CHAPTER : I

HISTORICAL AND SOCIO – CULTURAL BACKGROUND OF WOMEN IN KANYAKUMARI DISTRICT

Kanyakumari District, the Southern most part of Indian peninsular, is the most complicated, most peculiar, unpredictable; but very much unique in many ways of history and socio – culture\(^1\). This area was ruled by the kingdoms like Ayi (B.C. 250), Titiyan (A.D. 25), Nanjil Porunan (3\(^{rd}\) century A.D.), Pandiyas (560 – 900 A.D.), Cholas (920 – 1200 A.D.) and Venad - Chera Kings (1200 – 1949)\(^2\). The people of the district are predominantly Dravidians. However, the culture of the people is heterogeneous, due to the cultural and political contacts with other areas\(^3\). Fertile lands and favourable climatic conditions have triggered several waves of immigration from the neighbouring dry areas of the Tirunelveli district\(^4\). Since the district was part of the Kingdom of Travancore for a long time, it shared the socio – cultural traits of Travancore very much. Therefore, a look into the socio-

\(^2\) The Hindu, Thiruvanathapuram, 18 July 2011, p. 5.
\(^4\) Pillay, K. K., *Studies in the History of India with Special Reference to Tamil Nadu*, Madras, 1979, p. 474.
cultural context of the district needs to be done in the general context of the socio – cultural realities of the kingdom of Travancore.

The socio – cultural canvass of the kingdom of Travancore was composite and heterogeneous in character. It had the people of different caste, language, religions and cultures. Tamil and Malayalam were the languages spoken by the majority of the population, and both were considered vernacular languages. According to the 1901 census of the Kingdom of Travancore, out of the total number of 29,52,049 people 24,20,049 spoke Malayalam and 4,92273 spoke Tamil, which was 16.67% of the total population\(^5\). However, the Tamil speaking areas were recognised as linguistically and culturally having a separate identity of their own, which later became the basis for the claim to be merged with the State of Madras. So, linguistically, Tamil has always been the language of the people of South Travancore, at present called the District of Kanyakumari\(^6\).

The district has vast historical background that it produced Army Chiefs, philosophers, thinkers, scientists, poets, novelists, and grammarians of ancient and modern times. There was no disparity; a  


casteless, undivided people as pure as the nature had begotten them, were then living here during the earliest centuries. But, it is a historical fact that we see in the later periods that this place is being subjected for various cultural influence under the Cheras, Cholas and the Pandyans, the British, and others producing diverse types of cultural societies. Many wars and expeditions had been initiated from this place. Many thoughts and Sciences of various branches have been spread from these people of Kanyakumari centuries back, the rudiments of which are still traceable here.

It is difficult to ascertain women’s situation in pre-agricultural period, because historians have not been able to tap the traces of happenings and operations during that period. This much is evident that women played a large part in economic life. But, the bondage of reproduction was a terrible handicap in their dealings with the society. Menstruation, pregnancy and childbirth reduced their capacity to work for money and at times made them fully depend upon men for protection and food. The perpetuation of species was her responsibility. In contrast to women, man’s position was quite different. From the beginning man

had been an inventor. Through numerous inventions, he found self-realization as an existence. Thus, women’s subordination began with the society’s development. There had been clear-cut demarcation between women and men’s world of work⁹.

Philosophers, religious preachers, political leaders, social reformers and scientists all justified the inferior status of women in society, floating albeit differing justifications. for instance, the Greek Philosopher – Aristotle decreed that “…the relation of the male to female is by nature such that one is superior and the other is dominated …with barbarians, of course, the female and the dominated have the same rank. This is because they do not possess a naturally dominating element…” The writers of the literary classics were enormously prejudiced against women. despite their genius, they treated women equally in their works by depicting women as pretty, ornamental, idle, mindless and vicious creatures. And, ever since the Bible fixed the blame on Eve, women are held responsible for having led men on to their downfall¹⁰.

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¹⁰ Ibid.
Indian society is probably one of the few where the women’s position in 2000 B.C. was an enviable one. She has given education. She could, if she wanted, select her own life partner and in domestic life she was an equal partner to the male. The women in ancient India enjoyed considerable freedom, status and prestige in society being the man’s companion, not his attendant. However, this congruence did not last long; and lawgivers like Manu brought down the status. Unfortunately, women gave in to discriminatory laws against them. Women finally settled down to an indoor life, made imperative due to the institution of joint family that had developed.

After the middle or later part of the Sangam period, we find the place is very much nurtured by the great cultures of Buddhism and Jainism, which is traceable from many of the local historical sites. There are proofs to indicate that Aye kingdom existed even during 8th or 9th Century A.D. with Parthivapuram as one of the main centres of University studies and cultural interaction between the Jains and the newly coming up cult of Vaishnavism. Partivapuram is a small village situated near Munchirai.  

11. The Week : Mid – Year Special, Kottayam, 26 June 2011, p. 50.
principle of Sanadhana Dharma of Casteism, is not seen almost up to the end of 11\textsuperscript{th} century A.D., although we find a fight for supremacy is going on between the Brahmana and Kshatriya classes\textsuperscript{13}. But by the emergence of 16\textsuperscript{th}. and 17\textsuperscript{th}. centuries, we find the original language of the land, Tamil, being modified and changed to Malayalam causing a lingo – cultural change in the area making way for a thorough supremacy for the Aryan Nambutiri domination in the administrative structure of the regions\textsuperscript{14}.

This is followed by some concentration of administrative powers by the new groups, like the Nairs (19\textsuperscript{th} century), who have now become a sort of agents of Aryanism submitting and supporting the Nambutiris by making an alliance with them. By the emergence of Dewan Velu Thampi in 1801, a thorough implementation of the Aryan principles are seen imposed on the Tamils, especially on the major people of Kanyakumari District, the Tamils\textsuperscript{15}. This is the scene of Kanyakumari District around the year 1885; thrown away from the traditional Dravidian culture, to a state of imposition of Aryan Acharas, using the administrative machinery, supported by allied groups of Aryan Agents,

\textsuperscript{13.} Immanuel, M., \textit{op. cit.}
\textsuperscript{14.} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{15.} Ibid.
causing upsets in the socio-political mind - set of the original Tamils of the land. The ‘Varna’ system was materialised distinctly\textsuperscript{16}.

Travancore, originally being part of the ancient Dravidian country, had a more egalitarian social organisation during the Sangam age on the basis of the system of ‘tinai’\textsuperscript{17}. Tamilagam was separated into several zones by mountains, forests, river valleys, seashores and the land not suitable for regular system of agriculture due to lack of sufficient water resources. The social life, fine arts and folk songs were differed from one division to another. So that the Tamil literature developed with the influence of the geographical factors of a particular division and progressed into five types of ‘tinai’ literature, known as Kurunchi, Mullai, Marudham, Neithal and Palai\textsuperscript{18}. The term ‘tinai’ is basically referred to either behavioural or physiographic, it includes the social ethics of the people, family life, women in society, welfare and external life. These all highlighted proper duties and responsibilities of women.

\begin{itemize}
  \item \textsuperscript{16} Ibid.
  \item \textsuperscript{17} Personal Interview with T. Sunderaraj, aged 65, Former Prof. & Head of the History, St. Joseph’s College, (Autonomous) Thrichirapalli, dated 12 October 2010.
  \item \textsuperscript{18} Thomas, C., Thiruvalluvar’s Concept of State Formation and its Effects on the Politics of the Sangam Age, in \textit{Indian Historical Studies}, Thiruchirapalli, Vol. 1, 2013, p.18.
\end{itemize}
who would lead to the creation of a prosperous, peaceful and welfare in family and society\textsuperscript{19}. Hence, women were treated as head of the family.

With the invasion of Aryan race, which began its settlement in the Kerala country and established its sway the four – fold caste system seems to have been introduced into this country\textsuperscript{20}. The caste system was foisted on a casteless society by the Aryan immigrants who worked with extraordinary missionary zeal in spreading the Aryan ideology based on the primacy of Chaturvarnya\textsuperscript{21}. With the introduction of this four – fold caste system, a twin process of an amalgamation on one hand, and a hierarchical discrimination on the other, began to operate among the different tribes and women folk\textsuperscript{22}.

As early as 1750, A.D the mind - set of the people of the area was that “The Brahman was regarded as a foreigner…”, in spite of the fact that by this time, he was allowed to enjoy a lot of freedom in the southern country like Karnataka or Andhra Pradesh. The principle of Manu Dharma has already taken its roots here. People were under the grip of suppression and at the verge of slavery. No freedom for

\textsuperscript{19} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{21} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{22} Ibid.
education for the common class was allowed\textsuperscript{23}. Many inhuman acts were in practice. In Travancore, the society was based on the hierarchical caste system and slavery was officially recognised till the middle of the 19\textsuperscript{th} century. The feudal chieftains extracted from their lower caste tenants, whom they could evict at will or even kill. Their using of headgear, umbrellas, with handless and the growing of moustache needed specific permission on payment of a prescribed fee. There was a tax for the hair one grew and for the breasts of the women called a breast – tax\textsuperscript{24}.

The subordination of women long preceded the formation of class society and class oppression. Women are the first historic category of non-owing workers. Since, women owns nothing, she does not enjoy the dignity of being a person, she forms a part of the patriarchy of a man: first of her father, then to her husband and lastly of her son.

The gender inequalities have hampered their development and women’s sufferings often go unnoticed and unrecognised because of sexist prejudices\textsuperscript{25}. Even the institutions of home and family are the source of women’s oppression within all spheres of society, reserving

\begin{flushleft}
\textsuperscript{23} Immanuel, M., \textit{op. cit.} p. 193.
\textsuperscript{24} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{25} Razia Parvin, M., \textit{op. cit.}, p. 15
\end{flushleft}
the private sphere to women and the public sphere to men. Until the
dawn of the Industrial Revolution in 1868, the status of women was
almost the same throughout the world\textsuperscript{26}.

In the Greek States, while women were a subject of admiration
for her grace and motherly qualities, she was completely subordinated to
men. The position of women was no better in the Roman Empire also.
Early medieval society in Germany too enforced the complete control of
the husband on his wife as his right, known as the right of ‘mundium’,
Inferiority of women’s position in Japan dates back from the twelfth
century of military society and found greater support from Confucianist
Orthodoxy of the Tokugawa period. Conventional and traditional values
that were upheld by many Asian countries discriminative women at
various levels\textsuperscript{27}. Any observer of the world knows that while men may
be very good protectors for the women of their own families, they are
often very poor protectors for the women of other men’s families.

The position of women in India during the medieval times
deteriorated further due to more seclusion and a ‘closed life’ by the
custom of ‘purdah’. Women lost all their liberal activities and became a
property of their male masters, thereby becoming a “commodity” and

\textsuperscript{26} I\textit{bid}.
\textsuperscript{27} I\textit{bid}.
therefore came to be considered a liability instead of an asset to the family. The eighteenth century, perhaps, was the darkest period so far as the women were concerned. Women lost their separate entity and their very existence was merely a bare necessity and indispensable appendage to the male population. Thus till the beginning of the nineteenth century, women were totally and forcefully subjugated to male superiority, physically and intellectually.\(^{28}\)

By 1806 A.D., Christianity takes root in the soil, although not for the first time. As the light of freedom is set in, when we move forward to a few more decades, we find that “In 1843 slavery had been abolished in British India.”\(^{29}\) After one more decade, in 1855 we observe “that a final proclamation was issued liberating all slaves, Government and private…”\(^{30}\) Education, for the first time for all alike, slaves or free, was made possible in the year 1819 through the efforts of Christian Missionaries. According to Aryan concept of Hindu regulations, Woman was a commodity to be used for the satisfaction of man, as was prescribed by Lord Parasurama. “Their husband is their god. From birth to death women is under man’s authority... To educate

\(^{28}\) Ibid.
\(^{29}\) Immanuel, M., op. cit. p. 193.
\(^{30}\) Ibid.
a woman is like putting a torch in the hand of a monkey…” Somewhere around 1816, the London Missionary Society’s Missionary, Ringeltaube, wrote with great concern for the women of this area: “Girls never come to school in Travancore, which is a great loss…”\textsuperscript{31}

This was the state of affairs in the country, dominated by the Nambutiris, before the advent of Christianity. It was in 1819 that the first school for women was started which had consequently disproved the aforesaid theory of Aryan Hinduism, which in turn, was in contrast to the early Dravidian Hinduism of the Tamil Sages\textsuperscript{32}.

Suppressions were resisted. Social disabilities were questioned. The lustful, Hinduised regulations of the Aryan Lords to expose the female breasts to the Numbutiris and Government Officials, imposed around the 18\textsuperscript{th} or 19\textsuperscript{th} century, were vehemently protested by the people, even as early as 1822. This year recorded that the caste Hindus including the Nairs ill-treated the Nadar women of Kalkulam, Iraniyal taluks, even in the market places. They were stripped of their jackets and upper clothes. It led to series of communal riot between the Nadars and


\textsuperscript{32} \textit{Ibid}.p.134
Nairs\textsuperscript{33}. The period has seen a continuous revolution till victory was achieved through a Royal proclamation on 26\textsuperscript{th} July 1859, to end this evil and uncivilised practice imposed by Brahmanical forces. Thus one of the first ever fought revolutions for the Honour and Rights of Women was won over, initiated by the Nadar community of this land, in the 19\textsuperscript{th} century A.D. the guidance given by veteran Saint, Muthukutty Swamigal, for the cause of equality, in the land is worth remembering. It was a society characterised by a hierarchical social organization\textsuperscript{34}. Pallar, Parayar, and Pulayar were the major social groups that lived under the system of agrestic slavery. Nadar was the major social group in Travancore which, in spite of its position above the people in slavery, suffered untouchability and social degradation. Mukkuvar and Paravar were people living at the periphery of the society. All these groups of people can be classified as the subaltern people because of the social subordination they experienced. It created the culture of women as female degradation\textsuperscript{35}.


\textsuperscript{34} Patrick, G., \textit{op. cit.}, p. 32.

In Kanyakumari District, the predominant castes are the Nadars, the Mukkuvas, the Paravas, the Vellaalars, the Scheduled castes, the Nairs, the Krihnavakahars, popularly called the Kuruppus, the Nasudars or Naviars called the Kerala Mudaliars, Chettiars, Kollars, Por-Kollars, Vannar, and so on. There are good number of scheduled tribes, found mostly in the hilly areas, and called the Kanikkar and a small number of Brahmins. In all the castes, women were not treated as equal to men. Most of these community people are based on their traditional labour work viz. agriculture, barber work and cloth washing. Brahmins were the lawmakers and the interpreters for the social organisation of the society. Very zealously they safeguard the system of Varunacirama tarmam and the Sanskritic religious tradition. Their political system contributed to the maintenance of the hierarchical social organisation.

Awakened by the light of education lit by Christianity, revolution after revolution took place. 1872 saw the famous Temple Entry Movement. Seven Nadars entered into the Tiruchendur Temple; and in the year 1874, Mooka Nadar and party entered into the Madurai Meenakshi Temple registering; the right to worship one’s god of

choice. In 1923, Sri Vellaiyan Nadar entered into Kumarakoil temple of this district, with 12000 men of his followers\textsuperscript{37}.

After 1885, in the year 1893, the First College in the South Travancore, the Scott Christian College, at Nagercoil was established by the London Missionary Society, with Sir James Duthie as the first Principal; financially supported by Mr. Scott\textsuperscript{38}. Due to this opportunity the female education started to increase. Awakened by the culture of education spread by Christianity, even the Royal folds changed their attitude towards their subjects, which prompted them to establish Educational Institution like S.L.B. School, in memory of Rani Sethu Lekshmi Bai\textsuperscript{39}. But in spite of this, pressure from the Brahmanic forces was still at work; which is evident from the following lines spoken about the ruler of Travancore: “The Sovereign of this beautiful country is about 26 years of age, of a very pleasing countenance and his manners strikingly simple and gentile man – like… Could he escape from the swaddling bands of the Brahmins: it is supposed that he would show himself a really enlightened ruler. This however, seems impossible, as

\textsuperscript{37} Immanuel, M., \textit{op. cit.}, p. 194
\textsuperscript{38} Daniel, R. R., and others, \textit{op. cit.}
\textsuperscript{39} Padmanabha, K. P., \textit{op. cit.}
these crafty priests have thrown their meshes so effectually around that he can scarcely stir hand of foot without their permission…”

In Travancore, people worshiped female goddess like Yakshi, Kali, Parvathi, Devi, Amman etc. which are the symbols of power. The worship of these deities is confined to the people of lower castes. These deities are worshiped very much. According to the 1891 census of Travancore, the total numbers of these female temples were 3205, the largest numbers being returned from the southern taluks of Kalkulam, Agasteeswaram, Eraniel and Thovalai.

The restrictions on the dress of the lower caste women in Travancore were the gross denial of rights. By strict conventions and rigid rules they were bidden to wear a coarse piece of cloth known as ‘mundu’ extending from the waist to the knees leaving the breasts bare. A woman was given one or two ‘mundus’ a year by her master. Working in the fields from morning till evening, standing knee deep in water, in the rain and the sun, planting and weeding, wearing the same piece of cloth day in and day out, from harvest to harvest with hardy the facility or the time to wash, they went about in filthy rage, foul-smelling

41. Patrick, G., *op. cit.*
and were thus really justified untouchable. Like dumb driven cattle these poor women accepted the mandates of the higher castes that denied them their basic humanhood\textsuperscript{43}.

Ancient custom required the Nair and the other low caste women to uncover their bosoms in the presence of persons of rank and position, before royalty or while saluting such persons passing by, as a mark of respect. For the lower caste women it posed no problem, as they could not cover their bodies at any time. It affected mainly the higher caste Nair women who normally covered their breasts with a light white cloth when they went out, a privilege they enjoyed with the Brahmin women. During the Aarat festival when the Maharaja went to the beach to perform certain religious rites twice a year, hundreds of attractive young Nair girls with bared breasts went in procession for a distance of nearly three kilometres along the high road carrying lighted lamps as they were watched with great excitement and interest by large crowds on either side of the road\textsuperscript{44}.

The status of women was further lowered in Travancore by the introduction of the Devadasis who were once offered to temple services in the early period were young women attached to the temples to raise

\textsuperscript{43} Ibid.,
\textsuperscript{44} yesudhas.R.N.,op.cit., p.202
funds for the temples through musical and dance performances. It was an honourable profession and respectful women from aristocratic families took to it\textsuperscript{45}. Soon the profession degenerated and the dancing girls became a prey to the lust of feudal chieftains and rich landlords. They faced hardship and humiliation from not only men but women and society too. Bearing the temple blessings on the one side and burdens on the other side, women continued to march forward with a firm condition. They were neglected in the process of development. They lived in the temples owned by priests, which had no basic amenities\textsuperscript{46}. They were neither not treated equal nor allowed to enjoy equal opportunities along with men in any field.

They existed merely to entertain them. When this degeneration, the post of Devadasis became hereditary and came to be identified with temple prostitution. In Travancore, the Devadasis were much sought after till the beginning of this century by the members of the royal family when they visited the temples\textsuperscript{47}.

The practice of polyandry among the Nair women was the creation of the Nambudiris for their comfort. Though it conferred on

\textsuperscript{46} Personal Interview with Prof. V. T. Chellam, aged 70, Nagercoil, dated 21 June 2010.
\textsuperscript{47} Daniel, R. R., and others, op. cit., p. 207.
women certain liberty of action and social status, it began to demoralise society. The thrusting of prostitution on young girls and the heartless denial of ‘paternity’ became sociological factors that seriously affected the morale of Travancore society and tended to degrade the status of women\(^{48}\).

The socio-economic mosaic of Travancore in the 17\(^{th}\), 18\(^{th}\) and 19\(^{th}\) centuries was one of extreme contrasts existing side by side power bondage, purity and pollution, over lordship and subservience, landeness and landlessness, prosperity and poverty, knowledge and ignorance, the power of women and the degradation of women, immunities and slavery\(^{49}\). In the land of plenty where nature showered her choicest blessings of grain, fruits and roots, thousands lived eating reptiles, insects, ants and crabs. In this native state, which produced some of the finest woven cotton, which adorned the persons of the rich, thousands went about clad in dirty rags of coarse cloth. These contrasting chips were firmly cemented together by political, social and religious laws, traditions and conventions. It was a mosaic very similar to that of France during the Pre-Revolution period. Underneath a seemingly placid

\(^{48}\) Ibid.

surface, in Travancore, there were the same longings and rebelliousness to overthrow old shackles and emerge as a ‘new-people’\textsuperscript{50}.

According to Manu Tarmam, women were never allowed to live self-dependent status. While in the young age, she was under parents’ protection, as adult under husband’s protection and in old age, under her son’s protection. This was the status of women in ancient India. Incidentally, while sex is biologically determined, gender is sociologically imposed discrimination. The human society has seen several transformations in all aspects of life but the society has retained the patriarchal character consistently\textsuperscript{51}.

Mahatma Gandhi rightly observed that when a woman enjoys the freedom of liberty and equality in practice, real freedom of a country is realised. In the past, Indian women suffered under various disabilities and their life was questioned from several angles\textsuperscript{52}. But surprisingly an emancipation movement took place only in the last quarter of 18\textsuperscript{th} century. The reformers like Raja Ram Mohan Roy, Karve, Malabari, Sri Sankaran Nair, Mahatma Gandhi, Saraladevi Chaudhurani and others promoted the cause of women. Saraladevi Chaudhurani, a remarkable

\begin{flushleft}
50. \textit{Ibid.}
51. Sharma and Usha, \textit{Women Education in Ancient and Medieval India}, New Delhi, 1995, p. 70
\end{flushleft}
personality, was both feminist and a nationalist who played a crucial role in both the social reform and nationalist movement. Further, she was one of the first women to see the need for an association for women.

While the male dominated society enjoys all freedoms, women community suffers from lack of awareness to utilize the opportunities envisaged. However, the womenfolk over the period played a vital role on various issues pertaining to nation building. But their participation in freedom struggle or public affairs has not enhanced their position since the nature of family commitments inhibited their entry into public space. Women participation in the Central and State legislatures is still in the single digit percentage level. The question of due representation still remains unsolved and unfulfilled due to vested interests. The statistics of women participation in the Loksabha and the state legislatures reveal a pathetic status of women. A country, which comprises more than 50% of women population in the total population, has been named only as a developing country because it has failed to capitalize the women resources. Only a country, which utilize the resources of women population, could be named as a developed country. In the light of the

above, an attempt has been made to analyze the last century women in transition from their position in the status society to their evolving position in the modern, achievement society\textsuperscript{55}.

The Swadeshi movement in Bengal (1905-'08) marked the beginning of women’s participation in social and nationalist activities. Many women were from families, involved in nationalist politics after the Bangali Swadeshi Movement. By the turn of the century, The Women’s Indian Association (WIA) was formed in 1917 in Madras under the leadership of Dr. Annie Besant. Annie Besant was interested in the education of Indian women and attempted to make them conscious of their social and political rights. Hence, she organised the All India Women’s Conference in 1927. Annie Besant was the first alien women to become the President of the Indian National Congress in 1917, followed by Sarojini Naidu, the first Indian women who became the President of the Indian National Congress in 1925, and later by Nellie Sengupta in 1933. As a result of the above Movements, thousands of women joined the Salt Satyagraha, which is generally remembered for the participation by the masses of Indian women for the first time in the struggle for independence. Beyond any doubt, the active

\textsuperscript{55.} \textit{Ibid.},

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participation of women in the political struggle for independence was consummated in a Constitution which proclaimed the principles of equality and equal right for women suffering in the year 1947\textsuperscript{56}.

In August 1918, Sarojini Naidu spoke on behalf of women’s suffering at the special section of Congress held in Bombay. Five thousand delegates attended this session in which a resolution was passed by a 75 percent majority to press for women suffering. Women initially demanded only voting rights for at least some women\textsuperscript{57}. The “Monford Reforms” of 1919 enfranchised about one million women on the basis of property. Limited members alone gained the right to vote between 1921 and 1930 based on property. It was eventually in 1926 that they were accorded the right to be members of the Legislatures and even this, only by Government nomination. Dr. Muthulakshmi Reddy, the first women legislator, was appointed to the Madras Council in the year 1927. Indian women leaders were dissatisfied with their meagre representation and sought for reservation as a solution to the problem. The representation was continued till 1947\textsuperscript{58}.

\begin{itemize}
  \item \textsuperscript{56} Janki, D., \textit{Women’s Issues}, Chennai, 2001, p. 287.
  \item \textsuperscript{57} Kaushik and Suseela, \textit{Women’s Participation in Politics}, New Delhi, 1993, p. 207.
  \item \textsuperscript{58} \textit{Ibid}.
\end{itemize}
The constitution of Independent India visualized that all its citizens should be assured of certain fundamental rights; freedom of speech and expression, equality before law, equality of opportunities and adult franchise etc. Indian women, involved in the working of Indian National Congress in the freedom struggle tirelessly as much men, were equipped adequately to work towards the modern values of gender equality. National fervour and patriotism emboldened them to overcome the hurdles practiced in the traditional society. The social reform movement or religious reform movement or the freedom movement enlightened the women folk to enhance their position in the society\textsuperscript{59}.

Women population in India consistently increased over the past half century period in the post – Independent era. This tremendous increase does not match with of women in other areas\textsuperscript{60}. The under mentioned table shows the progress of women population over a historical period in Kanyakumari. In 1951, the women population was only 17.5 lakhs but in 2011, 55.7 per cent approximated more than fifty per cent of the total population over the short span of sixty years\textsuperscript{61}.

\textsuperscript{60} Savita Thakur Joshi, \textit{Women and Development}, New Delhi, 199, p. 120.
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year</th>
<th>Male</th>
<th>Female</th>
<th>Total</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1951</td>
<td>4,44,540</td>
<td>4,34,230</td>
<td>8,78,770</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1961</td>
<td>5,03,735</td>
<td>4,93,180</td>
<td>9,96,915</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1971</td>
<td>6,19,884</td>
<td>6,02,665</td>
<td>12,22,549</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1981</td>
<td>7,16,958</td>
<td>7,06,441</td>
<td>14,23,399</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1991</td>
<td>8,03,893</td>
<td>7,96,510</td>
<td>16,00,403</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2001</td>
<td>8,99,788</td>
<td>8,67,999</td>
<td>17,67,787</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2011</td>
<td>9,03,839</td>
<td>8,96,510</td>
<td>18,00,349</td>
</tr>
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</table>

This numerical strength one way or the other provoked several leaders and feminist historians to analyze and utilize women resources for the development of our district.

Humanity has advanced very far from where it had started. Many things have changed; the social position and rights of many groups have been subjected to the ebb and flows of history. Many sections of the population, which had ruled, have been brought down while others, which were deprived, have risen to position of equality and even to political power. But women who form nearly 50 percent of population are facing problems since ancient times, receiving only a small share of developmental opportunities. Their oppression is persistent and
universal, and their solutions are complicated. Therefore, the question of status of women has recently moved into the forefront of the socio-economic discussions all over the world\textsuperscript{62}.

In 20\textsuperscript{th} century, everywhere, the women have started to raise their voice in more emphatic way than ever. Political thinking of liberation of women and their demand for rights are getting momentum\textsuperscript{63}. Women who were confined to kitchen and retained, so far, within the four walls have come to the street raising their voices through federations and organizations. They have started realizing their social rights. They have broken down the old and oppressing traditions, laws and customs and they have started thinking for themselves. They demanded equal rights and opportunities in the family and in all walks of life and they are also ready to take up leadership in these areas and plunge into the technological process and experiments the world is making. They conducted various conferences which felt that the violence on women and the humiliations they suffer on account of the old social traditions have gone beyond race, language and colour and affected them very badly everywhere. Throughout the history, most societies have held

\textsuperscript{62} Personal Interview with T. Sunderaraj, aged 65, [Rtd.professor] Thrirapallil, dated 12\textsuperscript{th} October 2010.

\textsuperscript{63} Personal Interview with Mrs. Alphonsal, aged 50, President, Women’s Movement, Thuckalay, dated 25\textsuperscript{th} June 2010.
women in an inferior status compared to that of men. Women’s status was often justified as being the natural result of biological differences between the sexes. In many societies, for example, people believed women to be naturally more emotional and less decisive than men. Women were also held to be less intelligent and less creative by nature. However, research shows that women and men have the same range of emotional, intellectual and creative characteristics many sociologist and anthropologists maintain that various cultures have taught girls to behave according to negative images of feminity, thus keeping alive the idea that women are naturally inferior\textsuperscript{64}.

Women’s participation in the workforce as well in other activities increased during the nineteenth century and the early period of twentieth century due to upliftment of women from the tradition bound ethos brought about by the influence of the various social reforms of successive periods. The technological changes of the industrial revolution transformed the processes of production, and as a result, more women started to working. During the Second World War [1939-1945], women entered the labour force due to dire economic necessity and feelings of patriotism and for the first time they

\begin{flushright}
\footnotesize
64. \textit{Ibid.}
\end{flushright}
experienced the financial and physiological independence that an income activity outside the home could afford\textsuperscript{65}.

Development of science and technology, changes in attitudes and aspirations, in social structures and family living patterns have all concurred to relieve the burden of motherhood. Education has worked as a prime motivating factor among women and they feel that whatever they have acquired through education have to be utilized and not wasted. They want to be self – sufficient and understand very well that economic self-sufficiency has improved their social status. The women thus, have sought and accomplished more freedom and personal security. This is the outstanding achievement of the modern age\textsuperscript{66}.

The crux of the problem is that the two sexes have never shared the world equally. The women is heavily handicapped, though her situation is beginning to change. Extensive industrialization and high level of technology have marginalized them further. Originally quit a good number of industries were under the exclusive domain of women\textsuperscript{67}. These were snatched away by men due to the advent of mechanization and automation, since women lack the training and skill

\textsuperscript{65.} Razia Parvin, M., \textit{op. cit.}, p. 15
\textsuperscript{66.} \textit{Ibid.}
\textsuperscript{67.} \textit{Ibid.}
associated with it. The undervaluation of women is mainly due to the deliberate, conspiratorial and undervaluation of her work, ability and skill. Women put in larger hours of work than men did. In spite of the fact, that their physical and economic hardship get worse, neither the society nor the women themselves perceive their role in society. This misperception is because, the man is always regarded as the breadwinner and the women goes out to earn only when the family’s income is not enough. Since women are regarded as supplementary earners, their work is assessed as half-efficient or half-productive, even if it is actually not so.

Women are have-nots, because historically and traditionally they were denied their vital rights of taking decision and a share in their family income. Women, in all economic class, are, dependent on men, resulting in their lack of bargaining power even in matters of marriage, divorce and remarriage not to speak of absence of any rights whatsoever in matters related to land, other properties and their personal or family income. Besides, major decisions on family affairs rests with men. Almost nowhere women’s legal status the same as men’s, and frequently it is much to her disadvantage. Even when her rights are legally

68. Ibid.
recognized, long standing custom prevents their full expression. Thus woman’s position is lower than that of a man in all spheres of life\textsuperscript{69}.

As far as India is concerned, the social structure, cultural norms and value systems are important determinants of women’s role and their position in society. India has one of the most impressive sets of laws for women and children. The Constitution of India not only grants equality to women and forbids any discrimination based on religion, race, caste, sex are place of birth but also empowers the state to practice protective discrimination in favour of women, children and of socially and educationally backward classes, the Scheduled Castes and the Scheduled Tribes. In spite of this, the deeply entrenched customs and traditions, beliefs and practices of a largely patriarchal and feudal ‘past and present’ contributes to the continued subordination of woman\textsuperscript{70}.

Not giving birth to girls is marked in many regions across the country by what the Noble lourate economist, Dr. Amartya Sen, calls “high-tech sexism” – determining a foetus’ sex and aborting the foetus if it happened to be a female. Inadequate nurturing results from giving

\textsuperscript{69} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{70} Ibid.
girls a subordinate claim over the family’s food, education and medical resources, compared with boys\textsuperscript{71}.

Currently, the national figure stands at 933 women to 1000 men, but what is most disturbing is that the number of girls per 1000 boys in the 0-6 age group has fallen from 945 in 1991 census to 927 in 2001 census and to 900 in 2011\textsuperscript{72}. Professor Sen has called attention to the “remarkable geographical split” of India – the entire North and West are below benchmark and the whole East and South are the above it\textsuperscript{73}. In an attempt to understand why there is such a trend towards elimination of female foetuses and infants, let us examine the status of women across the districts and in Tamil Nadu and India.

Launching the nation-wide campaign to reverse the alarming decline in the ratio of women in the population in the country, Minister for Women and Child development, Government of India said: “It is a tragedy that every year, half million girl children are being killed and prevented from being born, ironically with the help of modern tools of science and technology leading to the decline in the ratio has already led to a situation where brothers shared a wife and in some cases, even


\textsuperscript{72} Census of India 2011.

\textsuperscript{73} Boraian, M. P., \textit{op. cit.}
fathers and sons shared a wife in several parts of the country. My Ministry would therefore, observe the next 10 years as The Decade of the Survival of Girl Child".  

Women who number 498.7 million according to 2011 Census represented 48.2 per cent of country’s population of 1,027.01 crores. The sex ratio of 933 women per 1000 men as revealed by the Census Report 2011 shows the misuse of the prenatal diagnostic technique to do away with female foetus. Health wise, high rates of infant and maternal deaths and severe anaemia in over half of all married women in India are some of the indicators of the low priority accorded to women’s health in the country. Life expectancy of rural women, which was 32 years in 1947, has gone up to 67 years in 2011. The infant mortality has decreased considerably.

According to the Census of India 2011, the literacy rate of women was only 74.04, percentage though it has grown considerably since independence. In 1951, the literacy rate of women was only 8.86 per cent. In 2011, it had raised manifold which went up to 54.16 per cent. The school enrolment has gone up to 99 per cent and every eligible girl

76. Ibid.
child today, has all the freedom and opportunity to get education. They now have access to Higher Education\textsuperscript{77}.

Ever since India became free, there have been phenomenal changes in the condition of women. The Constitution has given women the much needed status. They are now equal before law. There can be no discrimination by the state on grounds of gender. But, it is reported that in 2011, India had approximately 8157 dowry death, 25,611 molestation cases, 19,300 kidnappings and abductions, 15,283 cases of eve teasing, 19,949 instances involving cruelty by husband and relatives\textsuperscript{78}.

In matters related to economic development, women continued to be marginalised both in policy formulation and programme implementation. Low level of skills leads to lower wages and low earning. In terms of employment, she enjoys the same status as men and has to be given equal pay for equal work. Assurance has been given to promote harmony and to renounce practices derogatory to their dignity. Some of the recently enacted labour laws have facilitated the

\textsuperscript{77} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{78} The Hindu, Thiruvananthapuram Edn., 12 March 2011, p. 6.
employment of rural women as unskilled labour in the organised and unorganised sectors\textsuperscript{79}.

Politically, the reforms in the Panchayat Raj Act have given greater share for women in rural governance. At present, the concept of Self-Help Groups for women, particularly in rural areas has given them an opportunity to organize themselves to engage in productive activities that could augment their earnings which leads to their social and political empowerment\textsuperscript{80}.

According to Amartya Sen, gender inequality is not one homogenous phenomenon but a collection of desperate and interlinked problems and the different kinds of gender inequality were displayed in mortality, natality, basic facility, special opportunity professions, ownership, and household matters. We shall look into the classification of gender disparity at birth, growth and survival.

In being born as female children and giving birth to children, women experience gave disparity, while the infant mortality reveals that the right to be born is denied, the material mortality speaks of the lack of medical care and attention to women. Sex ratio (females per 1000

\textsuperscript{79} Personal Interview with Mr. Benny, aged 70, Editor of Kalakattam (Tamil Review), Thuckalay, dated 23 March 2010.

\textsuperscript{80} Boraian, M. P., \textit{op. cit.}, p. 5.
males) is a simple but very strong index of the long term status of women’s welfare. Kanyakumari is one of the few districts in Tamil Nadu, and their imbalance has increased over time. According to Census of Tamil Nadu 2011, the sex ratio is 943\(^81\).

**Sex Ratio (1951 – 2011)**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year</th>
<th>Kanyakumari</th>
<th>Tami Nadu</th>
<th>India</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1951</td>
<td>1010</td>
<td>1007</td>
<td>946</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1961</td>
<td>1000</td>
<td>992</td>
<td>941</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1971</td>
<td>991</td>
<td>978</td>
<td>930</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1981</td>
<td>990</td>
<td>977</td>
<td>934</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1891</td>
<td>974</td>
<td>974</td>
<td>927</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2001</td>
<td>972</td>
<td>986</td>
<td>933</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2011</td>
<td>970</td>
<td>998</td>
<td>935</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

In Tamil Nadu, the sex ratio has been raised to 998. The inter-district variations in Tamil Nadu have been striking. Thoothukudi has the highest sex ratio of 1049 and Salem has the lowest 929. In Dindigul district, the sex ratio is 986 on par with the ratio of the state. In Kanyakumari District, in 2001, there were 900 females to 1000 males, which increased to 991 in 2011\(^82\).

82. Ibid.
Due to female infanticide in Tamil Nadu, thousands of infants are killed every year. In 1999, as per Primary Health Centre (PHC) records, 3226 female infants are killed. It is concentrated in a core region of 7 districts namely Salem, Dharmapuri, Theni, Namakkal, Karur, Dindigul and Madurai. The general decline in juvenile sex ratio draws attention to safeguard the future of women.  

As female children grow, they are treated differently in getting food and health care; they do not even have educated opportunity as that of their male counterparts. Girls are breastfed less frequently and for the shorter durations in infancy in children and adulthood. Males are fed first and better. A primary way that parents discriminate against their girl children is through neglect during illness. Sometimes the sick, little girls are not taken to the doctor as frequently as are their brothers.

Education can pave way for an overall development of individuals and for the society. Female literacy is not only an end itself, but also serves as a catalyst for overall performance in other segments too. Generally literacy levels of women in Kanyakumari have been always

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84. Personal Interview with T. Sunderaraj, aged 65, Thrichirapalli, dated 12 October 2010.
above the Tamil Nadu State average, while India’s female literacy is 54.16 per cent.\textsuperscript{85}

### Literacy in Kanyakumari

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year</th>
<th>Male(%)</th>
<th>Female (%)</th>
<th>Total (%)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1951</td>
<td>31.73</td>
<td>10.06</td>
<td>20.85</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1961</td>
<td>44.54</td>
<td>18.17</td>
<td>31.41</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1971</td>
<td>51.78</td>
<td>26.36</td>
<td>39.46</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1981</td>
<td>58.26</td>
<td>34.99</td>
<td>46.76</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1991</td>
<td>74.88</td>
<td>51.30</td>
<td>63.72</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2001</td>
<td>82.33</td>
<td>64.55</td>
<td>73.47</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2011</td>
<td>92.60</td>
<td>80.50</td>
<td>85.39</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Even though female literacy in Tamil Nadu has shown considerable increase, the gender gap between male and female literacy rates has continued. The need to narrow down the gap is urgent. The inter-district imbalance in literacy levels ranges from 49.10 per cent in Darmapuri to 73.47 per cent in Kanyakumari.\textsuperscript{86} On the whole, literacy in Kanyakumari is very high. It was an overall 73.47 per cent during the 2001, which has risen to 85.39 per cent in 2011. Subsequently due

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\textsuperscript{86} The Hindu, Thiruvananthapuram, June 2011, p. 4.
to the adult literacy campaign implemented with great zeal and enthusiasm, this small district has became 100 per cent literate in the age group 15 to 45\textsuperscript{87}.

While working for their survival, women are not given equal wages, dignified treatment and their progress is suppressed through violence. However, women contribute to show their determination by involving in governance. In rural areas, while the work participation of men had increased from 58.28 per cent in 2000 – 2001 to 60.1 per cent in 2002 – 2003, that of women increased considerably from 38.50 per cent to 47.8 per cent\textsuperscript{88}. While the increase of work participation of women has to be acknowledged, the type of work undertaken by them being out clearly their subservient position in Kanyakumari District.

\begin{table}[h]
\centering
\begin{tabular}{|l|c|c|}
\hline
\hline
1. Rural & & \\
Male & 58.28 & 61.1 \\
Female & 38.50 & 47.8 \\
\hline
2. Urban & & \\
Male & 52.78 & 57.4 \\
Female & 13.10 & 22.8 \\
\hline
\end{tabular}
\caption{Work Participation in Kanyakumari}
\end{table}

\textsuperscript{87}Daniel, R. R., and others, \textit{op. cit.}, p. 173.

\textsuperscript{88}The Hindu, \textit{op. cit.}
Women’ contribution to agriculture – where it is subsistence farming or commercial agriculture, when measured in terms of the number of tasks performed and the time spent, is greater than men. The industries and institutions make beedi manufacturing (60%), cashew nut processing (84%), construction fields (30%), schools, stores and organizations (78%). That are surely not highly rewarding and some of them even create serious health hazards. Women’s work participation mostly goes unrecorded and unrecognised. They work roughly twice as many hours as men. Nearly 27 per cent are accounted for by ‘unpaid activities’ performed by family labour. Moreover, the situation and working condition of women in Kanyakumari District requires greater attention and provision.

Violence against women and girls is the most pervasive. Human right violation is one of the most crucial social mechanisms by which they are forced into a suitable position. Fear of violence is a cause of women’s lack of participation in activities beyond their home as well as inside it. In recent years, there has been an alarming rise in atrocities against women in Kanyakumari. Every 26 minutes, a woman is molested. Every 34 minutes, a rape takes place. Every 42 minutes, a

90. Personal Interview with Mrs. Leema Rose, aged 45, Ex. MLA , Villavancode Constituency, dated 23 March 2011.
sexual harassment occurs. Every 43 minutes, a woman is kidnapped. And every 93 minutes, a woman is burnt to death over dowry. One – quarter of the reported rapes involve girls under the age of 16 but the vast majorities are reported although the penalty is severe, and convictions are rare\textsuperscript{91}.

Perhaps the most significant development for women in the last decade has been the introduction of 33 per cent reservation for women in local village level Panchayat Raj elections. More and more women have shown that once they have power, they are able to use it, to the benefit of society in general and women in particular. However, there is ample delay. Currently, Constitutional Amendment Bill being considered for approval by the Indian Parliament that will allow the Indian Government to set aside in the states exclusively for women.

Since the onset of Panchayat Raj Institutions (PRI), the percentage of women in various levels of political activity have risen from 4 -5 per cent to 25 – 40 per cent. Though the existence of the Indian PRIs, one million women have actively entered political life in India. There are very few lakhs in Tamil Nadu and only 2 per cent in Kanyakumari\textsuperscript{92}.

\textsuperscript{91} Boraian, M. P., \textit{op. cit.}, p. 9.
\textsuperscript{92} \textit{Ibid.}
Women, as an independent target group, account for 595.74 million and represent 58.3 per cent of county’s total population, as per the 2011 Census. Empowering women as a process demands a life-cycle approach. Therefore, every stage of their life counts as a priority in the planning process. Depending upon the developmental needs at every stage, female population has been categorised into 5 distinct sub-groups. It leads a life of subordination in comparison with Kanyakumari in all aspects. They are [1] Girl children in the target age-group 0 – 14 years who account for 141.50 million (34.6 per cent), deserve special attention because of the gender bias and discrimination they suffer from at such a tender age; [2] Adolescent girls in the age-group 15 – 19 years, who account for 52.14 million (10.5), are very sensitive from the viewpoint of planning because of the preparatory stage for their future productive and reproductive roles in the society and family, respectively; [3] Women in the reproductive age – group 15 – 44 years numbering 233.72 million (47.1 per cent) need special care and attention because of their reproductive needs; [4] Women in the economically active age – group 15 – 59 years, who account for 289.40 million (58.4 per cent), have different demands like those of education, training, employment, income generation and participation in the

developmental process, decision – making etc.; and [5] The elderly women in the age – group 60 years, numbering 34.87 million (7.0 per cent), have limited needs mainly relating to health, financial and emotional support.

In order to empower the weaker and socially and economically deprived sections of the society, The Indian Government introduced many welfare schemes for women development. The Central Social Welfare Board (CSWB) was set up in 1953 with the objective of promoting social welfare activities and implementing welfare programmes for women. At the same time, it was felt that women’s direct participation in decision – making and planning are very important. Hence, they were provided chance to take part in Panchayat Raj System. The salient features of the Constitution Act 1992 are related to women. They are 1. to provide reservation of seats for Scheduled Castes, Scheduled Tribes and women, 2. preparation of plan for economic development and social justice, 3. implementation of schemes for economic development and social justice in relation to 29 subjects given in the Eleventh Schedule of the Constitution and 4. the Constitution of Gram Sabha, consisting of men and women registered in

94. Rural Development, National Commission for women, Rashtriya Mahila Kosh and Five Year Plans for women are the most important ones.
the electoral rolls relating to a village comprised with in the area of Gram Panchayat\textsuperscript{95}.

Throughout the history, most societies have held women in an interior status compared to that of men. Women’s status was often justified as being the natural result of biological differences between the sexes. In many societies, for example, people believed women to be naturally more emotional and less decisive than men. Women were also held to be less intelligent and less creative by nature. However, research shows that women and men have the same range of emotional, intellectual and creative characteristics many sociologist and anthropologists maintain that various cultures have taught girls to behave according to negative images of feminists, thus keeping alive the idea that women are naturally inferior.

It is concluded that women, who enjoyed a better status in historic times, slowly became secondary and subservient to men. However, the recent trend has been better and they are gradually equipping themselves on all fronts.

\textsuperscript{95} Panchayat Raj System facilitates direct participation and representation of rural masses in designing and executing development strategies and programmes.