexities of dalit women as a political subjectivity in oppression. They also recognize the need to theorize dalit women's experience specific to the Kerala situation since the dynamics of caste and gender differs according to the context.

### **Dalit Service Society (DSS)**

Various new dalit groups like Dalit Service Society (DSS), Dalit Students Movement (DSM) and *Dalit Aikya Samithi* (DAS) emerged during the second phase in the 2000s. DSS is an organization originated in Ernakulam, which is like a combination of both community and political organization in its functional set up. It as a community organization play a major role in every day issues of its members, like helping in marriage functions and giving report for caste certificate to be produced before village officer, etc. As a political

organization, they are associating with various struggles and programmes conducted by dalits in Kerala.

### ***Dalit Aikya Samithi***

It is a renovated form of *Adhasthitha Navodhana Munnani*, under the leadership of K.M. Salimkumar. This organization gives focus to the self esteem of dalits and makes them self conscious of their identity. As its name denotes, this organization stands for the unity among dalit community. For this purpose, they declare their organizational policy to associate with any dalit organization working in Kerala. Dalits are parted into different sub-castes, different religious groups and several organizations and political parties; only by uniting all dalit subgroups into one dalit community could dalits obtain power. So DAS aims at unity of dalits and raising self-esteem. Criticism against Gandhian approach to dalit issues, Marxian understanding of dalit question and the brahmanical structure form the ideological base of this organization. They are taking up issues that affect dalit life.

### **Dalit Students' Movement (DSM)<sup>2</sup>**

Dalit Students' Movement (DSM) in current times is an evolution and continuation of old DSM and unlike its earlier avatar, it has shown more urgency in intervening in both dalit student's and community's issues. Active intervention was made by DSM on the issue of suicide of Rajani .S.Anand,

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<sup>2</sup> New version of DSM differs from its earlier form in conceptualizing dalit issues.

who was an engineering student, studying at Thiruvananthapuram- who was denied educational assistance from authorities. Being a dalit girl, coming from a financially backward family, she couldn't afford the expenses of self-finance college education. Pained by the harassment of college authorities and depressed by the poor financial background which blocked her from pursuing education, she committed suicide by jumping from the multistoried building of her institution. This triggered a lot of discussion and agitation rallying for justice to Rajani and ensuring healthy environment for the dalit students studying for professional courses. Left student organizations put this issue as an economical issue and protested against self-finance colleges. But it is DSM which could rightly place the issue and interpret it as an issue correlating caste and gender. There were discussions around the theme of violence on dalit women's body and on how caste and gender blended together in creating dalit women's lower status. The prejudice of mainstream society towards dalit women forms a major point of discussion and agitation (Raj 2011).

Another important move by DSM was its struggles for reservation in aided colleges. This was not restricted to protests only; activists of DSM could file a case in Kerala High Court demanding to consider reservation in the recruitments in aided colleges in Kerala. Since aided colleges are funded by government (managed by private entities), they have to follow reservation criteria in their appointments- was the argument behind this demands. A detailed discussion about this will be done later in this chapter.

The Dalit voice became more and more audible in the last two decades as more and more Dalit writings got published in mainstream magazines. Books on and by Dalit writers received attention as well. Multifarious initiatives were also seen in theatre, cinema and the fine arts. Together they constituted a paradigm shift in Kerala's public sphere.

### **Major Arguments and Conceptualizations:**

#### **The Land Question**

The question of land has been the prime focus of debates in the dalit discourses in Kerala since the reform period. Dalit critics pointed out that the renowned Kerala land reform law had in fact confined dalits to five cent colonies and two cent colonies. Dalits were workers in the land - yet denied ownership of land. In the reform period, owning land was one of the major projects of lower caste movements. The repeated requests in Sree Moolam Praja Sabha - both by Ayyankali and Poykayil Appachan, resulted in minimal land ownership for the dalits in Thiruvananthapuram. The movement couldn't carry forward their demand for land as they faced stagnancy immediately after the death of their main leader. Dalits were then attracted to communist ideologies and participated in communist parties on a large scale. But dalits remained as agricultural labourers or workers within the communist parties. Caste was never a major area of concern for communists in Kerala. Introduction of land reform bill made middle castes owners of the land. Dalit life remained untouched by land reforms. There have been constant demands

for a second land reform by dalit movements. Dalit groups published many booklets on the issue of land reform - showing the failure of land reforms through statistical information. Though dalit organizations criticized communist parties on land reforms, there were only few isolated protests demanding land for dalits and Adivasis.

It was during 1990s that C.K Janu on behalf of *Adivasi Ekopana Samithi*, started a hunger strike in front of the secretariat and that protest gained a lot of support from people. Land question again got attention from public during this struggle. The aggressiveness in the style of Adivasi struggle also got noticed. This led to a number of vibrant yet creative struggles by adivasi groups. *Kudilketti Samaram* (Build the Huts Struggle) ,Muthanga Samaram (Muthanga Struggle) and Nilpu Samaram (Standing Protest) and so on. *Kudilketti Samaram* started in 2001, as a response to government failure in addressing the pathetic conditions of Adivasi life. They had absolutely no land with them. After a series of hunger deaths reported from Adivasi settlements; Adivasi Ekopana Samithi started a long protest by building sheds in front of the secretariat demanding productive land for Adivasis. The protest continued for 48 days and resulted in forcing the government to make an agreement with Adivasi leadership, promising immediate disbursement of land and other rehabilitation programmes for tribes in Kerala.

After a long wait for the fulfillment of the agreement and recognizing the betrayal of government, tribal people were forced to continue their struggle in

a different way. Under the banner of Adivasi Gothra Maha Sabha (AGMS) tribes from Wyanad decided to enter the reserve forest of Muthanga and built temporary houses there as a form of protest. The adivasi people were forcefully evicted from Muthanga in 1960 for the declaration of reserve sanctuary. The Government without any kind of move for negotiation with protesters issued an eviction notice and later forcefully evicted adivasi people from encroached forest place. This resulted in a brutal police attack on adivasi people. Though protesters tried to defend by counter attacks, police forcefully evicted them. The police fired at them and a protester was shot dead. This invited global level criticism towards government action. All these issues eventually led to the formation of Gothra Maha Sabha (GMS), and then as a political platform Rashtreeya Maha Sabha was formed , with the allies from liberal politics and dalit groups. These incidents and debates helped to get support from both national and international communities.

*Nilpu Samaram* (Standing Struggle) is a protest that happened recently under the leadership of C.K. Janu and M. Geethanandan , organized under the slogan '*Vakkupalikkal Oru Jandhipathya Maryadayaanu*' ('keeping promises is a democratic etiquette') which continued for 162 days . According to *Gothra Maha Sabha*, adivasi land struggles demanded triple level solution for the adivasi cause. Firstly, legal steps should be taken for the regaining alienated land of adivasi people. Secondly, rehabilitation programmes should be initiated for the landless tribes in Kerala. Thirdly, a political move to ensure

ownership in forest lands for tribes in Kerala, in accordance with forest rights laws for tribes of India. “The aim of Nilpu Samaram is to start a dialogue with government and society on above said issues” (Gothra Maha Sabha 2014).

There were struggles from dalit groups for land rights. Both *Chengara* and *Arippa* struggle have marked another history of dalit assertions in Kerala. It was generally believed through left debates that the question of land in Kerala is a solved problem. It is from dalit corners that concrete challenges to such presumptions have been forthcoming (Kapickadu 2012, Renukumar 1998).

The *Chengara* land struggle was started under the leadership of Laha Gopalan. The new mode of protest, which was done in a way that landless people belonging to dalit and adivasi groups occupied Harrison Malayalam Estate, Pathanamthitta, and built houses there. The movement was a fight to re-claim ownership of land that had been part of a long standing promise of the Government. Nearly 5000 families, more than 20,000 people, have entered the Harrison Malayalam Private Ltd. Estate, living in makeshift arrangements. The *Chengara* land struggle demanded for a permanent ownership of agricultural land through transfer of ownership from the Harrison Company to the dalits and adivasis. The *Sadhu Jana Vimochana Samyuktha Vedi* (SJVSV), the collective that leads the struggle, has opted for the land take-over as strategy remembering the tradition of the great leader Ayyankali, the militant dalit leader whose mission was to ensure liberation of dalits from various forms of slavery, right to agricultural land, as well as right to education in

Kerala<sup>3</sup> (Solidarity Youth Movement 2007). Participants in the struggle were brutally attacked by the left wing trade union of Harrison Estate alleging that dalit land occupiers' move is a threat to their jobs. This struggle got worldwide attention and a support council was formed under the leadership of dalit leaders and organizations and this group did a crucial role in propagating the struggle. Later, the struggle arrived at an agreement with government and some land was distributed to dalits. But still there are people living in Chengara yet to receive land from government. Chengara land struggle problematised the established understanding of land relations in Kerala (Sreerekha 2012, Rammohan 2008).

*Arippa* land struggle is an ongoing struggle under the banner of ADMS (*Adivasi Dalit Munnetta Samithi*) led by Sreeraman Koyyon. It was on December 31st, 2012, that over 150 landless families encroached and set up temporary shelters made of plastic sheets in the revenue land of Arrippa and started living there.

Their habitation in the land itself was a protest. The mainstream political parties were against the 'occupation' of revenue land and they even organized physical attacks on the protesters. Revenue land of 21.54 acres in Arrippa were allotted to the 21 families who had participated in the *Chengara* land struggle as part of the Chengara package. The occupied land at *Arippa* was earlier

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<sup>3</sup> For more details see a report on Chengara by *SOLIDARITY Youth Movement (2007)*.

leased to Tangal Kunju Musliyar. When the lease period ended, 13 acres of land were handed over to an Ambedkar residential school. The protesters have occupied 56 acres of the rest of the land. Ajithkumar (2013) observes:

The land struggles point towards the operation of the caste factor in the distribution of land in Kerala. Almost 85 percent of landless population in Kerala is composed of Dalits and Adivasis. It is said that there are more than 26,000 Dalit colonies in Kerala. Many of the Dalit intellectuals and activists have pointed out that the land reforms by the left government was the main culprit in making the Dalits landless.

Land struggles by Adivasi people in Kerala got tremendous support from public. But we could not find same in the case of dalits who have been in constant struggles for land rights for a decade through different struggles, such as Chengara land struggle and Arippa land struggle. Adivasi people are considered as pure, innocent, living in a primitive settlement – all these generate sympathy from the public. More than that, Adivasi life has never become part of mainstream life of Malayali people. They are always living far-away from the mainstream settlements. Thus giving land to Adivasi people won't disturb the land relations of Malayali society in general. This may be the reason behind unconditional support received by Adivasi land struggle. There were protests from people, who are at the risk of losing land while implementing Adivasi land bill, especially migrant settlers at Wyanad from southern part of Kerala. So it is evident that support received for Adivasi

struggle shows a middle class generosity than a political solidarity. On the contrary, dalit land struggles have been facing constant threats and attacks from political parties and local people from the occupied land. Hostility towards dalit struggles by the mainstream needs to be discussed with due importance. Unlike other states in India, demographic distribution of dalits in Kerala allows dalits to live mixing with other communities. Thus for dominant communities, unlike Adivasi who 'imagined as distant pure innocent people of living in primitive setting' dalits comes as the immediate 'other' who interact with them in everyday life. Being at risk of losing their own land, the mainstream maintains resentment towards the dalit demand for land.

### **Reservation**

The debate on reservation for dalits and subaltern groups in various power structures has been active for a long time. Even though dalits have reservation in the Government sector, dalits are not represented in both private sector and other government aided institutions. Most job opportunities lie in the private sector, but dalits are kept out of it. To ensure social equality and equity, all sectors should be opened up for all sections of society. The lower caste and subaltern caste groups should be favoured in this process. The concept of reservation is not just the matter of an individual getting an economic security, rather a participation in the structure of power. Realizing this, dalit groups have been asking for reservation in various governmental political structures

and political parties. KDP and IDF have organized a lot of struggles for reservation for dalits in the private sector.

Dominant communities have always enjoyed priorities in all power structures. Each community's bargaining capacity to negotiate with government determines their power. Dalits don't have this bargaining power, as they lack resources. The reservation in government aided colleges is the latest demand from dalit corners. Aided colleges are run by dominant castes and religious minority groups such as Syrian Christians and Muslims. Dalits were not able to own any institution in recent history. Reservation in aided colleges is raised by dalit groups and it opened up debates on equality and equity among communities. The anti- reservation attitude by the mainstream is challenged by dalit intellectuals saying that all jobs in the aided colleges are reserved for the community that owns the institution. Yet the society shows hostility towards reservation. In fact the demand for a reservation based on community was started from upper castes and *Malayali* and *Ezhava Memorials* were examples for such moves. Chandrabhan Prasad (2004) says:

About a century and a half ago, some British administrators were faced with a dilemma. The Presidency College in Madras, then newly founded, realized that a majority of students were unable to pass the final examination in the first and second divisions. The administrators then introduced a new division to ensure that more students cleared the tests. It will not be out of place to state here that Tamil Brahmins were

the first to enter to world of European learning. The twice born Hindus seem to have selective memory. That have completely forgotten that it is for them that third division was introduced, and now they are talking about merit (25).

Thus, reservation has been one of the key issues of debate in dalit movements due to the realisation that apart from economic security, reservation provides opportunities for participating in the socio-political structures and thereby democratizing social and political ordering processes.

### **Cultural Interventions**

The second phase is marked by the multilevel initiatives of Dalit intellectuals and activists. Dalit writings began to expand considerably during this period. Presence of dalit writers in mainstream magazines became very much visible. Many dalit writers became columnists<sup>4</sup> of major print magazines and cyber magazines. A space for dalit voices was provides by many magazines – this was made use by dalits for establishing a position in the cultural power relations. A large number of books have been published in the areas of dalit critical thinking as well as literature.

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<sup>4</sup> For instance, K.M Salimkumar , a dalit leader and writer, started a column named 'negritude' in *Mathrubhumi Weekly*, in which he discussed current political issues regarding dalits. A.S Ajithkumar started a column in *Azhimukham*, a leading web magazine, and his column discusses the relation between caste and music. Rupeshkumar and Vaikhari Adat were other two columnists who were discussing issues relating to daily caste and gender issues.

Starting of a publishing house which focused on Dalit subaltern thinking in Malayalam, namely, *Subject and Language Press*, also happened in this period. This publishing house produced some important books on contemporary dalit thinking. A media house under the leadership of the Dalits and its output, *Utharakalam*, a web portal with a clear political affinity towards Dalit debates, also emerged. Dalits' entry into the world of cinema also happened in this era; cinema produced and directed by dalits on dalit subjects came in to being. *Gouthami*, a film on a famous poem by Kumaranasan *Chandaalabhikshuki*, which is directed by Ajayan, a documentary on caste and music titled *3D Stereo Caste* by dalit intellectual A.S. Ajithkumar, etc are examples. Rupeshkumar, another Dalit documentarian, has produced a series of documentaries on everyday caste such as *Sabitha- A Dalit Woman* and *Don't be Our Fathers*. The conduct of dalit painting camps, individual and group painting shows by dalit artists, publications of dalit literature by mainstream publishers,etc. would be further examples for dalit entry into the cultural public sphere of Kerala.

Apart from this, a handful of dalit women appeared in the cultural and intellectual landscape in the last decade. Most of them are in literary writing. Poetry collection by dalit women have been published by major publishing companies in recent times. Dalit women are also a significant presence in social networking sites and they initiate discussions on caste and gender.

Dalits publishing has a long history since reform period spanning over a century. History of dalit publishing efforts reflect dalits' social status in a peculiar way. So many magazines are published from dalit corners but they couldn't stay for a long time in the process. Most of the magazines stopped printing after a few issues due to financial crisis or other technical issues. Apart from these handicaps, dalit magazines contributed significantly to dalit critical thinking. For instance, SEEDIAN and *Soochakam* brought out a good number scholarly articles.

### **Dalit Identity and Religion**

A recent development in the dalit debates is the entry of new selves which are precisely articulated in terms of religious identity. Writing and publishing efforts from dalit Christians is a crucial entry in this regard. Discussion around reservation in churches and church related power structures and demand for 'scheduled caste' status for Christian dalits made significant shifts in dalit politics. These writing posed challenges to the dalit politics. The entry of the dalit Christians into this scene highlighted a problematic of the hitherto existing dalit politics – that the dalit political sensibility is Hindu, and it is therefore that non-Hindu dalits could find no space in dalit discourses.

Another significant entry was from PRDS groups. Writing about Poykayil Appachan and his political philosophy and subaltern theology were highlighted in these writings. To them, reading through missionary historiography and mainstream reformist understanding of history would limit

the diverse possibility in reading Poykayil Appachan's life and religious teaching. Many books were published on PRDS recently.

DHRM also raised some positions on religion. To them, Hindu religion is a hegemonic religion which controls and oppresses dalits and subaltern caste groups in general. So a break from Hindu religion is a primary step for the liberation of dalits. They advocated Buddhism as more liberating religion, following Ambedkarite position on conversion. DHRM families are converted to Buddhist religion as part of their political life. Ambedkar is also worshiped among them. They also formulated certain standard of ethical life for the individual and family, which are explicitly not following mainstream moral codes. Religion, faith and spirituality were never part of earlier dalit conceptualizations. Ethical life or concept of life was discussed in a language of rationality and materialism or in a language of secularism. Secularist concerns of dalit discourses gets automatically linked to Hinduism - which never gave spaces for those who have a religious or spiritual life and a politics based on theological or spiritual/ religious understanding was not allowed entry to such discourses. These three positions on religion have raised new kind of arguments within dalit discourses which existing frameworks failed to address. Thus, these discourses, in effect broadened dalit discourses in an important way.

## **Arguments for Community**

One of the major arguments in contemporary dalit discourses is the argument for dalits constituting a community. In fact this concept is derived from reformation discourse, where in the process of reformist activities, similar castes having grouped under one community and entered into social power structure through powerful intervention- both in society as well as in government. The bargaining capacity and social capital accumulated by those communities later had a crucial impact on Kerala society's power structure. All social as well as individual rights are defined in terms of community through this discourse. Even in recent times, we could see that communities are the crucial players in political parties and then in political power structures. Dalits failed to form a community and remained as sub-castes and therefore could gain nothing from the community ridden politics of Kerala.

Drawing from this ideal of community, in the 1990s a new argument which assert dalit as a community, got prominence. Though there have been similar kind of arguments prevalent in various dalit organizations – in a sense more closer to the idea of class – those arguments didn't get enough prominence during early phase of dalit discourses. In fact it was Dalit thinker and activist K.K.Kochu who developed the idea of community in a contemporary way. He prepared a concept note on community formation and presented in the state conference of *Dalit Vidyarthi Ekopana Samithi* in 1998. This note was later

published as a booklet and distributed among individuals and organizations.

K.K.Kochu (1997) writes,

We need to end the immoral life of our men and women; and along with that the strengthen family bonds. Earlier there was a system of *illam* [homestead] among Dalits. Men and women belonging to the same *illam* can't marry. This had regularized our sexual lives. But after the degradation of *illam* a moral code couldn't be established. The community organizations should take the responsibility for this degradation. They should have enforced a moral conduct as part of organizational duties. The result is that cadre's are mute witnesses before immoral activities. In a study on Dalit students, it was evaluated that they are an easy promiscuous lot. The fragility of family is the basis for such behavior. Drinking alcohol and family fights also have a role in this. Fights in the family make our children lose resistance and dignity. Imitating other community's greed for wealth – to enjoy luxury, nice clothes etc. is a cause for immoral behavior. The love, which can't be provided by father and mother leads to forbidden love. If hope for marriage is not expected out of the family, the crowded existence in colonies and slums, lack of education, lack of thought over a good life – above all joblessness and poverty leads to an immoral way of life...To solve this bad situation it is necessary to take stringent actions by community social work. People who lead immoral lives

should be isolated and a model way of life should be propagated. Family and society should discourage premarital affairs of young people as well as extramarital affairs of married folks. Along with this the family should give assurance of married life. Community welfare should involve establishment of marriage bureaus. The community publishing's should include marriage advertisement (10).

In the segment discussing about women in the community, he observes:

We should take care that women of our community are healthy and beautiful. Girls are given lesser food than boys, in some communities. Along with that girls are made to work hard at a very young age. We should shed away these systems. In family, girls are being trained to do jobs which women usually do and confined to it. The main problem with the worldview of household is that women of other communities go for higher job placements, while our women remain helpless. Thus our women have lesser importance in competitive exams for jobs, science and technology research subjects and socio-political avenues...We should address women's problems as total equality in community and corridors of power. We should give them right to property along with men and also the right to utilize the property of husband's household. The community should come forward to fight the atrocities against women. Husband-wife relationship should be grounded in mutual trust, happy familial life and loving children.

Women should free themselves from luxury and ornament craze, which is not supported by their economic condition. Along with stopping underage marriages, community should take initiative for family planning methods, abortion, make divorce proceedings more decent and promote re-marriages (18).

We could see a new modern imagination on dalit community in these observations. But these observations, which later became the basis of community identity of dalits of recent discourses, follow an 'reformist ideal' on the role of women in community which is by and large in an 'empowering' model than allowing women as a 'free entity' with agency and with independent choices.

### **Cyber Space and Dalit Presence**

Cyber space provides a valuable opportunity for dalits to articulate their politics and everyday experiences. A significant number of dalit writers emerged through the social networking sites in which dalit women are also very active. Most of the recent debates started in online sites and later appeared in mainstream magazines. Dalit women are articulating their everyday patriarchal experience through blogs and Facebook notes. Online groups such as 'dalit online movement' provide a space for discussions about caste-gender relations and their interventions sometimes go beyond the cyber world and materialize as struggles for justice in the physical world. For instance, the 'dalit online movement' organized protests in various cities of Kerala against

the rape of dalit girls in Uttar Pradesh. There was also a dalit women's meeting held on behalf of this cyber group.

### **Feminist Debates and Dalit Women**

#### **Women and the Reform Process**

The question of women rights began to get articulated during the reform period in the wake of inception and spread of colonial modernity. The socio-religious reform movements of the nineteenth century played a crucial role in improving the condition of women in the society. Further, all leaders of the reform movements worked for the eradication of social evils and social customs which altered Malayali life in a major way. Educated men and women from elite upper caste groups started to form women's associations during the nineteenth century. Each community had their own women's association in which women were encouraged to participate in community mobility movements. The formation of such organizations helped women to come out of their traditional roles in the society. It provided them a space for self expression outside family. During late nineteenth century, there were several magazines published in Malayalam and many of them propagated the need for women education, freedom and mobility for women and so on. Thus women's magazines and journals of this period widened the mental horizon of women of the dominant castes. The influence of colonial modernity compelled different communities to take steps to overcome existing backwardness and pre-modern characteristic of their life in order to compete with the 'new' changes. This resulted in a positive change in the life of women, especially

those belonging to elite upper castes. Lower caste women were not part of these developments; they were only able to overcome their subhuman status through the reform process, and all other deprivations remained same for them.

As discussed in this chapter earlier, reformist movements changed the socio-political situation of Kerala in a significant way in the nineteenth century. Women were the major location through which social reformers formulated their ideas for changes. Each community has had their own agenda in reforming women and this was explicitly defined in terms of community. Empowerment of women was defined in terms of giving education to women, making them modern through allowing them to organize themselves in comparatively 'apolitical' spaces such as women's associations.

### **Early Feminist Interventions**

The 1980s is a crucial period in the history of feminist movement as women's organizations began to get established under the leadership of educated middle class women, who were influenced by Marxist ideology. These organisations began to develop a critique of Kerala society from women's stand point. Highlighting the lower status of women in society and family these organizations posed challenges to the mainstream left's understanding of society. Drawing from Marxist idea of society, these women's groups tried to extend such debate to understand the gender dimension. Discrimination faced by women in all spheres of life was the focal point of debates of such

organizations. They discussed a wide range of issues which affected women's life in general. The topic ranges from domestic violence, mobility, property right, dowry and domestic division of labour. There had also been discussions about cultural implications of gender in Kerala. A kind of 'sisterhood' celebration could be seen in the initial years of feminist movements. The role of patriarchy in ascribing the status of secondary citizenship of women is widely discussed. During this time, a number of women's organizations were formed all across Kerala. The first meeting of independent women at Vavannur, in 1982, was organised by women who were active in left politics. They influenced the formation of many early women's organisations such as *Prachodana*, Thiruvananthapuram; *Bodhana*, Calicut; *Manushi*, Pattampy; *Chethana*, Thrissur and *Grameena Vanitha Prashtanam*, Thiruvalla and *Prabudhatha*, Payyanur (Chandrika 1998: 34). These organizations mainly took up the issues such as rape cases, domestic violence, dowry deaths and other kind of atrocities against women. For instance *Manushi* under the leadership Sara Joseph had taken up the case of murder of a teenage girl named Lata. It demanded for an enquiry into the death of Latha and formed an action council to lead the agitation. Their activities were more in a popular mode, seeking support of the social organisations including political parties. They organized many hunger strikes seeking justice for victims of rape. Through these activities *Manushi* could seek support from all sections of society especially women of all strata of society. By giving an emotional undertone to the entire Lata rape case protest, *Manushi* could establish the

subjective elements of women's politics. It succeeded in establishing rape as social crime connoting its gender implication in Kerala society and it demanded for a new language to speak about such atrocities against women, which was new to the political practices of Kerala society. *Manushi* published a handful of materials on the women question and they had attempted to write songs on the idea of women's empowerment and a good number of short stories were also published by them. For instance the popular song 'unranneneekkuka sodari' (wake up dear sister from the century long oppression) became an 'icon' of women movement later. This song first appeared in the *Manushi* magazine.

A booklet published by the organizing committee of first autonomous women's conference held at Calicut in 1990, gives a short history of women's interventions till that time:

Compared to other parts of India, feminism took a long time to bloom in Kerala. Different groups started working here after the second national meeting. Prachodana in Trivandrum, Manushi in Pattambi, Chetana in Thrissur, Bodhana in Kozhikode, Prabudhatha in Payyanur were the early organizations. These organizations handled innumerable cases relating with dowry deaths, rapes and wife molestations. Within their limitations, they organized protests asking for the arrest of the police officers responsible for the Thankamani gang rape. Manushi (later 'Manavi') made a strong cultural presence, through the length

and breadth of Kerala, organizing a lot of indigenous street plays and poems inculcating feminist principles. On the lock-up death of Kunjibi –sister of the street, in the Kozhikode women’s police station , there was a strong willed protest by the feminist organisations, hereby unprecedented in history. They gave leadership to a protest gathering hundreds of sisters of the street. Feminist activists made their mark in Kerala’s political history, by playing a major role in the ‘GROW’ protest against the monopolizing capitalists who shut down Mavoor factory for three years – subjecting hundreds of workers and their families to hunger and misery. Some organizations gave unconditional support towards Left Democratic Front in the general elections, reinforcing their socialist feminist ideology.

The Feminist movement in Kerala took up a variety of issues from early days of its assertion. The above-mentioned booklet says further:

Like any other progressive movement, this one also attracted the attention of middle class women first. But they have also tried to incorporate in their fold agricultural women workers and Dalit women. To raise the status of Feminist movement in Kerala from a nascent stage and build a popular base for it, two years back - specifically in 1988 December 10, a co-ordination committee of various womens groups was formed. This committee took on the responsibility of providing hospitality for the 4<sup>th</sup> National conference on feminism.

Hundreds of feminist groups and thousands of participants – from all over India took part in this conference. Along with this historical conference , Kerala co-ordination committee collaborated on various propaganda programmes. Seminars were conducted in August 1989 and February 1990. On March 8<sup>th</sup> 1990 , International Women’s Day was celebrated with much enthusiasm by the committee , organizing a protest march by working women and burning posters of pornographic films, in the city centre. In that year itself , when the third meeting was convened in Dahanu to organize the conference in April , a lot of internal problems within the committee arose – which was a temporary setback for the organisation. But the committee could overcome the problems in the right time and move forward with unity and will power and organize the conference.

Later on, all these movements faced stagnation and most of them winded up their activities.

Devika and Mini Sukumar (2006) say:

The decade of the 1990’s also saw the firming of the feminist presence in the arena of politics in Kerala. The implementation of the 33 percent reservation of seats for women in local bodies. ‘gender mainstreaming’ has also proceeded space, and now ‘gender training’ is an eminently familiar, technical and mostly nonthreatening term. The Kerala governments ‘women –oriented poverty mission’ has been lauded as a

successful innovation in women's empowerment. Yet the extent to which these initiatives have been successful in politicizing women is still doubtful; the possibility they offer, too, appear mixed. It is also important to remember that the Government's efforts to mainstream gender took place precisely in a period of accentuated confrontation between the feminist movement in Kerala and almost all sections of entrenched political society, which was certainly a major way in which feminists grabbed the attention of mainstream media. In these struggles, the feminist movement relied heavily up on the judiciary and the media, which did bring certain gains (4469).

In 1990's feminist groups found new rhythm in articulating their concerns. Sexual harassment cases reported in this period became a main focus of this period for feminist movements. Feminist groups also raised the issues such as property rights, sexual harassment at work place, domestic violence, gender division of labour and Women's Reservation Bill in parliament. There were emergence of new feminist organizations which focused on intervening in issues of women with a gender perspective. Later in the middle of 1990's a network of autonomous women's organizations and individuals were formed, known as Kerala Sthree Vedi. It became the face of women's struggle in Kerala. Vedi raised issue such as sexual harassment cases, representation of women in various political structures so on. Here are some organizations formed during this time.

## **Anweshi**

*Anweshi* is a women's organization set up under the leadership of K. Ajitha, a notable women activist and leader in Kerala. She was a leader of CPI (ML) groups and was a revolutionary activist during 60's and later she left the extreme left organizations and established herself as a feminist. This organization established an important wing called *Anweshi* Women's Counseling Centre in November 1993. *Anweshi* is part of a network of small, radical women's emancipation groups in Kerala called Kerala Sthree Vedi.

According to the website of *Anweshi*:

*Anweshi* began work in a context when Kerala society is historically experiencing the bitter fruits of economic and cultural globalization and its resulting transformation of the lives of women. Its work in the Kozhikode district of North Kerala, over the years its activities have been extended to adjacent districts of Malappuram, Wayanad, Kannur and Kasargod. *Anweshi* has been collaborating with other NGOs and government departments in its efforts to highlight the issue of growing violence against women in Kerala and in its struggle to get justice for women and children who are victims of such violence.

This organization attempts to address the issue of gender based violence in the state of Kerala and committed towards gender justice and women's rights. It works among women from all economic classes, castes and religious

communities, especially from the poorer and marginalized sections of Kerala. The organization is located in Calicut and extends its activities to nearby districts.

### **Kerala Sthree Vedi**

Kerala Sthree Vedi (Kerala Women's Forum) was formed in 1996. It is a common platform for diverse women's groups to plan joint action for political demands of the women's movement.

### **Sakhi Resource Centre for Women**

It was established at Thiruvananthapuram in 1996, under the leadership of Aieyamma Vijayan and Mercy Alexander. *Sakhi* established an exclusive women's library. It involves in many activities including gender training for both men and women, training in Panchayati Raj and organising workshops and seminars regarding women's issues. They offer capacity building programmes to various target groups such as adolescence people, young women and men, people representatives, government employs on gender and governance. They also publish a newsletter in which contemporary women's issues are discussed.

### **Sahaja**

*Sahaja* is an autonomous women's group operating from Kottayam. They constantly engage with women's issues. They have conducted many seminars

and discussions on national and international issues concerning human rights. *Sahaja* co-ordinates with other women's groups with similar political agendas. It has a reading room and discussion group for promoting critical thinking and interventions regarding women's issues and other democratic issues. *Sahaja* as a group extended multi level supports to the various struggles in Kerala, especially by women and marginalized group. They also played a major role in addressing sexual harassment cases in Kerala. They offer support to the victims of atrocities and sexual harassment.

### **Sahayathrika**

The concept of 'Sahayathrika' was shaped a decade ago in a context when social activists initiated several studies and enquiries into the growing number of suicides among women from different social, economic, and vocational backgrounds. The idea of an independent collective arose as we realized the need to address the gravity of human rights violation they had faced in their private as well as public lives, both directly and indirectly.

Sahayathrika aims at a deeper and inclusive approach regarding their rights in order to understand the specificity of the problems faced by women of varied identities. As a queer support group, Sahayathrika believes that in a pluralistic state like Kerala there is need for comprehensive political intervention at multiple levels to address the issues of differing identities. Being an independent organisation, it studies women's diverse lives, identities and sexualities in relation to their varied social situations.

Initially, *Sahayathrika* focused on women's human rights issues but later widened its scope to discuss issues regarding alternate sexualities. 'Sahayathrika', through its regular interventions, brought to light that queer sexuality as 'natural' as heterosexuality. It also believes that sexuality is one's choice and part of basic rights. The collective has stood by those women who with their lives have questioned the conventional definitions of gender and sexuality and it has also brought such people to the forefront of the mainstream society.

The middle of the 1990s was crucial for the feminist movement as well. According to J. Devika and Mini Sukumar (2006),

A feminist social critique began to develop significantly in this period. The formation of different feminist or women's organizations took place. In the 1990s, more and more research based feminist writings began to appear, and towards the late 1990s and in the decade that followed, they found space in mainstream Malayalam journals. A large portion of these were produced by women scholars trained in metropolitan universities and research institutions, many of whom had direct connection with the feminist movements in Kerala.

In fact, Dalit women<sup>5</sup> were present in crucial positions in these women's organizations, such as Kerala Streevedi (Forum of Kerala Women) and

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<sup>5</sup> Achamma John, Resly Abraham and Inayammal were the founder members of Kerala Streevedi – a prominent network of individuals and autonomous women groups -- in

Anweshi. Even so, the question of caste remained unaddressed or got marginalized in both feminist debates and practice. These organizations largely posited essentialist claims of a homogenous womanhood, whether through discussions of women's work, sexual violence or the patriarchal oppression of women. Let me mention a few examples. A booklet published by *Prachodana*, a feminist organization from Trivandrum, discusses "the limited social spaces allowed for women who are designed in such a way that any men with an immediate relation with women could control them with strict measures". Or again, the word 'wife' (*bharya* in Malayalam) was now exposed as 'the one who needs to be dominated', by giving up all the romantic attributes created around this position (Indira, n.d.). In her note on communal violence, Sara Joseph writes,

the purity of blood theory of fascism chains the womb of women too. It's a patriarchal demand on women's choice that determines which caste, class, race, and ethnicity they could conceive in their wombs... Women perceive a biological capacity to deny all divisions of humankind. This very natural law of reproduction is being controlled by the chains of patriarchy for money, power and religious hegemony (Joseph 2002).

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Kerala. A conversation with them reveals the fact that their caste identity was subsumed in these groups. They were rather considered as women activists by themselves and their co-workers.

In her article on the Women's Reservation Bill, AleyammaVijayan (1997) observes:

The argument for the representation of backward castes in parliament is a good one. But is it not the responsibility of the political parties to ensure seats for the women from backward castes? There is no separate reservation for backward communities in Parliament other than the Scheduled Caste and Scheduled Tribe community (SC-82, ST-49 and OBC-250). So the issue is not legal but rather one of becoming powerful enough to strategically use the bargaining power of the community to make sure that women from backward communities are getting more seats than upper caste women. These unnecessary anxieties (regarding the reservation of backward caste women within the women's reservation bill) are not out of concern that the community needs to get sufficient seats for their women counterparts, but result from the fear of losing existing constituencies.

In a close analysis of the literature and documents produced by mainstream women's and feminist movements, one could easily find many topics that have been discussed such as globalization, women's labour, sexual violence, sex work, gender relations, poverty, and so on. The observation of Annie Namala (2008) is quite applicable to this context:

The practice has been to club Dalit women issues under the caption of women's issues and discuss them in general terms. They are analysed

under the headers of women in higher education, dropout rates of girl children, employment patterns of women, resource allocations to women, assets and land ownership of women, rape and atrocities against women, man-woman relationships and so on. In this, the movement has not been able to identify that the face behind is that of a Dalit women. While the factors are analysed, Dalit women have not been integrated in to this analysis and focussed up on (463).

It is also interesting to note that feminists have passively mentioned the differences of caste and class in these discussions (Vijayan 1995, Chandrika 1998). But in practice, caste was never an active category necessary for the analysis of women's questions. This is clear in the programmes and agenda setting of feminist organizations, the struggles and protests they undertake, and the discussions that were going on. The essentialist claims on womanhood in these organizations was not a simple universalizing move for the purpose of strategizing politics, but has been a more deliberate attempt to appropriate the newly emerging criticisms in order to be 'politically correct' while not taking any real steps to address 'caste' as a question beyond tokenism or a simple logic of addition. The ideological frameworks of these organizations are such that they have been inadequate in addressing the question of difference. Whenever criticisms emerged from various corners, these organizations failed to initiate constructive steps towards integrating these critiques both in theory and practice.

With our entry into the twenty-first century, debates around women's questions started problematizing the notion of a homogenous Malayali woman. These interventions ranged from queer articulations in Malayali life (Bharadwaj 2007); unraveling of issues in Muslim women's selves and the history of Muslim women engagements in Kerala (Shamshad 2009); the autobiography of a sex worker who addressed the complexities of man-woman relationships and critiques of familial relationships in Malayali life (Jameela 2006); the history of the making of 'good women' and 'bad women' in the history of Kerala with an emphasis on various locations like caste and its contributions (Devika 2011). These shifts were concrete enough to challenge the mainstream feminist debates and their binary analysis of women's subordination. But in spite of this development, the subtle mechanisms of caste were largely overlooked while analyzing the women's question and feminist practice.

### **Summing Up**

Contemporary dalit discourses in Kerala emerged during the 1980s. The above discussion shows that arguments arose considering the topic of debates and the construction of the dalit self happened through these debates. Dalit discourses could be divided into two phases. The initial phase could be mapped roughly from the ending years of 1980s to the second half of 1990s. It is also a phase of consistent shift and changes in the ideology and praxis in Dalit movements. Though movements in this era were mainly constituted by lower caste

organizations and ideologically share a left view; they initiated talking caste in public, which the left always negated. These two decades witnessed from left ideology, a resistance towards considering lower caste people as proletarian in the left discourses. In the Initial phase , dalit discourses formulated ‘dalit identity’ as a homogenous essentialist category which is based on idea of shared slave experience and shared culture among dalit sub castes. In this phase we could see a trend to articulate similarities than differences. The effort was made to interpret all social experience of dalits- irrespective of gender, in terms of caste. Thus dalit self here was considered as a ‘collective self’ based on community identity through which the ideas like social justice, equity and freedom were articulated for the liberation of the community. Thus this identity is shaped up around the experience of dalits and a peculiar meaning applied to it by interpreting it through specific discourses. By proposing an unanimated dalit identity, the initial discourses on dalit identity negates further identity within it and erased the specific gendered experience of dalit women. Thus the experiences of dalit women are talked in no other terms than gender.

Contemporary phase dalit discourses flourished during the 2000s, further taking advantage of the conceptual apparatuses and terms from ‘black criticism and structuralist philosophy ’ and arguments foregrounding resources and representation and subjectivity. These were more in the nature of initiatives by small groups, predominantly in the intellectual domain rather than mass based movements. Such political debates significantly altered the

intellectual domain of Dalits and to a certain extent the domain of knowledge in the Malayali public sphere. In this phase we could see emergence of different selves within dalit selves. The articulations of dalit self from different corners like religion, gender, sexuality appeared. These interventions posed challenges to the established notions of 'dalit self' which is explicitly based on essentialism. Dalit women were silent in that discourse most often, even if they presented - their gender status was negated. A kind of absence-in-presence of dalit women could be seen here. The dalit self is discursively male in these discourses. Emergence of dalit women in the political scenario of dalit politics altered its debates considerably. By articulating gender politics within the community and putting caste as crucial category within feminist discourse, dalit women politics shook the ideological frame works of both discourses. The above discussions reveal operationalities by which gender plays within dalit movements - how the dalit movements have constructed dalit womanhood through their discourses - by their selective silence and tokenism and addictive logic.