GENDER EQUITY IN KERALA: AN ANALYSIS OF CONSTITUTIONAL PROVISIONS AND CIVIL SOCIETY MOVEMENT

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ABSTRACT: This paper explores how far the constitutional provisions and civil society movements created a space for women empowerment and thereby gender justice in a state like Kerala which is otherwise known as progressive society, rich in social capital and so on. To be specific, the study examines how far civil society movements have internalized the notion of gender equity and have incorporated it into their practice and also focuses on political party participation of women in Kannur district for the analysis. This paper argues that though Kerala society is known for rich social capital, active civil society movements, better gender development index etc, it is still dominated by patriarchal mind set even in the case of progressive political parties and those political parties who could initiate reservations of women in local self-governing institutions.

Key Words: Gender equality, Constitutional provisions, Civil society movement, Political participation.

I. INTRODUCTION

The state of Kerala is well known for its social and human development indicators largely favouring women; an exception to all other states in India. In spite of this fact, women are not a significant part of the decision making process in the state. Governance continues to be male dominated especially in the state renowned and influenced by its matrilineal groups. Kerala is rich in social capital because of favouring sex ratio, high literacy rates for men and women, high life expectancy, highest student enrollment ratio, highest voting percentage high associational life, politically vibrant etc. Regarding HDI and GDI Kerala's position is almost equal to that of a developed country. Inspite of all these facts the role of women in a decision making is insignificant. We find a wide range of socio-religious associations, educational bodies, development organizations environmental groups etc. Only few women are members of these associations and most of them are for name sake. In this context, the study would like to address the role of women in two dominant political parties in Kannur District. The present study tries to explore how far the constitutional provisions and civil society movements created a space for women empowerment and thereby gender justice in a state like Kerala. It also examines how far civil society movements have internalized the notion of gender equity and have incorporated it into their practice. For realizing the objectives the researcher analyzes the existing literature on multiple dimensions of gender equity in Kerala from a critical social science perspective. I would be focusing on political party participation of women in Kannur district for my analysis. The present study used primary data which was collected from two dominant parties in Kannur district to understand how far they have internalised the notion of gender equity.

II. CONCEPT OF GENDER EQUITY

In the gender literature, we often come across two concepts: 'gender equality' and 'gender equity'. They are sometimes used interchangeably, but they do not quite refer to the same thing. The concept gender equality is since long established as the preferred wording for equal rights, life prospects, opportunities and power for women and men, girls and boys. "Gender equality requires equal enjoyment by women and men of socially-valued goods, opportunities, resources and rewards." When there is gender inequality, it is women that are more likely to be disadvantaged and marginalized; but we should not ignore the negative impact that gender inequality can have on men as well. Gender equity puts the focus on fairness and justice regarding benefits and needs for women and men, girls and boys. Equity is used for example within the education, health and humanitarian sectors referring to the equal distribution of resources based on the needs of different groups of people. "Gender equity is the process of being fair to women and men" Women and men should not only be given equal access to resources and equal opportunities, but they should also be given the means of benefiting from this equality. This is where the concept of 'gender equity' comes into play. Gender equity implies fairness in the way women and men are treated. The different life experiences and needs of men and women are taken into consideration and compensation is made for women's historical and social disadvantages. The lower status of women in society often constitutes a
Constitutional Provisions and Civil Society Movement

Indian Constitution makes provisions to eliminate gender inequality and the Preamble to the Constitution talks about goals of achieving social, economic and political justice to everyone and to provide equality of status and of opportunity to all its citizens. Apart from these, various legislations have also been passed by the Parliament to eliminate exploitation of women and to give them equal status in society. Despite all these provisions the ground reality is very different for women even in the state of Kerala. The present study argues that though Kerala society is known for rich social capital, active civil society movements, better gender development index etc it is still dominated by patriarchal mind set even in the case of progressive political parties and those political parties who could initiate reservations of women in local self governing institutions.

In development literature and university courses on development, the state of Kerala in southern India is commonly presented as a model of social development in the absence of a strong economic base. Kerala leads India on gender-specific development indicators, including female life expectancy, fertility reduction, and education. All these indicators showed that the status of women in Kerala is in a better position. The state of Kerala is widely recognized as a progressive nation in respect of social capital. But when we analyze the role of women in various political parties, associations or clubs we saw entrenched inequality in relationship between men and women. The social capital formed in Kerala had failed to include women.

Participation of women in forums like grama sabhas working groups and development seminars has increased visibly. But this participation is largely limited to filling up quorums and raising personal demands. Needs articulated in these events have not translated into plans and projects, especially since implementation remains the prerogative of elected male representatives or party representatives.

Women's representation in local government has increased substantially since reservations were introduced in Kerala in 1996. Initially one third of the seats were reserved for women. From 2010 election onwards women's quota has been increased to 50% of seats. Although women's political participation has enhanced at the panchayat level to 50%, it is limited to two women ministers at the assembly level. The 140 member assembly has only 8 women representives, one seat higher than last year's figure. The number of women turned up to caste vote on last election was even higher than men. During the last election about 78.29% women caste vote, where as 76.33% men exercised franchise. A total of 110 women candidate contested in the election (Election Commission Report, 2016).The data appears to suggest that although women are contesting and voting in record numbers they are no handicap and provisions should be made to redress this inequality before they can take advantage of the opportunities provided. Gender equity thus serves to level the playing field and empower women. Therefore, we can say that equity is essential to achieve true equality.

III. CONSTITUTIONAL PROVISIONS AND CIVIL SOCIETY MOVEMENT

Although Kerala society is known for rich social capital, active civil society movements, better gender development index etc it is still dominated by patriarchal mind set even in the case of progressive political parties and those political parties who could initiate reservations of women in local self governing institutions. Participation of women in forums like grama sabhas working groups and development seminars has increased visibly.

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Participation of women in the public sphere both in formal politics as well as in the community forum has been very limited and no concerted effort was made to address this predicament. The delimitation was imposed not only by the traditional religious and cultural forces but also the so called modern political parties and mass and class organizations that are considered as part of Kerala's progressive project. J Devika tells us that there is a disjuncture between the professed willingness of political society to induct women into the process of governance and its actual reluctance to do so.

Kerala is known for a number of civil society movements like silent valley movement, Plachimada cococola, C K Janus nilpu samaram, library movements etc. People are politically aware and experienced with collective action. More inclusion of women in public sphere was addressed through neighborhood groups and women's self-help groups, by the state and local governments, particularly through planning experiment. One of the direct results of the peoples planning exercise in Kannur district was the unprecedented growth registered in the number of rural institutions. Most of these associations were created for meeting certain requirements of the planning exercise. In addition many panchayats have neighborhood groups known as ayakkootams. With its strong civil society, its land reform, its extensive educational system, and its high level of social welfare, Kerala and its soon to be 30 million inhabitants certainly diverge from the rest of India. Kerala is not just uncommonly beautiful; it also has one of the Third World's strongest civil societies.

Research Paper
The majority of citizens in Kannur are both literate and voluntarily organised in a multitude of organisations. There is lot of socio-religious associations, educational bodies, development organisations, environmental groups, women's organizations etc. In addition, there are the political parties, the trade unions and the co-operatives which are actively operating in Kannur district. Women representation is limited and inadequate in political parties, trade unions and in other positions of political power as well as in decision making processes in professional bodies.

The two major political parties in Kannur are Congress and CPIM (Communist party of India (Marxist)). Both parties follow a system of vertical associations. The structure of congress party in a district consists of District congress committee, Block congress committee and mandalam committee. In Kannur DCC the women representation was 11.25% and that of BCC and mandalam committee was 5.61 per cent and 4.86 per cent respectively in 2018. In the case of CPI(M) the organizational structure includes district secretariat, district committee and area committee. In the district secretariat there were 18 members but none of them was female. The female representations in the district and area committee were 7.4 and 10.5 per cent respectively.

Women representation both in mass organizations and high level committees of political parties is not up to the expected level. At a political level women have started to speak at the panchayath level, but their voices have not found a place in key decision making arenas, which are almost male dominated. The patriarchal practices of political parties and male defined ways of engagement combined with social attitudes to women have brought only a few talented women into the political field. Therefore it is time to promote female politics that will address practical gender needs.

IV. CONCLUSION

Kerala is far better in the context of gender equity. Kerala has already taken its first step towards the constitutional promise of gender equality. Equality is often manifested in terms of better gender development index in Kerala but analysis based on two leading political parties showed that they could not even internalize the concept of gender equity. Despite its high literacy rate and a balanced sex ratio, Kerala has been very conservative in electing women to Lok Sabha. Election Commission of India's statistics show that Kerala's women representation in Lok Sabha is below the national average. Gender budgeting is a strategy to ensure gender equity. I would argue that gender budgeting and constitutional provisions alone will not lead to gender equity rather a structural change which challenges the patriarchal mindset of civil society movements is essential. Further political parties being a strong movement within the civil society movements in Kerala who initiated the discourses on gender equity, who demanded for gender budgeting could not come put the clutches of this patriarchal mind set is evident from their own decision making bodies. They being better negotiators between state and markets failed to ensure this constitutional right. A prosperous Kerala needs its women and men to be equal partners, socially, economically and politically. Clearly there are miles to go before the constitutional promise can be said to have been achieved. Stressing on the importance of more women political participation, the economic survey 2017-18 said, "Recognising the significance of roles of women in decision making process in the society is critical to strengthen women's agencies for building a progressive society with equality of opportunities among all citizens."

REFERENCES