CHAPTER V
WOMEN’S MOVEMENTS IN KERALA:
CHALLENGES AND PROSPECTS

Starting from nineteenth century, the women’s movement in
India has waxed and waned as times changed and emphasis shifted.
Changes have occurred in its objectives, strategies and
perspectives. It has notched up many victories to its credit.
Many specific problems were solved; equality under the
constitution was accepted; various committees and commissions
were formed, and they did commendable work; International Women’s
Year and International Women’s Decade promised much and achieved
much; but much remain undone. Legal reforms were made through
general and special laws. And yet, after more than a century of
its functioning, women still do face many handicaps. Women’s
movement also faces many challenges. Various factors directly or
indirectly affect the progress of the women’s movement in India.
The vigorous movements in Kerala stagnated without functioning
properly. Here is an attempt to analyse the factors that hinder
the movement.

Today the women’s movement has grown so much, that it tries
to view every issue in a woman’s perspective and to struggle to
solve women’s specific problems. However, inspite of the growth
of the movement, the problems of an average woman, are very much
alive. The movement has not yet succeeded in its attempt to solve
the problems of the masses where the primary question is not equality but survival. Their theories and ideologies are not easily digestible to the masses.

Though the efforts of the women’s movement could influence government policies and strategies to a certain extent, and legal reforms could be made, they remain ineffective at the implementation level. Political participation and political power still elude the majority of women. Inadequate participation in politics and near total absence in the committees for policy making, put women in a disadvantageous position. The apolitical nature of the women’s groups keep them away from power. Women in the political parties face various limitations as there is male domination in the parties. To sum up: there is unequal power sharing.

Women’s movement has not been strong enough to break the unholy alliance between religion and the state existing for years. All the personal laws in religions are against the interests of women. The Muslim Women’s Protection of Rights (on Divorce) Act which was passed by the government to overcome the Supreme Court verdict on ‘Shah Bano’ case was a serious set back to the movement.

To establishing linkage between the women’s movement and broader socio-political movement is the major challenge faced by women’s groups.¹ They have to address themselves to questions like casteism, class issue, communalism and find how they affect
women's lives. Such questions are most important for women activists and groups who have to make crucial decisions concerning these issues. Differences of views moreover cause serious tensions or conflicts among these groups. The women leaders in various walks of life share the view that, language, literature, religions, media and the most important of factor, the executive, the judiciary, and the legislatures disseminate male-oriented values and pose great challenges to the women's movement.

The sociologists are bound to observe that the women of Kerala have a high standard of living, socially and culturally. They indeed have a high level of education, and receive good health care; the male-female sex ratio is favourable, the life expectancy at birth is high, the age of marriage is also demographically acceptable; the life standard index also is high.

But to conclude that women of Kerala have equality with men, economically and socially is erroneous. Prof. Saradamony says: "these demographic indicators cannot be taken as a true indicator of women's position in Kerala". Projection of the above mentioned demographic indicators in one way hide the true picture and create a feeling among the public outside and inside Kerala that women's condition is far better in Kerala.

High literacy among women in Kerala is doubtful of producing desired results in terms of their knowledge and awareness of
their rights. A literate person is one who can write his name and put his signature. So mere literacy may not bring forth knowledge. And in literacy too, women are behind men.

The statistics show that the percentage of girls in schools are almost same as that of boys. In colleges they outnumber boys. But when it comes to technical and professional courses their rate decreases. This may be due to various reasons. In Kerala there is discrimination in educating girls and boys. Quite a large number of parents still do not consider higher education and employment as a necessity to girls. They consider marriage as important in a girls' life. Many girls and their parents still continue to hold this belief and consider their education as a time pass up to marriage. For marriage of their daughters, parents usually prefer boys with high educational qualification and a job. If the girls go in for higher education the chances of getting a boy with the same education or higher education becomes difficult. This element also works against girls' education at a higher level. High value placed on dowry is another factor. This along with the general belief that a girl child will not be helpful for their parents after marriage, prevents them from spending more money on girls' education.

Finding and securing a suitable placement is a difficult proposition for the youth of Kerala. Unemployment is one of the major problems and the state has the highest level of educationally trained man power resources. Moreover Kerala does
not have the necessary industrial infrastructure to absorb educated men and women. Highly educated women accept jobs which do not commensurate with their qualifications. The number of women in the executive cadre is less in comparison with men. Their employment helps them, but it requires them to take double burden. The belief that women should do all household duties prevails here and this restricts the number of women seeking and taking up employment. Most of the employed women do not get help from the male members of the family in their domestic duties. This double burden affects their health, success in profession and in the overall performance. This force them to be away from joining organisations or engaging in other outside activities. As a class women, do take a second place in employment, under constraints stated above.

Many a time, due to possibilities of continual transfers women generally avoid promotions. It is a custom in all government controlled services, to transfer an employee and promote him to the higher cadre. Promotion without a transfer is a rarity. This is usually seen in banking sector where men go for higher positions and women do not try for it due to family related issues such as education of children. In all these cases women are the losers. Moreover, women who earn their salary have to get the permission of the husband to spend the money for personal purposes. The patriarch controls purse, no matter who puts money in it. Leela Menon—a woman journalist says:— "Education conferred jobs on women but not an economic identity.
They are made mute by cultural compulsions, confined to secondary roles sans any decision making powers, they confirm to female stereotypes, social status and security rather than power. Spinsterhood is an enduring nightmare for the women in Kerala. And scandals are her nemesis."\(^5\)

The female work participation rate in Kerala is lower than that of Indian average.\(^6\) Discrimination in wages exists in the agricultural sector which employs a large number of women. "Average daily wages for agricultural labour although higher than elsewhere in the country is much less than that of males."\(^7\) With the introduction of new technologies and mechanisation, women's employment chances in this sector are being reduced.

It is quite true that Kerala has achieved high levels in the field of family planning. Programmes are promoted not with the real welfare of women at heart but as population control measures. Thus ironically while the right of abortion is a battle cry for women in the West, the legalising of abortion for women in India is not necessarily liberating women when it does not come from their choice but due to pressure from government and more often from families. But here again women have to take greater responsibility than men do. The burden of controlling the family size falls on women generally. It is her duty. Official reports show that the number of women who undergo tubectomy -the operation for women- is much higher than that of men who undergo vasectomy -the operation for men, which is relatively simpler
than the former. Many women are not at all aware of the side effects of contraceptives they use, and yet they do, as men would not take that responsibility.

Most people of Kerala are religious-minded and religion influences private lives to a very great extent. Thus the mores of the main three religions- The Hindu, the Muslim and the Christian have great bearing on the private lives. The patriarchal value- systems of these faiths put women in a subservient ambiance. Of women, Manu, the law-giver says: 'women have no right to enjoy freedom as the father protects her in the childhood, husband in the youth and son in the old age'.

The two epics of Hinduism - Ramayana and Mahabharatha - have references to women's duties. They describe woman as secondary citizen or as one who should devote herself to her husband and suffer anything and everything for him and his family. In Mahabharatha, women's duties are described as almost same as those of Sudras (The servant caste or people who do menial jobs). As religious texts, these books have immense influence on the life style and customs of the people. And this religious literature passes from one generation, to the other without modifications; the role-models remain unaltered.

Women are prohibited from becoming Poojaris (priests) in temples. Widows are not given a prominent place during holy occasions such as marriage ceremonies. But widowers are not treated likewise. This discrimination against women, is not a feature of rural life alone, but of urban life too. Religious texts of Christians and Muslims are no exceptions.
Christianity also gives women only a secondary position. In India, dowry is prominent among Christians and it looks as if churches here too support this system. Till recently Christian inheritance laws discriminated against women. According to Travancore Christian Succession Act, a daughter's right among Travancore Christian family property ended when she was given, Stridhan (dowry) on marriage. The amount being fixed at Rs 5000/- or one fourth of the value of son's share. The widow has only a life interest in her husband's property. This ends with her life. Though this was challenged by Mary Roy of Kottayam and she got a favourable verdict from the Court, she had to undergo threats from her relatives, religious leaders and even from other women. The Supreme Court verdict was held in ridicule by some educated women of Kerala also. The Kerala state filed an appeal in the court, put it rejected in due course. The interesting thing is that even after six or seven years of the verdict, the State Government is trying to introduce a bill to bypass the judgment and to remove the retrospective effect of the verdict.

In Christianity women have no right to become Purohita (Priest). Recently some sects started allowing the same to women amidst strong protests from the members. The Indian Divorce Act 1869 is extremely hard to Indian Christian women. As such there is no provision for mutual consent like that of Hindu Marriage Act of 1955. Although under the Indian Divorce Act both husband and wife can obtain a divorce, inflicting much strain on wife.
The grounds provided in the Act, for dissolution of marriage are very limited. The couple must rely on differing grounds for divorce. The wife can seek divorce on the grounds of i) incestuous adultery, ii) bigamy with adultery iii) rape, sodomy or bestiality iv) adultery and cruelty v) adultery and desertion vi) conversion from Christianity and marriage with other women. A wife has to prove more than one ground, if she has to succeed in her petition for divorce. If she proves only one charge, namely, adultery or cruelty or desertion, the Court is competent to grant her a judicial separation and not a divorce decree. In order to get the marriage dissolved, the wife has to prove cruelty and adultery. A husband’s only ground for divorce is adultery. So a Christian woman has to tolerate her husband even if he has many vices.

Participation of women in the administration and other activities of the churches on terms of equality with men, is not common. In Protestant churches women’s participation in decision making bodies as well as in liturgical services is being allowed. Women’s ordination into priesthood is sanctioned and encouraged by some Protestant churches, of late, whereas in the Orthodox and Catholic churches women are not considered for elections to any of the decision making bodies. They are not considered equal with men.

The following case of a professor, who was actively engaged in activities related to church, is an illustrative case. She is
a retired professor of sociology. Besides she is a recognised national and international church leader, a dynamic community organiser and an effective public speaker.

She had been the executive secretary of the Women’s Commission of the Kerala Council of Churches, a regional council of the National Council of Churches. She had the privilege of registering the honour of the women of the Orthodox Church in India as well as Global Ecumenical Movement. Her struggle with the church started when she was nominated by the Nomination Committee of the World Council of Churches to its Central Committee at its seventh assembly meet in Canberra, Australia.

When her name appeared in the nomination list the leader of the church delegation wanted her to withdraw the nomination in favour of a male priest from India. Knowing that it was a seat, for the women of the Orthodox Churches in India, she refused to obey. She got elected to the Central Committee of the World Council of Churches. She attended the first meeting of the Central Committee and established thereby for the first time in the history of the Orthodox Church in India, women’s position in the central decision making body of the World Council of Churches. On returning home, she was pressurised and compelled to resign the position in the central committee, by the synod of the Orthodox Church at the instigation of the leader of the delegation who ordered her to withdraw the nomination in favour of a male priest. She was even threatened with excommunication if she did not comply with their order.
At last to avoid excommunication and the consequences, she resigned but handed over the baton to another woman in her church. Had she obeyed the command of the leader of the church, at Canberra it would have been impossible for her to safeguard the rights of women, and to secure the seat for women members. Thus the challenges are many to the women’s movement in Kerala even from educated women and from the religion.

Muslims form a religious community in which customs, beliefs and personal laws rule every aspect of one’s life. Women are the worst sufferers of Muslim personal laws. Muslim women’s right to property is half that of men. According to ‘Saria’at Law’, a man can marry a women or divorce a wife through simple proceedings. He can divorce his wife by simply saying the word Talaq three times, even in the absence of his wife. And the husband is not at all legally obliged to pay maintenance to his divorced wife and children. Recently Government of India also backed the Muslim fundamentalists and by making an act to circumvent the Supreme Court verdict making it mandatory to pay maintenance to a divorced wife through the famous ‘Shah Bano case’. With assumed religious sanction, Polygyny still exists among Muslims. All these practices negatively affect an average Muslim woman. Muslim women are not allowed to enter mosques. (Exceptions are there in some mosques). It is surprising that Purdah system continues in certain parts of Kerala (Malabar). In Malabar region, child marriages and ‘Arab marriages’ do take place, mostly among poor people.
Arab marriages constitute an alliance of convenience. The girls are married off to Arabs (who visit Kerala for a short time); The parents of girl take cash from the bride groom. In many cases these girls are discarded and the husbands return to their homeland after a short period of honeymoon. The girls do not get maintenance from their erstwhile husbands. These marriages take place in Kerala, with the indirect connivance of the religious leaders.

It may be due to deep-rooted taboos and practices like child marriages that women’s education has not gathered momentum in the Muslim community. Thus it is seen that the stranglehold of religion hinder women’s progress. The women’s movement in Kerala has not yet succeeded in liberating women from the shackles of age-old beliefs and customs. It was never able to lead a serious campaign against personal laws in religions.

Media - both electronic and print, hardly give a woman the treatment she deserves. The stories, novels, plays and features coming through the media negatively affect women and resurrects the old images of women. The programmes on television and radio invariably depict woman as inferior to man. The housewife/mother image of woman is getting prominence in both print and electronic media. They are largely portrayed as home-bound, ritualistic and superstitious, self-negating and passive, decorative, powerless and acquiescing to battering and violence. Advertisements on television and radio are also exploitative of women’s bodies. The
female body, often scantly clad, is used to advertise all kinds of products ranging from shaving cream and drinks to automobiles. This further degrades the image of women. Cinema - one of the most influential of medias, is not an exception. Sex and violence is on the increase in cinema.

A large number of Malayalam weeklies indirectly encourage violence against women; the increasing rate of suicides among women in Kerala, is attributed to such violence and sex. The sensational weeklies in Malayalam, with an eye on the till, exploit the soft feelings of the neoliterates as well as literates by publishing tens and hundreds of pynkili novels, depicting women as sex objects and the worst sufferers of the society. The theme of almost all of them is the same, whatever men may do, the female folk of the family must suffer. In Kerala where most of the people are literate, these sob stories can have a powerful impact on them. They surely produce some brainwashing effect, feminist group leaders feel.

Women in decision making roles are very few. Politics does not attracting women in the post-independence period. Even women who took part actively in the political activities in Kerala before independence are seen to quit the field. Statistics show that women contestants and those elected are comparatively less with reference to the total number of seats. This happens in a state where women outnumber men. Many a time, Kerala cabinet lacked a woman minister. Commenting on low participation of
women in the assembly and parliament, Leela Damoodara Menon once remarked that, political parties assigned to women constituencies where an easy victory was impossible. Even when elected, women were not given their due in responsible positions.

Much blame must be assigned to the nature of politics now. It is increasingly an area of fierce competition and corruption. Women who are not inclined to corruption are hesitant to enter politics. Character assassination, threats, harassment etc. are not rare in recent politics. As M.T Padma - the Fisheries Minister of Kerala from 1995 onwards says : "No women in politics remains untainted by scandals". They do not want to lose their fair image by entering in to politics - riddled with immorality, corruption, intrigues, dishonesty and patronage. Many times women political workers were mentally tortured and threatened. According to Simi Rosebell John - the state youth congress secretary : - "women cannot rise in politics except through reservations".

Thus in Kerala political power is far away from women. It is men who make laws, plan and implement policies and programmes intended to promote women's development. Hence the lacunas are many. A woman's perspective is lacking all the time. Commenting about the lack of political power for women in Kerala, Leela Menon - a famous journalist says "of the 2.9 crores population 53 percent are women, who have no share in political power. And, of the one hundred and forty one members in the assembly there are
just six women. Only 11 percent of the one thousand two hundred
elected members of local bodies are women. And there is just one
woman among the twenty five members of parliament from Kerala.
Women have registered only a 0.39 percent increase in the work
force. In the IPS cadre there are two women officers while in the
one hundred and sixty strong IAS force only thirteen are women.
The fact that women form 60 percent of the faceless teachers in
the state is no slave to feminist egos. And women entrepreneurs
are either making pickles or stitching garments. Their motto
seems to be "No high tech for us please, we are women".16

Women's wings of political parties are undoubtedly a strong
current in the women's movement which can influence the
governmental bodies to improve the status of women. But the
members and leaders of these women's wings frankly admit that
they are unable to find more space for women in the party. The
women's membership in the party is not much. The women's wing is
controlled by the party and so cannot always take an independent
stand on women's specific issues. The attitude of the parties to
these wings had always been "You are free and autonomous but you
refuse my permission to say so".

Political parties have no definite outlook on women's
issues. Meetings on important matters are convened late at night.
Women cannot attend these meetings and so crucial decisions are
taken in their absence. This view is shared by the members and
leaders of many other (professional) organisations also.
Another tendency which prevails in the state is the animosity of the politically sponsored women's organisations against the independent women's groups - Feminists allege that their aim is to propagate the ideology of their political party among the poor women rather than propagate the ideas of free thinking and equality and sense of rights and privileges among them. Their organisation has their own well organised political machinery behind them and hence in each conflict of ideas the political organisations are the winners. Feminists allege that the political parties fear - the spread of free thinking and large scale awakening among women as that may ruin them. The leaders of the independent women's organisations are very much fearful and critical about this suppressive and destructive attitude of women's organisations of the leftist parties in Kerala. A strong spokes person of a feminist group in Kerala, Ajitha 17 - once a strong leftist, vehemently condemn the 'Janadhipatya Mahila Association', sponsored by the Communist party of India (Marxist).

However Gabriela Dietrich of Tamil Nadu Theological Seminary - an outstanding person in the field of women's studies opine that women's wing of political parties have an important place in the emancipation of women in Kerala. Though they may be against autonomous feminist groups - as feminists allege, they are responsible for the mass organising of women in Kerala. She adds that Kerala’s culture, its customs and beliefs which are passing from generation to generation may be the prime factor which prevents the emergence of a strong women's movement.
Various laws were made before and after independence for the sake of women. But at the implementation level most of them did not measure up to their expectations. A majority of women are unaware of the laws which are enacted solely for their well-being. Laws against dowry, rape and child marriage, sometimes become ineffective due to various reasons. Economic dependence on others hinder women from approaching courts; litigation consumes much money and time. Plaintiffs influencing the witnesses and even the judges are not rare. Threats against women force them to withdraw cases. It is very common that political parties that have to raise funds, use their influence to save the criminals involved in violence against women. Moreover, existing laws are altered by the organs of the state. Existing rights also get snatched away by the government. This is borne out in the famous 'Shah Bano Case' where the central government legislated against the interest of women and in 'Mary Roy Case' where the state government is trying to.

Many laws framed to help women seem to be ineffective for they are ill-made. In many cases there was a wide disparity between the initial demands raised by the women’s movement and the recommendations of the law commissions and final enactment. The activists and experts who initiate the movement cannot participate in the process of drafting the bills. Almost every single campaign against violence on women in the eighties resulted in new legislations aimed at protecting women. However, these have had little impact on the society.
The campaign for reforms in Rape Laws (1983) is a clear example of ineffectiveness. As a result of the anti-rape campaign, a Law Commission was constituted to study the demands. The Law Commission's recommendations included both the demands raised by the campaign, i.e., regarding onus of proof and women's past sexual history. The commission also recommended certain pre-trial procedures — women should not be arrested at night, a policeman should not touch a woman when he is arresting her, and statements of woman should be recorded in the presence of a relative, friend or a representative of women's organisation. It also recommended that a police official's refusal to register a complaint of rape should be treated as an offence.

However, the bill which was presented to the parliament in August 1980 did not include any of these positive recommendations regulating the police power. The demand that a women's past sexual history and general conduct should not be used as evidence in a rape trial, was excluded from the bill.

Another disturbing trend in the state is the increasing violence against women. Dowry, social discrimination and sexual harassment are rampant and on the increase. Wife beatings are not rare though media coverage is scanty. `Dowry deaths were unheard of in the past, they are however very much a social reality at present. There have been many instances of dowry related suicides in the last few years. Literate women have chosen to end their lives rather than be burdens on their parents who were unable to pay the unconscionable dowry demands.¹⁸

One incident to be singled out for mention here is the tragic suicide of an engineer working in the engineering research
unit, Trichur. The demand for dowry by her husband who was a co-worker in the institution and his torture ultimately led to the suicide of that woman with two small children. Another incident related to dowry occurred in Palghat district (1989). Four sisters committed suicide not to become a burden on their parents. They were aged between eighteen and twenty five and were much worried about their plight. They learned how the marriage of their eldest sister, nearly had ruined the family financially. Hence their tragic end.

Recently news papers reported the dowry harassment of a woman named ‘Beena’ at Kottayam by her in-laws and husband. She was admitted in hospital with serious injuries and the newspapers reported the incident. Many women’s organisations of Kottayam protested against the incident and extended support to her. Many such incidents often go unreported or unnoticed. All these reveals the prevalence of dowry related harassment and dowry deaths in Kerala.

In Kerala no dowry death was reported in 1983 and 1984 but there were five cases in 1985 and now it is on the increase. Rape cases are also increasing in Kerala. Even though men are responsible for rape and molestation, society generally stands against women and that adversely affects her future. In 1990 the number of rape cases reported was one hundred and ninety seven. It increased to two hundred and eleven in 1991. Statistics show that Kerala is not far behind other states of India in the case of rape.

The framing of uniform civil code to overcome all personal laws in religions is one of the long existing demands of women’s
movement. Recently in an epoch-making judgment, the Supreme Court on 10 May 1995 asked the Prime Minister to take a "Fresh look" at Article 44 of the constitution mandating the state to secure a Uniform Civil Code for the citizens throughout the territory of India. This was in a case where a Hindu husband had misused the absence of a Uniform Civil Code to convert to Islam and marry a second wife without dissolving the first marriage. However, the Prime Minister of India and Chief Minister of the state Kerala emphatically declared that there is no move from the part of government to constitute the Uniform Civil Code as it never wanted to hurt the feelings of the religious people by changing personal laws. From this it is crystal clear that the government is least moved by women's concerns or women's movement, even if there is direction from the apex court of the country.

The National Commission for Women is also facing criticisms. The NCW from its inception is doing commendable work including inquiries on around one thousand cases concerning women, conducted major studies on family court system, women in the unorganised sector and so on, and appealed to the President not to give assent to the Kerala bill denying Christian women the right to succession. However many women's organisations criticize the functioning of the commission as it is biased in favour of the party in power. Disappointment is widespread among women in general about the appointments made in the commission that the government filled the commission with its supporters. Thus noted academicians and activists of the women's movement have not got a place in the commission.

Feminism is often a misunderstood term in Kerala. People consider it as western and try to neglect and oppose anything
connected with feminism. Feminists are often ridiculed even by eminent men and women and also the media in general. During mid-eighties when feminist groups were formed, the opposition came from all corners – said a feminist group leader in Kerala. Feminism is considered as anti-Indian and against the country’s culture. This adversely affects women’s groups. Even the educated, freedom loving women hesitate to say that they are feminists. They may speak, write and work for women but add at the same time that they are not feminists. This hesitancy also negatively affect the growth of feminist groups in the state.

"Women in Kerala lack courage", says Sugatha Kumari. She adds: "women in Kerala wear an inner purdah". Most women leaders share this idea and add that women of Kerala lack initiative. They are always afraid of society. This is a general tendency of the middle-class. Lower class people are very different and have some courage to come forward.

According to Sr.Alice, "unmarried girls of Kerala usually would not come forward to join a rally or a protest meeting. They never wanted to be assertive or dominating as they fear that it may affect the prospects of their marriage. They consider marriage as the most important event in their life and are ready to sacrifice their jobs, education and even their individuality to that end. All these beliefs shared by majority of women is the stumbling block in the growth of women’s movement". 
Unity and contradiction -positive and negative- the recent developments in Kerala women's movement scene may be summed up in these terms. As the society grows and literacy become universal the women's question get momentum. Many talk and write about equality and the new autonomous feminist groups do much for the upliftment of women. Still there are problems, which impede the functioning of the women's organisation. The disappearance of 'prachodana' - a feminist group which actively functioned in Trivandrum indicates that challenges to women's groups are high in the state. It is said that the strong opposition from political parties and the mental torture of members in the group are among the factors for its disappearance. This is not a single case. Almost all organisation are facing strong challenges.

A close look at the situation in Kerala reveals that many feminist groups which started during 1980's are now inactive due to lack of strong leadership and membership. And, even after the years of emergence of various groups they have not at all succeeded in organising a united front to effectively fight and react to the issues concerning women. Attempts are made to bring the different groups together, but all their discussions end up in arguments on ideological or theoretical grounds. Unity has been elusive.

Various criticisms are levelled against women's movement that they are fragmented, lacks a clear orientation, direction or an efficient organisation. They are in their initial stage and
are far from organising intense struggles. However the great victories, the movement has made, are clear examples to its progress to success. It is quite clear that day by day, the number of individuals supporting women’s emancipation is increasing. General public and media are becoming more and more conscious. Women’s studies are also growing in volume and quality. The diffusion of education, the passing of social legislation, and the defence of oppressed women are the products of these women’s movements. The movement has contributed to the transformation of the mind set of the people to a great extent. It influences the government policies on women also.

The movement today is undergoing various changes and comprises different trends in its fold. Most of the groups developed links with far left working class, tribal and anti-caste organisations. Women increasingly begin to take part in other social movements like ecological and civil rights movement. Unlike the early years of its functioning, the women’s groups, generally the women’s movement earned much confidence through their activities and received much support from the public. Though western feminists’ ideologies were discussed in detail, the groups here never went to extremities like violent protests as in the West.

The movement in the pre-independence period was for getting legal reforms including right to education, right to employment, right to franchise, right to divorce etc. Whereas the present day
women's movement has gone much ahead in realizing the importance of viewing every issue in women's perspective. It began to fight against everything which tries to oppress or discriminate women. The movement by this time has got strength through protest, and pressurising, as well as research and basic net working among women's groups. The activism has spread even to the rural areas. Women's high participation and even leading roles they assume in various struggles such as fish workers movement and prohibition movement, bear this out.

One of the major charges raised by the women's movement against the left political parties is that they do not at all take women's issues seriously and are working against the interest of women's movement; now a change of heart has taken place in the left parties. With the initiative and leadership of AKG Centre, Trivandrum, a Women's Conference - "Women in Kerala, Yesterday, Today" - inviting academicians and women activists of all women groups, was organised recently at Trivandrum. (February 11 to 13, 1995). Around one hundred and eighty papers relating to women and their movements were presented in the conference. The seminar revealed the changed attitude of left political party towards women's movement in which E.M.S Namboothirippad talked about the immediate necessity of the emergence of a strong women's movement in Kerala. Besides he admitted the low position and participation, women have in the party and other mass based organisations and wanted a conscious effort to replace this situation. The incessant struggle by the
women members of the party against male domination may be one of the major reasons for this attitudinal change.

The most remarkable development of recent times in the state is the government's decision to reserve 33.3 percent seats in Panchayat Raj institutions which aims at the political and economical empowerment of women. In line with the constitution (73rd Amendment) Act 1992, the Kerala Panchayat Raj Act 1994 has passed as a measure to secure a greater participation of people in the planned development and in local Governmental affairs, by constituting Village, Block and District level Panchayats. The Act which reserved one third of the total number of seats for women, has also reserved for them in the same ratio for executive posts. According to the Act (Chapter XIV, Sec. 153(3)(b)(ii) of extraordinary gazette of Kerala Government) one third of the total number of offices of village panchayats, block panchayats and district Panchayats, will be reserved for women.

Accordingly in Kerala about four thousand five hundred and fifty three women will get power including three thousand eight hundred and eighty one members in Village panchayats, five hundred and sixty eight members in Block panchayats and one hundred and four members in District Panchayats. Women will be the presidents of three hundred and thirty one Village panchayats, fifty one Block panchayats and five District Panchayats. Also women get the presidentship of about eighteen Municipalities and one Corporation. This reform can be
considered a great success as far as women's movement is concerned.

The establishment of National Commission for Women in 1992 offers a bright prospect for women all over the country. Under the National Commission for Women Act, 1990, the commission is empowered to take "suomotto" notice of matters relating to deprivation of women's rights and non-implementation of laws enacted to provide protection to women and to take up issues arising out of these with the appropriate authorities.

With the determination to check the increasing violence against women, the commission has formulated a number of recommendations. Some of the relevant provisions are:

i) setting up / strengthening, of monitoring bodies in every district and every state. The committee usually consists of police officers and magistrates in some states, in-charge of the area, legal aid workers, representatives of women's organisations, counselling experts etc.

ii) recognizing the strength and capabilities of voluntary organisations for generating public response to violence and social mobilisation, the commission has recommended that the existing schemes of assistance to non governmental organisations be modified to include a specific component for combating atrocities against women,

iii) the commission has recommended to set up women's cells or women police stations on an urgent basis all over the country as a special mechanism to deal with violence against women.
It is of the view that a gender sensitisation programme should be incorporated in all the training programmes for the entire administrative machinery including police, the prosecutors, magistrates, the forensic and medico-legal personnel and judiciary.

The Women’s Commission has also come to the conclusion that the only effective remedy for dowry deaths is financial i.e., confiscation of the property of the husband or in-laws of the deceased and it has been recommended that a legal provision should be made to do this in all cases of dowry deaths.

The proposal of the National Commission for Women for 30 percent reservation for women in all government job is conspicuous. Recently the Department for Women and Children in the Ministry of Human Resource Development has supported this proposal. The recommendation has been cleared by the ministry of Human Resource Development and is doing the rounds of the ministries of laws and welfare and the department of personnel. In her meeting with HRD minister Madhavarao Sindia, Mohini Giri - Chairperson of the National Commission for Women has pointed out that the money spent by the commission would be wasted if this recommendation is not accepted.

In Kerala, the political empowerment of women was first attempted when 30 percent of seats of District council were reserved for women in 1990. Now the new legislation will surely be a great advancement towards granting political power to women.
Studies show that women in top jobs are very few. Even at the lower level, they hold just 4 to 15 percent of various categories of government jobs. The recommendation for reservation for women is significant, as it does just before the Beijing Conference of women and the release of the 1995 Human Development Report of the UNDP in which Mahbub-ul-Haq, author of the report has mooted the 50/50 job proposal for women and men. Beginning with 30 percent jobs in the organised sector for women, Haq says government should work towards 50 percent jobs for women.

The UN secretary-general Boutros Ghali, is also pushing for 50 percent of the top UN jobs (assistant secretary-general and above) for women. The deadline to achieve the target is 2000 AD.

Meanwhile the Karnataka Government on 23 September 1995 decided to reserve 25 percent of posts in government service for women in future recruitment. Briefing on the cabinet decisions, Law Minister M.C. Nanaiah said henceforth the government would ensure that 30 percent of beneficiaries for various welfare programmes drawn by the government shall be women.

The fourth National Conference on Women: Action for Equality, Development and Peace to be held at Beijing, China from 4 – 5 September 1995. It became a stage for the world-wide women’s movement to discuss women’s issues to share their experiences and to formulate strategies for the future. Convened
by the UN General Assembly, the conference adopted a 'Platform for Action', concentrating on "critical areas of concern", issues identified as obstacles to the advancement of women in the world.


The Forward-Looking strategies provide a framework for action at international, national and regional levels to promote greater equality and opportunity for women. They are based on the three objectives of the UN Decade for Women 'Equality, Development and Peace'. The 'Platform for Action' which will recommend further concrete steps to be taken by policy makers and by women and men worldwide is intended to speed up the process of making the strategies a reality.

Despite the widespread movement towards democratisation in the past decade, women have made little progress in attaining political power in legislative bodies or achieving the target of 30 percent in decision making levels set by the United Nations. With a reservation of 33.33 percent of seats in local bodies for women, India has more than fulfilled the target and in the last local bodies election more than 40 percent elected
representatives in some states like Karnataka and Maharashtra were women.

Gender equality, politics and decision making are identified as one of the twelve major thrust areas which the Beijing Conference would focus its attention. It was at India’s initiative that the issue of girl child was included as one of the thrust areas that the conference would focus. The other areas included women and poverty, literacy and education, women’s health, women in the global economy, violence against women, women and the environment and women at war and peace.

Five hundred Indian delegates headed by Human Resources Development Minister Madhav Rao Scindia participated the conference. About twenty-five thousand delegates including activists and leaders representing various types of women’s groups from one hundred and eighty UN member states participated the conference, which may act as a springboard for renewed work.

A parallel NGO Forum on Women 1995 held from 30 August to 8 September 1995. The two themes the Forum had focussed are i) to influence ‘Platform for Action’ that UN member states will adopt, ii) to highlight the women’s vision for the world in the twenty first century. The theme of the Forum is to "look at the world through women’s eyes".

Though these conferences can work no miracle, they will help women to reach an understanding about women’s common problems and
to chalkout ways to solve these at global level. They also help women to know about the women’s movement in different countries and to instill in them a feeling that they are not alone in the path of struggle for liberation, which may in turn raise their confidence to work with renewed vigour and enthusiasm.

The present study already revealed that women of Kerala is better placed in terms of health, education etc. Though they share many problems with the women of the rest of the country, their progress in the field of education is noteworthy. The old concept about women, as duty bound to remain at home and men as the bread-winners (earning members), is already broken. Now it is a fact that in many of the households in Kerala, bread-winners are women. This to a certain extent empowers them economically. Though employed women faces many problems, their status and dignity in society as well as at home is increasing.

The National Women’s Commission’s proposal to reserve 30 percent jobs to women, if implemented, may create a silent revolution in the state. The economic and political empowerment are the two key components which can liberate women from the clutches of subordination. The recent move to reserve 33.33 percent seats in the local bodies is sure to yield good results as it will empower women politically and economically. If the Panchayat Raj is allowed to function properly, the democratic process and institutions will be strengthened, people (both men and women) will receive a political education as well as a better
sense of themselves as citizens; the internal democracy of the voluntary sector may improve and women may participate in the decision making bodies as well as in the general functioning of the local government as full-fledged citizens. With this the concept that the public-realm is solely for men, began to rupture.

Increasing violence against women is seriously taken into consideration by the state under the direction from the National Commission for Women. More women police stations are started and measures have been taken to start more family courts to help women. According to Administration Report of Police Department, Kerala, 1990, there were twenty women’s police stations already functioning in the state. In order to ensure more security and protection to women and to take up their complaints twenty more women’s police stations are to be established in various places of state.34

Attention was given to employed women to lessen their difficulties regarding children by opening more Creches and Day-care Centres. Assistance is given to ‘Mahila Samajams’ to function properly and to take up economically beneficent schemes. Recognition of women in government policies can be observed in the case of IRDP where the direction is that 30 percent of its beneficiaries should be women. With the efforts of courageous women, the government and judiciary under pressure to reform discriminatory legislations as in the case of Travancore Christian Succession Act and the Christian Divorce Act.
Entry of more women writers to the field of literature is a new trend in the state. They get wider acceptance and are gradually breaking the monopoly of men in the field of literature. The women's writing (feminist writing) has become an emerging area in literature which owes much to the women's movement in the state. The acceptance of women's studies, as an academic discipline at the University level and the starting of women's centres or cells in many colleges and Universities in Kerala, offers a bright prospect to the women's movement.

The women's movement in Kerala so far was able to create a psychological impact on women and also to create a change in the attitude of the public towards women's issues and status. It has led to a rethinking about the present social order and values. This trend in turn influences the government and its programmes. Changes are taking place; the women's movement has the responsibility to accelerate the change.