

WOMEN IN THE KERALA MODEL OF DEVELOPMENT

Aparna Sivaraman

Kerala has been one Indian state which defied national trends and provided a model of development that is more open and inclusive of women. This essay aims to understand three major aspects. The first is whether the actual position of women in Kerala is reflected in the indicators that have been released. The second objective is to analyse the role women have played in the success of the Kerala model of development and the third is to understand if there has been any impact of having been a matrilineal society on the development of women in the state.

INTRODUCTION

The concept of women empowerment within the broader spectrum of gender equality has been the primary focus of countries across the world. It has become widely recognized and accepted that economic and social growth and development cannot be achieved in its true sense if we do not simultaneously concentrate on ensuring that gender equality is maintained. It has been noticed that even on a global level, there is no country where women enjoy equal rights as men. This is shameful in the light of the fact that women contribute enormously in the form of unpaid or invisible economic activity. It is a widely accepted fact that women assume a dual role in society: the selfless and assumed caregiver and the independent income earning individual. Women constantly strive to maintain a balance between the two with unfortunately little or no help from the society they live in. They are in most cases denied the basic economic, social and even legal rights that their male counterparts enjoy. It was this observation that made women empowerment and gender equality feature as the third of the eight Millennium Development Goals. It further came to be acknowledged as an instrumental prerequisite to achieving all other goals.

An important clarification that has to be made at this juncture is the true meaning of the word empowerment. Empowerment must be

understood as providing the power of decision-making to someone who did not have it previously. A person is said to be empowered in the true sense only when they had been denied the choice before. It has also been aptly pointed out that women empowerment has been assumed possible by attempting to equalise opportunities in education, employment and access to political power. It has been argued that this approach to ensuring women empowerment may not be successful in achieving the set objectives (Kabeer, 1994).

The relationship between women empowerment and economic development of society becomes successful only when a vicious circle is formed with one following the other. Economic development in itself as mentioned above cannot help raise the status of women. This is primarily because the neo-classical discourse makes a fundamental but flawed assumption that industrial development would automatically lead to a reduction in the gender disparities since it will provide equal opportunities in the spheres of education, employment and political voice to both men and women which are the primary tools of ensuring equality. This narrow approach does not consider the possibility that the existing patriarchal systems would not allow women equal footing as men. Hence, what is needed is a change in the social stigma attached to women participation in order to achieve economic progress. Following the same argument, women empowerment is bound to fail if women are not given the opportunities to participate and contribute to economic development. There must be a justification for the various programs carried out to promote women participation. Only when women are able to contribute to economic activity, these reforms become feasible both economically and socially. Hence, economic development and women empowerment cannot be considered in a vacuum and must follow one another (Duflo, 2012).

In this context, the Women in Development discourse recognises the shortcomings of the neo-classical ideology but makes an assumption that the institutional roadblocks will weaken after a certain age of growth and would begin to usher in more opportunities for women. This discourse goes on to explain that once the bottlenecks are cleared, the instruments of empowerment would automatically start being implemented by the government. This has called for the need for another more comprehensive discourse which led to an altogether new approach called 'Gender and Development'. The GAD approach realized that the conventional indicators of employment, education and political power would not fully enable the empowerment of women and may lead to a generation of further problems and obstacles in

the process. It pointed out the need to also focus on non-conventional indicators that would complement the conventional indicators that would help to effectively measure the gender inequality (Scaria, 2014). Such non-conventional indicators may include the power relations within the family, the role of women in decision-making and the power to translate resources into opportunities.

THE CASE OF KERALA

In a country like India, where several goddesses are worshipped, it is pitiful to see that women are treated with lesser status than men and even a slew of reforms post-independence has not been able to pull women out of their repressed, marginalised and exploited state (Sreekumar, 2001). The major flaw in appropriating women to goddesses is that the comparison portrays the picture of a strong woman, ready to fight evil. However, this does not make sense. It promotes the false premise that normal women cannot make a mark for themselves and that successful women are superwomen. It then goes on to promote only a small category of women, leaving the majority in the dark. Moreover, it fails to recognise that even the goddesses lived within a society governed by male dominance and their powers were limited to instances of protecting their husbands or extreme cases of protecting society.

Gender disparities have been widely prevalent across India and several states have shown very poor measures on the conventional indicators despite several initiatives by the state. While the rest of the country has grappled with skewed gender disparities, there is one state that has proved to be an exception. With a favourable sex ratio of 1084 as compared to the all India figures of 940 in 2011, Kerala has been an exception to the general trend in terms of women development. Similarly, in terms of literacy, life expectancy and mean age at marriage, women in Kerala have had a higher score when compared with women in the rest of the country. Thus historically too, a favourable ground was set for Kerala women while most of the Indian states were deplorably poor in this regard. Perhaps this paved the way for the outstanding achievement of Kerala in terms of women's development, and as a result, the increase in the overall human development. As per the 2010 Economic review, Kerala's female literacy is 92 percent while the corresponding figure at the national level is only 65 percent. The female life expectancy in Kerala as per the latest available secondary source is 76.3 years when the same for women at the national level is only 64.2 years (Economic Review, 2010).

Kerala, also known as God's own Country, is India's 13th largest economy. Kerala has had a unique development story and the revolution has been rightly termed as the 'Kerala model of development'. This model is highly paradoxical because, while there has been major development on the social indicators front, the economic development of the state has been unimpressive. This kind of lopsided growth is the first of its kind which is why it has been of interest (Mukhopadhyay & Sudarshan, 2003).

THE COMPLICATED MODEL OF DEVELOPMENT

Authors in the 1950s termed Kerala as a problem state which could be seen as the birthplace of communism in India just as Yenan was for Chinese Communism. The election of Kerala's first communist government in 1957 further fueled this belief which continued to linger for almost a generation. It was only in the '70s that the focus shifted from the Marxist ideology to the unusual but very pleasing social indicators such as the falling birth and infant mortality rates, increasing literacy, a female favourable sex ratio and increasing average life expectancy (Jeffery, 2016). It has been observed that these changes in Kerala have been largely possible due to the role played by women in the development of the state. The intensity of the role played by women in the different parts of the state varied but the collective commonalities of changes in land relations, family and kinship and the rules of the social and economic framework helped reinforce the role of women. It also aided in the decomposition of the rigid caste system which came as an added benefit.

The expansion of education in Kerala can be largely attributed to the initiatives of the rulers of kingdoms like Travancore and Cochin which were the main provinces of the British Empire. Rulers like Rani Gouri Parvathi Bai, who was the ruling queen of Travancore in 1817, made it clear as early as then that the state should provide education to all by defraying the cost of education. She believed that education would help in the spread of enlightenment which would in turn help to produce better subjects and public servants. This would ultimately help in the advancement of the reputation and prosperity of the state.

DO MATRILINEAL SYSTEMS GUARANTEE DEVELOPMENT?

Another factor that could explain the success of Kerala was the existence of a matrilineal system of property inheritance that was practised among certain upper-class sections of the society (Sen, 1989). The place of women in the Kerala society is instrumental in understanding the effectiveness of the Kerala model of development. Though much of the development in the state is attributed to the matrilineal model, it is supposed to have been on the decline throughout the 20th century and had completely vanished by 1976. The decline of the system ushered in the patriarchal society evident from the diminishing share of property to women that became replaced by dowry (Chacko, 2003). In this vein, it becomes imperative in understanding the role that the matrilineal system has played starting from its origin till its collapse and the implications it has had on the legal, structural and sentimental values of the people. However, before any further discussion, it is necessary to make the distinction between matriliney and matriarchy. By definition, 'matriarchy' is a form of social organisation where the power lies in the hands of women; this is rarely, if ever, the case. However, matrilineal descent is an anthropological term that refers to a specific form of inheritance (quite often found in Africa) in which property is transmitted through female lineage.

The key is acknowledging exactly which female lineage; property is not transferred from one woman to another but rather through a woman's male kin. For example, ownership can be transferred from the mother's brother to the nephew but by no means to women themselves. It has often been a misconception that matrilineal societies translate into female empowerment. It is also often falsely assumed that women in these societies have more rights and access to property. In reality, responsibility for land management vested principally with older men, usually brothers or maternal uncles. In decisions concerning the partition or transfer of landed property, however, women's concurrence was necessary (Agarwal, 1994). When men (and women) in power say that women in a certain community are empowered because the society is matrilineal, it sets us on a dangerous path. It allows decision makers to assume that women in matrilineal societies already have the right to land ownership, without requiring any additional attention.

The matrilineal system in Kerala appears to have developed around the eleventh century CE, as a result of the war between the Cholas and Cheras. It then went on to become firmly embedded particularly in the

upper caste Nairs. One of the major benefits of the matrilineal system was that it allowed the free movement of girls and women in the society. Girls were encouraged to attend schools in the local area which enabled even the backward areas of Malabar lead India in terms of female literacy. This education further led to women becoming capable of taking up salaried jobs both in the erstwhile colonial rule and in the present developmental model. The practice of educating girls created the need for women teachers and the cycle continued. By the mid-1980s, 58 percent of Kerala's teachers were women and 94 percent of primary-age girls were estimated to attend school.

Matriliny cemented the belief that women could be considered as salary earners. The employment of women was not confined only to education. Women began to find employment as midwives and nurses and by 1930s, women also began to work as doctors in several hospitals and a major proportion of the women came from matrilineal societies. What started out as a practice by Nair families began to be practised by families of other communities as well within the state. In more recent times, the fact that women in Kerala sought salaried work helped to raise the age of marriage and contributed to a lower birth rate. The presence of Kerala women in salaried, 'white-collar' work is unique in India today. In 2000, 68 percent of Kerala's 185,000 teachers were women. In 1991, the census calculated that 24 percent of working women in Kerala were employed in 'other services', a category including salaried occupations. In India as a whole, only 8 percent of working women were so employed: the Kerala rate was three times greater. The matrilineal system had such an effect that even after its collapse, the political ideologies continued to place women on the forefront that created development models that have shaped the Kerala model.

CONCLUSION

We suggest in this article that it is imperative to understand how the matrilineal system in Kerala s system has been translated into the present employment opportunities. Surveys have shown that Kerala has managed to consistently defy the trends that are prevalent in the country over the years. Data clearly shows that the pattern of employment in Kerala is entirely different from the rest of India and that of the major states. The overall trend regarding employment of India and its major states shows a continuous reduction of employment in the agricultural sector and a steady increase in the industrial and service sectors due to the structural transformation of the economy as

seen in the work participation tables. As far as employment in Kerala is concerned, nearly 40 percent of male as well as female employment is in the service sector. The share of women employed in Kerala in the service sector is very much higher when compared with that of all India and that of the major states. In other words, the majority of male and female main workers in Kerala as per the 2001 Census are in the service sector.

However, as per the 68th Round of NSSO for the year 2011-12, a wide gap between male and female employment has emerged in the state. While the state average is 40.3 per cent, female labour participation rate (per 100 persons) in Kerala is 24.8 percent and that of male is 57.8 percent. The sectoral distribution of employment of women in Kerala shows that relative to men, a larger proportion of women are engaged in the agricultural sector. The percentage share of males engaged in service sector is much higher compared to females; however in industry the relative proportions are not very different; but a further disaggregation would show that this is because large numbers of women are engaged in low productivity, labour intensive traditional industries like handlooms, khadi, coir, and cashew (Economic Review, 2016).

In conclusion, it can be said that though often unconsidered, the role of women has had a major impact in the way Kerala has grown as a state, particularly the famous Kerala model of development. However, there has been a noticeable decline in female participation in the state in recent times and questions have been raised about the actual impact of the matrilineal system in the households. There is a need for policies and indicators that will be able to measure the actual power that women have in the state and how much of this power can be actually translated. While the system cannot be utterly disregarded, there is a need to carry forward the institutional framework provided by the matrilineal system and ensure that the power granted to women only continues to grow further.

REFERENCES

- Kabeer, N 2005, Gender equality and women's empowerment: A critical analysis of the third millennium development goal 1. *Gender and Development*, vol. 13, no. 1, pp. 13-24. Available from: Taylor and Francis online. [30 March 2017]
- Duflo, E 2012, Women Empowerment and Economic Development. *Journal of Economic Literature*, vol. 50, no. 4, pp.1051-1079. Published by: American Economic Association. [24 September 2017]

- Scaria, S 2014, A Dictated Space? Women and Their Well-being in a Kerala Village. *Indian Journal of Gender Studies*, vol. 21, no. 3, pp. 421-449. Published by: SAGE Publications. [25 March 2017]
- Sreekumar, B 2001, Women in Agriculture: An evaluation of the Central scheme in Palakkad district (Kerala), *Kerala Research Programme on Local Level Development*, no. 30, pp. 5-7. Published by: Centre for Development Studies. [30 March 2016]
- State Planning Board 2011, *Economic Review*. Published by: Government of Kerala [25 March 2017]
- Mukhopadhyay, S, Sudarshan, R 2003, *Tracking Gender Equity Under Economic Reforms*, International Development Research Centre.
- Sen, A 1989, Women's Survival as a Development Problem, *Bulletin of the American Academy of Arts and Sciences*, vol. 43, no. 2, pp. 14-29. Published by: American Academy of Arts and Sciences. [1 April 2017]
- Chacko, E 2003, Marriage, Development and the Status of Women in Kerala, India, *Gender and Development*, vol. 11, no. 2, pp. 52-59. Published by: Taylor and Francis. [24 September 2017]
- Agarwal, B 1994, Gender and Command Over Property: A Critical Gap in Economic Analysis and Policy in South Asia, *World Development*, vol. 22, no. 10, pp. 1455-1478. Published by: Elsevier Science Ltd. [24 September 2017]
- State Planning Board 2017, *Economic Review*, vol. 1. Published by: Government of Kerala. [24 September 2017]