INTRODUCTION

Chapter I

INTRODUCTION

Gender studies have attracted the attention of the historians very recently. The concept of gender was adopted in order to analyse or delineate the social construction of men and women. Gender studies have mainly addressed the question of invisibility of women. More precisely, they focused on the invisibility of women's labour and their relation to family and society. When scholars refer to the working population, they include only the men and women who participate in the labour process either as full time or part-time. Labour is a human effort directed towards producing commodity and is one of the factors of production. The meaning, location and nature of labour of course have changed over time. The perception of what constitutes labour also vary between people. Like many other words, labour has several meanings. The terms like work, labour, employment, job etc are frequently used in order to denote this. Work is a more standard term or unit often used by the neo-classical economists and is used to denote a specific point that it has no direct connection with productive activity. It can be used to determine the quantum of specific kind. It is often used in the sense of 'doing'. But unlike work, employment means occupation, work in offices and activities that are modern in nature.

Usually women's labour is always referred to as 'work'. Work is often a general term that includes both socially productive and unproductive
labour. The economic theory from the point of the neo-classical economists has always been centred on labour market. In labour market, the volume of labour accomplished and the time devoted to it is usually compensated in terms of money. This market centred nature of labour theory creates some separation between women's labour and men's labour. Otherwise it creates a separation of workplace from domestic labour and naturally creates private and public spheres of work. It was Max Weber who had anticipated the feminist discussion of the relationship between public and private spheres¹. This isolation of the units of domestic labour appears to be a natural separation of women from men as well. The justification of removing women from social labour process is normally done by advocating the myth that domestic labour is the time honoured natural setting for women. A series of correlated opposites embodies the seemingly universal division of life into two spheres of experience. Private and public, domestic and social, family and work, women and men. Rooted in the economic working of the capitalist mode of production, and reinforced by system of male supremacy or patriarchy, this ideology of separate spheres has a force that is extremely difficult to transcend².

In order to describe the patriarchal control, several approaches have been explained by the feminists. Important among them were liberal

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feminist approach, radical feminist approach, and social feminist approach. The liberal feminism argued that gender roles constraining women to household superintendence was based on legal subordination of women. It was advocated that women should be empowered with civil and political rights and educational facilities. However, the concept of women's place at home was not challenged. According to radical feminists, nothing short of a complete sexual revolution can help to restructure the society. They concentrated on the traditional female concerns of love, sex, children and interpersonal relationships. The biological differentiation of women, the institution of marriage and family were seen to perpetuate masculine control over female fertility and thereby helping the preservation of a patriarchal system. The socialist feminist approach is derived from the Marxian perspective and finds the roots of female subordination embedded in the private ownership of means of production. This viewpoint held that domestic work produces only use value and not exchange value. A group of socialist feminists argue that women's oppression is based on unpaid house work; child bearing, child care and house work are mentioned as being productive activities. Women in their role of house wives contribute to the reproduction of social relations and provide domestic labour.

Historical transformation of women's labour had show the changing role of women's labour. It shows that in the early stages of society, productive resources were made communally and the absence of private

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property, had made the household labour of women and productive labour of men equal. But with the emergence of private property, the relation between men and women changed. And thus men began to control the process of production and exchange within and outside the household in general and women were reduced to the so-called domestic cores.

In this context, an effort is made here to explore women's labour and interlinkage between household, family, kin relations and production in an agrarian economy in North Malabar in Kerala during early 20th century. Although there have been a number of studies on the land relations and social change in Kerala, very few of them directly addressed the question of women's labour in the land relations and in the process of social change. The present study is aware of the difficulties in evaluating these sources. Even though a large number of works have discussed the agrarian problems on North Malabar, all these works have attempted to analyse the differentiation among the North Malabar peasantry, and its impact on the process of production. And in the remaining sources, especially from the biographies

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of early leaders, we find only scattered references\(^5\). The only exception to this case was the work of Andalat and K. Devayani\(^6\). It is recognized that in the traditional agrarian system, women’s labour composed a substantial part of the agricultural labour. When the movement of the ordinary tenants against the landlord intensified in the 30’s and 40’s, women labourers took active part. The visibility of the women labourers in the political process became manifested with the growth of tenant agitations. The presence of women labourers in all these agitations shows that the repressive policies followed by the landlords, the newly emerging industrial classes and the state directly affected the women labourers. The extensive participation of women in this agrarian struggle throws up a number of questions. This constitutes a major problem in historical analysis. The present study on the women’s labour process takes up North Malabar as the study region primarily because of the


following reasons:

(a) North Malabar was the centre of sustained struggles of the *Verumpattakar* of which, the labour women formed a sizeable component.

(b) This women’s activism sustained itself even after the 40s and it is the only region where women’s organizations have mass following, from the 40s to the present day.

(c) This is also the region where radical and national politics took deep roots and wielded considerable influence to this day. Because of this, it is possible to explore the relationship between labour process, changes in social relations and women’s social and political activism as a sample case.

**REVIEW OF LITERATURE**

Since the 19th century itself, a range of opinions have been brought about the position of women in labour process.

The pioneering historical research belonged to the gendered aspects of labour in French history are Olive Schreiner, Aben Soure and the Fabian socialist Alice Clark, research student at the London School of Economics, writing under the inspiration of Olive Schreiner’s work. Clark in her work, *The Working Life of Women in the 17th Century*, spelled out the differences among the working women, from midwives and merchants through
agricultural labourers. Aben Soure in *La femme et le fem*\(^7\) gave separate consideration to the women of the courtly and provincial nobility. Besides these works, a number of case studies of women’s work in particular industries, occupations and work places have been carried out.

Ester Boserup’s *Women’s Role in Economic Development*\(^8\) emphasised the fundamental ways in which women’s work varied cross culturally. Drawing largely on materials derived from African agriculture, she was the first to note the prevalence in Africa of female farming systems in which food production was taken care of by women with little help from men. The centrality of women in African agrarian production and food production systems in a culture distinguished by rigid sexual division of labour was, for Boserup, linked directly to population, density, landholding systems and technology. She was also concerned with identifying the relations between female farming and agricultural intensification. Driven by population growth and the attendant shortening fallow periods, the trajectories of agrarian change in African agriculture were typically associated with the withdrawal of women from production.

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Louise A. Tilly and Joan W. Scott in *Women, Work and Family*\(^9\) examine the historical record of women's work in England and France from about 1700 to 1950. The work focuses on those social groups which involved large numbers of women in productive activities at home and in the labour market. Although the experience of women and families in countries under going industrial growth and demographic change varies, the definitions and the important variable are relevant to the history of women's work elsewhere. According to the authors, the supply of women available for these activities is shaped in part by demographical factors such as sex ratios, morality, the age and rate of marriage and levels of fertility. The work also analyses women's labour approaches from two aspects. On the one hand it looks at the labour women. And on the other hand, they look at the economic and demographic factors that influenced women's labour.

Marshall Sahlins' *Stone Age Economics*\(^10\) examines the economies of early societies. In the beginning this book focuses on hunters and gatherers society and their economic behaviour i.e., their inclination to consume at once all stocks at hand. And about the affluent character of this society in which all the material wants of peoples are easily stratified. He states that agriculture had allowed the Neolithic communities to maintain high degree of social order. In this work he had clearly defined about the domestic mode

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of production. For him domestic mode of production refers to economics organized by domestic groups and kinship relations. And it was mainly based on household production in which the household tasks are allotted to women but they often did men's labour too.

The collection titled *Feminism and Materialism; Women and Modes of Production* edited by Annette Kuhn and Ann Marie Wolpe contains eleven articles. The articles of Annette Kuhn and Ann Marie Wolpe at the beginning of this collection are arguing for a materialist conception of theoretical contribution. In order to assess the position of women for the materialist conception they are taking the Marxist conception that put forward in the *Capital* i.e., on the one side, the production of the means of existence, of food, clothing and shelter and the tools necessary for that production; on the other side, the production of human beings themselves, the propagation of the species. It is at this point that the whole articles in this collections are concentrating on. This is followed by two articles that centered on patriarchy and its relations of production, by Roisin McDonough et.al and Annette Kuhn. There after Lesley Cardwell's paper on church, state and family, Eva Gamarnikow's paper on sexual division of labour, the case of nursing, and Kate Young's mode of appropriation and the sexual division of labour; a case study from Oaxaca, Mexico are arranged. Following that Veronica Beechey's paper on women and production a

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critical analysis of some sociological theories of women's work discuss some of the problems involved in analysing female wage labour and had discussed sociological theories regarding women's labour and dual labour market theory. This was followed by four more articles regarding sexual division of labour and women's oppression. The authors of this collection argues that it is of fundamental importance to analyse the relationship between the family and the organization of production in the process of capital accumulation.

In *Women and Work*[^12], Sheila Lewenhak is trying to trace the developments in women's work from stone age to the present age. She argues that since the beginning of human history, women have worked constantly, continuously, always and everywhere, in every type of society and in every part of the world. She traces that in human history, there has not been an unchanging delimitation of work functions on sex lines. The travellers, conquerors, settlers, archaeologists and anthropologists have all recorded that in earliest societies the principle of existence was do-it-yourself.

In *Work and Inequality*[^13], Susan Lonsdale looks at the unequal distribution of work in British society and some of the explanations for this. She documents some significant changes in employment, most notably the

growth in female participation in the labour market, part-time employment and in unemployment, and the response to these trends by policy makers. A considerable part of the book provides us with evidence about the circumstances of group in society who face discrimination and disadvantage in the labour market. The book concludes that a great deal of poverty and inequality still persists in Britain today as a consequence of the social division of labour and the concern of policy with efficiency rather than equity.

Wally Seccombe’s *A Millennium of Family Change; Feudalism to Capitalism in North Western Europe*\(^{14}\), presents a broad sketch of a millennium of economic and family change in North Western Europe, from the early middle ages to the brink of the industrial revolution. The book also has sought to locate the family forms of labouring classes within prevailing modes of production. Further, this book has expanded the mode-of-production concept by including the reproduction of the species as a form of production.

The contributors of *Agrarian Change, Gender and Land Rights*\(^{15}\) edited by Shahra Razavi, explore how the deflationary macro-economic policies and processes associated with economic liberalization are impacting on rural livelihood and agrarian change in diverse political economies, focusing in


particular on the gender specificities of these impacts. This collections includes eight articles. The volume opens with an introduction by Shahra Razavi in Agrarian change, gender and land rights and it was followed by two articles one by Utsa Patnaik and by Ann Whitehead and Dzodzi Tsikata on neoliberal macroeconomic policies, agricultural liberalization and the reform of land tenure institutions. After these two articles, it contain's case studies on agrarian change, land tenure reform and gender structures of five countries. It reflects on the particular agrarian histories, current processes of land tenure reform and the on-going preoccupations of women's movements and advocates in the different countries.

Sue Hatt's *Gender, Work and Labour Market*¹⁶, tries to trace the dual responsibilities of women, the division of labour and gender wage gap. Sue Hatt is trying to trace that the decision about women's hours of work, place of work, full-time or part-time employment and the response to income tax etc within the parameters imposed by family, society and economic opportunities. The author argues that the living standards of men and women in society is depend upon the level of output which the economy actually produces within the market and the domestic sector of the economy.

*The Politics of House Work*¹⁷ edited by Ellen Malos is a collection of 18 essays regarding domestic labour. The volumes begins with Catherine Hall's

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article about the history of the house wife. This is followed by different articles about the politics of house work, women and family, wage for house work and wage against house work.

When we look into the various works regarding labour history in India, serious Indian works regarding the role of women in labour process and other development are relatively few. Some of the major works are given below:

*Structures of Patriarchy; State, Community and Household in Modern Asia*\(^{18}\), is a collection of essays edited Bina Agarwal. These essays examine the gender impact of agricultural growth strategies in Sri Lanka, Malaysia, India and China, export oriented industrialization in South east Asia, the new population policies in Malaysia and Singapore, and the rise of religious fundamentalism in Iran and else where.

The collected work *Land Caste and Politics in Indian states*\(^{19}\) by Gail Omvedt beginning with an introductory essay by Gail Omvedt on class caste and land in India and followed by seven other studies. Though the method of class analysis is one of the most valuable tools for understanding social stratification and social relations, to say that caste category is only a manifestation of class in simplistic mechanical understanding is devoid of

\(^{18}\) Bina Agarwal (ed.), *Structures of Patriarchy; State, Community and Household in Modern Asia*, Kali for Women, 1988.

\(^{19}\) Gail Omvedt (ed.), *Land Caste and Politics in Indian States*, Authors Guild Publications, University of Delhi, 1982.
empirical reality and historical context. According to the authors there is a need to diagnose both the basis of caste in the structure of land relations and its super structural dimensions in politics emphasizing various levels of interaction between economy, culture and politics.

Ursula Sharma's *Women's Work, Class and Urban Household; A Study of Shimla, North India*\(^\text{20}\), is based on research in Shimla among the urban households. In this work she compares the household works performed by employed women with that of unemployed. She also reveals that women's migration is primarily related to their husband's employment. She traces the Indian women's concept of housework and examines the notion that, housework must be privately done. Then she examines the role of education and the role of women's paid work in the household economy, examines the patterns of employment and also states that marriage does not precipitate a crisis in a woman's working career. And the labour outside the home extends the range of source of help and information which are available to the household. Lastly, the author examines the structure and stage of the social life of the women. She argues that participation in public labour enhances the decision making power of women even inside their household, and the decision making power of the unemployed women in the household is relatively less.

In Cold Hearths and Barren Slopes: The Wood Fuel Crisis in the Third World, Bina Agarwal analyses the wood fuel crisis faced by the third world. In this book she traces the nature of the wood fuel problem, causes of the wood fuel crisis and also makes a search for the solution to these problems. The nature of this problem is that, in the third world countries the collection of firewood was done by women and they spent a lot of their time for this purpose. Then she traces the reasons for the shortage of firewood and states that the worst sufferers of this shortage were the women themselves. During times of wood fuel shortage, they are forced to depend on things that do not provide continuous heat and thus increase the cooking time. Moreover, they had to reduce the course of food preparation and had to shift to less nutritious food. This shortage also reduced the input in agriculture. Lastly, the author also discusses the effects of innovations. This study thus focuses on the impact of environmental destruction on the household labour of women, which in turn has its impact on the actual labour time spent by women on agriculture or other areas of public labour.

Finding the Household; Conceptual and Methodological Issues, edited by K. Saradamoni is a collection of eleven essays which explore various

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important issues, including the formation and inner dynamics of households, the linkage between individual households and the wider processes and structures of society, and differing kinship. The first three essays examine the currently available Indian data sources. The next seven discuss, major concepts like family, household and has based on field data drawn from India, the Philippines, Korea and Vietnam. The last essays sum up the debate and highlight the global nature of the problem.

Bina Agarwal, in her book entitled *A Field of One's Own; Gender and Land Rights in South Asia*\(^2\), raises the question whether independent ownership of land can be of crucial importance in promoting the well being and empowerment of women. She also points out that the issue of women's land rights has, until recently, received little attention in policy formation. In pursuing the issue of women's independent rights in land, a number of related questions arise, such as; how should we characterize gender relations and what role do the land rights play in constituting and changing those relations, what are the rights in the land that women have historically enjoyed, and how and why did these change during different historical epochs. She also indicates the need for a very different conceptualization of the household and says that the bargaining approach, which indicates the ability of a member of the household to bargain her claims within the household, has particular usefulness in examining gender relations. Further,

Bina examines the communities that customarily recognize women's rights in land. She traces the formulation of contemporary inheritance laws on landed property and the significant legal differences between different countries. She also points out the gap between law and practice in traditionally patrilineal communities and states that the claims to land would depend upon the strength of Purdha norms and practice, post marital residence and marriage distance, the extent of male support, women's level of education and extent of women's economic vulnerability. After that, she discusses the issue of land control and states that women's ability to claim as well as control and self manage land likely to be a function of a number of factors, such as the taboo on female ploughing, purdha practices, female illiteracy rates etc. She provides an analytical framework on the role of women in land relations, that could be applied in specific studies. Thus this work is a major contribution to gender studies.

_Siva and Her Sisters: Gender, Caste and Class in Rural South India_24 by Karin Kapadia focuses on the experience of Pallar women of Tiruchi district in Tamil Nadu. In this study Karin shows that it is impossible to deal with class and caste as categories without incorporating the dynamics of gender and also shows that Pallar women posses a certain cultural autonomy. This book begins by laying out the categories of kinship prevalent amongst different castes in Aruloor, with a special emphasis on matrilineal kin and

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24 Karin Kapadia, _Siva and Her Sisters: Gender, Caste and Class in Rural South India_, Delhi, OUP, 1996.
the unique functions of the mother's brother. After that the author looks at
low gender and sexuality are affected by caste. And states that the control of
women's fertility as being more central amongst lower castes, while female
sexuality and chastity are primary pre occupations for upper castes, a norm
that is emulated by upwardly mobile lower caste groups. In the last part, the
author discusses the spheres of work and production relations. She also
traces the effects of the technological changes in capitalist agriculture on the
gendered divisions of labour and disparities in wage rates.

*Labour and Gender; Survival in Urban India*\(^\text{25}\), by U. Kalpagam focuses
on labour and gender. The work is based on the thesis that gender issues
cannot be studied in isolation but need to be located within the overall
structural context of an economy. The approaches that have been applied for
this are neo-classical and Marxist. The author is underlining the fact that
work and reproduction are two very crucial and mutually influencing
spheres in women's lives, and that an understanding of the multiple fields of
force and power relations that enmesh women's lives have to ground its
analysis in these two spheres.

In *Women and Labour in late Colonial India; The Bengal Jute Industry*\(^\text{26}\),
Samita Sen traces the history of labouring women in Calcutta in the 19th and

\(^{25}\) U. Kalpagam, *Labour and Gender; Survival in Urban India*, Sage Publications, New
Delhi, 1994.

\(^{26}\) Samita, Sen, *Women and Labour in Late Colonial India: The Bengal Jute Industry*,
early 20th centuries. She raises the question why and how the industrial working class became overwhelmingly male-centred. She tries to question the assumptions and judgements of the earlier writers regarding the working class, especially working class women. The author examines the migration of the labour to the jute mill area and raises the question why, the Calcutta jute mill owners found the women unsuitable and also traces that how the earnings of wives and children in the villages enabled the male workers 'Come and go as they please'. Then the author examines the impact of men's migration on women's work. The chapter entitled 'Away from homes; women's work in the mills', examines the role of gender division of labour and explores the fact that employers paid women less than men because they considered women's task as unskilled. With the outset of mechanization in jute mills, women began to be thrown out of labour even on flimsy excuses. Thus, industrialization and mechanization resulted in rendering women unemployed and the industrial working class became mainly male. The author also examines the sexual and marital history of Calcutta's jute workers and shows that women workers were victims of sexual exploitation both in public and private life. Further, she also tries to reconstruct women workers political roles and recovering their diverse concerns.

In The Veiled Women27 Prem Chaudhary describes the importance of women in Agrarian economy in Hariyana. The author explains how this

important role of women in the agrarian economy led to wide acceptance of
the prevalent custom of sale and purchase of brides among the economically
distressed peasantry, how the reinforced importance of animal husbandry
increased female work etc. The author states the division of labour was
constituted on the basis of certain patriarchal norms. But the fact is that, it is
only the care given by a women to the land and household that made it
possible for a man to avail the job opportunity outside. The author argues
that it is through education, this type of cultural work ethics can be
eliminated and this can imbued with a new set of values. There existed a
number of jokes and stories which clearly ridiculed men’s cornering of the
largest share of food. The author states that apart from the direct physical
control of a woman through violence, there are certain cultural constraints
which not only control her ideologically, but, also assure her non
participation in decision making. The custom of observing purdha is
foremost among them. Thus her being veiled allows men and other people to
perpetuate discrimination in private and public sphere. The author also
explicates the exclusion of women from property rights and inheritance.
There existed justification for continuing to deprive a women of her
inheritance rights. The main justification of the male is that girls receive their
share at the time of marriage. The author states the rural women have
accepted dowry as a substitute for property. Thus in this work, the author
has described the cultural restraints of women that prevent her from
entering the public sphere and keep her confined to the household as
subordinates of men.

*Exploring Gender Equations: Colonial and Post-Colonial India* edited by Shakti Kak and Biswamoy Pati, is a collection of 18 articles. Shashank Shekhar Sinha’s article on Adivasi women and Archana Prasad’s article on tribal women vehemently deny the notion propounded by many anthropologists that prior to colonial rule tribal women enjoyed more freedom and egalitarianism. The articles by Samita Sen and Shobhana Warrier on labouring women in Bengal in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries and women and workplace respectively have some common concerns. Shobhana Warrier explains that while, on the one hand, the factory ‘constituted a cultural space entirely different from that of agrarian society’, there was nevertheless a tendency to bring old cultural practices in to the workplace. Thus the custom of segregating a women during the days of her menstrual period was sought to be perpetuated by a union demand that women should be given three days leave in a month for that period. In Madurai, she tells us, the workers never dared to eat food at their new work place, because if they were found eating inside the mill, sand was thrown on their faces by way of punishment²⁸.

We can analyse the history of labour and labour movements in Kerala from the works of K.P. Kannan, Andalat, R. Prakasam, Thomas Isaac, T.C.

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Varghese, P. Radhakrishnan etc. But in these works we find only scattered and incomplete references on women and labour process. Some articles of Mridual Eapen, Praveenakodoth and Saradamoni's are some exceptional cases. In her work entitled Changing Land Relations and Women; A Case Study of Palghat District Kerala, Saradamoni had undertaken the case study of Palghat district, one of the major centres of land reform process in Kerala. This work attempts to study the important changes that Kerala society had witnessed in the 20th century, viz., the progressive break down of landlordism and the accompanying socio-cultural changes and to examine the ways these changes affected women belonging to the different strata of the agricultural community. But this study does not confine itself to issues like land and women and in terms of their labour.


Although the information, provided by the texts cited above is very rich, we find only scattered and incomplete references on women's labour participation. So the present study attempts to contribute to the development of a gender perspective on some of the problems of Kerala history with reference to the process of land reform and social change during 19th and 20th centuries.

AIMS AND OBJECTIVES

This study is an attempt to analyse the character of women's labour and the role that it played in the social relations of North Malabar in their transition from premodern to modern times. It will analyse the role of women in the tenurial pattern of the pre-modern traditional society and examine the production process in traditional societies inorder to find out the share of women in agricultural and non-agricultural labour. This study also aims at analyzing the changes occurred in the labour status of women from pre-colonial to colonial periods, and will examine the role of caste and gender in the process of division of labour and how it affected the women labourers.

When we examine the existing literature regarding labour process in Kerala, we perceive that very few of them depict the conditions of women labourers. It is well known that women have always played a substantial role in agriculture and craft production. But it is surprising that no study seriously goes into the question of the vicissitudes of female labour in traditional and modern Kerala society. It is also known that caste, gender and social norms play an important role in limiting the participation of
women in the labour process, which has also not been adequately studied. Gender based labour pattern is seen in agricultural and non-agricultural labour. In the agricultural field, the most of the women belong to the lower castes and agricultural operations like sowing, transplanting, grain-processing etc. were done by women. In the coir industry, cleaning job was done by low caste women. Hence this study will analyse a detailed picture of their conditions in terms of socio-economic and gender categories.

Another factor is that, though Kerala has witnessed sustained participation of women in majority of the popular movements, there have been hardly any studies on the role of women in agrarian struggles. In this context a study like this which will examine the issues to which women responded and the method of their struggle, and whether they came forward because of their own motivation or because of inspiration by others is so relevant. There is ample evidence of the participation of women in struggles in various forms. However, the forms in which they participate need not be in the standard forms like jathas, dharnas, satyagrahas, strikes and so on.

**SOURCES AND METHODOLOGY**

The study will make use of the existing archival records, combined with surveys, interviews and oral testimonies from women. Literary sources and folk memories can also be made use of. Here priority is given to oral history, since details regarding women are meagre in literary works. It is only through oral testimony, that it can be recalculated.

Normally, the labour history and history of agrarian struggles are
treated separately, but in the study the effort is not to give a detailed account of the dynamics of women's labour, but the change that women's participation in the labour process has undergone during the early phases of the 20th century. The role of women in the labour process contributed to their participation in agrarian struggles, which in turn resulted in the changes in their position as labourers. This dialectical relationship is important to understand the crucial question, why women participated in these struggles and again why they did not became a manifest political force, in spite of their participation.

The study will have to be interdisciplinary by drawing up on models from Sociology, Anthropology and many other disciplines. The scope of the present study is limited to the area of North Malabar in Kerala. North Malabar is conventionally regarded as the region to the north of the city of Calicut in Kerala and includes Cannanore districts and parts of Calicut, Kasargod and Wynad districts. But Wynad had been excluded from this study due to the fact that, it was not an active area of agrarian struggle.

Even though the experience of old people/living people offers an entire world of opportunity, most professional historians are generally sceptical about the value of oral sources in reconstructing the past. One of the persistent challenges presented by scholars to oral history is on the reliability and the validity of the interviews31. Reliability can be defined as the consistency with which an individual will tell the same story about the

same events on a number of different occasions. Validity refers to the degree of conformity between the reports of the event and the event itself as recorded by other primary resource material such as documents, photographs, diaries and letters\textsuperscript{32}.

According to Gwyn Prins, we can distinguish three modes of communication:

1) Oral Cultures where language takes a purely oral form. These are typified by local languages they are now, and have been for a long time, relatively rare.

2) Written cultures where languages takes a written form only, because the oral form has died out. These are typified by classical languages.

3) Composite cultures where languages assume both oral and written forms for all or a proportion of the people. We are obliged to categorize further and to distinguish between universally literate cultures, such as we too easily take for granted but which are historically unusual, and restrictedly literate cultures where most people live on the fringes of, but under the sway of, the literate register\textsuperscript{33}.

Here Gwyn Prins points out that the conventional range of judgement

\textsuperscript{32} Ibid., p. 89.

\textsuperscript{33} Gwyn Prins, 'Oral history' in Peter Burke (ed.), \textit{New Perspectives on Historical Writings}, p. 119.
regarding oral sources is bleak because from pre-historic periods onwards communications are orally transmitted. Moreover, in societies without historical writings, oral tradition bear the brunt of historical reconstruction. We can make oral description as a true description by testing its validity against other evidence. Particularly when the object of study is a composite culture, where both written and oral forms of communication are present. So in this study wherever possible, the oral sources are corroborated with other sources like archival records, surveys, reports, literary sources etc.

There are three classes of oral documentation. The first is the recording of performances in which the participants are following a prepared script. Second is the recording, sometimes surreptitiously, of unrehearsed events in which the speaking of the participants is spontaneous and dynamic and entirely concerned with immediate purposes or plans. Finally there is the oral documentation that has come to be called oral history; the recording of a special kind of event, the interview in which historical information, insight and opinion are sought deliberately and are deliberately preserved as a historical source. In the present study the third category is used.

In order to develop an outline regarding the areas of the study, a rough draft regarding the areas was prepared with the help of Vikasana

34 David K. Dunaway, et. al, (eds), Oral History...Op. Cit., p. 120.
prepared by the Panchayaths during the people’s planning campaign in 1997-98, which gave evidence about the geographical peculiarity and other socio-economic events. Even though the participation regarding women are very meagre in these volumes, they are sufficient to make an outline of unknown areas. With these outlines we have spotted particular areas and in each area we visited co-operative service banks (almost all the co-operative service banks are situated on the main road so it is easy to reach there by bus). From these offices we gathered information regarding the participants in various struggle of that particular area. With the help of auto drivers or local people we met the participants. But one of the main difficulty was to convince them about the purpose of our study. But in areas like Karivelloor, Kodakkat, Eleri, Kayoor, Kandakkai etc this difficulty did not arise. Even though we spent a lot of time to convince them, we were fortunate to receive good hospitality and response from those people. About 300 respondents were interviewed in which majority of them were women. Majority of the interviews were conducted at homes and besides these some group interviews were also conducted in schools, local libraries, clubs and paddy fields. Sometimes some of them were visited more than once. Most interviews lasted three to four hours. Their response shows that a lot of historical experience is hidden among them and they presented several facets and sides that normally are not brought to light in conventional

35 Vikasana Rekha, Project of Peoples Development Programmes gives minute details regarding Panchayats. Almost 166 volumes are available.
historical writing. It also reveals that so many factors like land, gender, caste etc. restricting women’s labour relations. Besides these, it shows that women’s labour form a major portion of agricultural labour in North Malabar and their working period is longer than men. Another interesting fact is that, the existing norms regarding women’s labour participation, i.e., the participation of women in agriculture is inversely related to the status of family is not applicable in the case of North Malabar. Here, by disregarding their family status, all of them actively participated in the labour process. Besides oral sources archival sources like settlement records, reports, memorandums, confidential files, general files, census reports, statistical data, agricultural reports etc. are used. Newspapers like Prabhatham, Mathrubhumi, Deshabhimani and literary sources and journal are combined. From these sources we can analyse that the actual labour expended by women in an agrarian society would be substantial but the net return to the women is minimum.

The period of the study roughly covers the early half of the 20th century, when the traditional agrarian society and landlord tenant relations in North Malabar was being transformed as a result of agrarian struggles and agrarian legislations by the colonial government. The period is only to provide a rough chronological framework rather than indicating a very strict adherence to a political era.