The Enigmatic State of Women in Kerala

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A survey conducted by a voluntary agency in Kerala on married women found that 57 per cent of respondents preferred divorce to married life if they had a sustainable income to feed them and their kids. Further studies conducted by various organisations and individual researchers show that routine violence against women is high in the state of Kerala. The State also has the dubious distinction of having the highest recorded rate of crimes against women in India. With the tragic death of Soumya due to rape and physical assault while boarding a local train at Shornur in Kerala a year ago and the subsequent attacks on women in public have raised the serious issue of how safe is Kerala for women and children.

In 1997 UNDP listed Kerala as having the highest position on the Human Development Index and on the Gender-related Development Index amongst Indian states. Basic demographic indicators in the state such as life expectancy are almost at par with those of the developed world. Despite the many positive developments that have advanced women’s human rights in Kerala on one hand, patriarchy continues to be embedded in the social system in many parts of the state. Manifestations of violence against women including physical aggression, such as blows of varying intensity, sexual abuse and rape, psychological abuse through verbal insults, coercion, humiliation, economic and emotional threats etc. are on the rise. An Inter Press Service analysis carried out in late 2009 of the data of domestic violence which was recorded in the Kerala State Crimes Records Bureau (KSCRB), under the state government’s home department, has revealed a nearly 50 per cent increase in domestic violence complaints registered at various police stations in the state during the period 1998-2008 from 2,333 cases in 1988 to 4,143 cases in 2008. Given these trends, it is disheartening to note that there is a conspicuous social silence on this manifested gender violence.

These expressions of violence spread across all religions, classes and socio-economic status, as reported in the study carried out by The Centre for Women’s Studies and Development, the Rajagiri College of Social Sciences in Kochi, Kerala entitled ‘A Situational Analysis of Domestic Violence Against Women in Kerala’. The ground reality for women’s groups continue to be extremely harsh, despite the constitutional, legislative and administrative framework that exists.

With the unique development trajectory highlighted by the human development indices on one hand and the low per capita income on the other, the Kerala Model of Development has attracted global attention and has been a subject of many research enquiries. Conventional indicators like literacy, fertility rate and maternal mortality place Kerala on the top among different States in India. Kerala has the highest female literacy rate of 86.2 per cent, a low infant mortality ratio of 13
against the national average of 80, a favourable sex ratio of 1032 female for 1000 male, low maternal mortality ratio at the rate of 0.8/1000 and high life expectancy ratio of 74 female / 70 male. Despite this, a conspicuous absence of women in public domain remains as a paradox of the Kerala model of development. Poor participation and representation in politics, low work participation rate, relatively unequal property rights, acute morbidity and rising suicide rates, and exponential growth in gender-based violence reveal critical faultiness in the otherwise enabling gender profiles in Kerala.

The FGDs conducted by this author in all the 14 districts of Kerala in 2003 as part of a study on the prevailing dowry system in Kerala revealed that majority of community women leaders were embedded with the idea that women should be loyal and subservient to men. They honestly believed that their male partner had absolute control over their body and soul. This implies that both women and men can be perpetrators of patriarchy. In fact many such values may be perpetrated by women partly because of the internalised sense of ‘norms’ constructed and made almost pathological over period of time. Limited but insightful studies on the context and character of gender—based violence and the response and redress mechanisms available for victims reveal some interesting patterns (Sakhi, 2004). A large proportion of women report a lack of control over decisions regarding their investment decisions and health issues. One-fourth of women expressed low levels of freedom of movement. Despite the impressive literacy rates and a much celebrated level of awareness of rights and entitlements, a startling 36 per cent feel that the male spouse or partner has a right to beat the female partner/spouse. Knowledge about laws and recourses was also limited. For example, more than two-thirds of the respondents thought that the law could not intervene regarding domestic violence because it was a private issue.

Violence against women has many health consequences. Physical and sexual abuse lie behind unwanted pregnancies, sexually transmitted infections, including HIV/AIDS, and complications of pregnancy (Johns Hopkins School of Public Health, 1999). Relationship between gender-based violence and health has also figured prominently in discussions in the Kerala context (Sakhi, 2004). Eleven percent of women who have been subjected to gender-based violence reported serious physical injury requiring medical attention like wounds and loss of hearing. A significant 50 per cent reported suffering from acute psychological distress like sleeplessness, anxiety disorder, loss of appetite and panic attacks.

Politics of gender seems to be the ideology behind the gender violence that cuts across social boundaries. The identity ingrained in the Malayalee male is that he is superior to the women. This understanding remains unspoken, though it has commonly understood ramifications within different social, cultural and religious contexts. Within the marital relationship, for instance, the husband claims a right to the body and wealth including the assets, income, if any, and landed property of the woman he is married to. Domestic violence is different from other forms of violence against women in that it is bred and nurtured on a one-to-one basis, within the four walls of the house, and perpetrated by individuals on whom depends the very identity of the woman.
Cultural and social factors are interlinked and very often fuel the development and propagation of violent behaviour. The home, which is considered to be the safest place for a woman, is unfortunately turning out to be the most insecure place for her on account of the violence being inflicted on a woman by her intimate male partner. The National Family Health Survey 3 [2005-2006], commissioned by the Government of India, seems to suggest that domestic violence affects a lower 16.4 per cent of families in Kerala when compared with the national average of 37.2 percent. However, in an independent ICRW-INCLEN (International Centre for Research on Women and International Clinical Epidemiologist Network) study conducted in 2000, Thiruvananthapuram, Kerala’s capital city, ranks first among five cities in all of India in the prevalence of domestic violence. Violence in Thiruvananthapuram is about 64 per cent in urban non-slum areas and 71 per cent in rural areas. As per available statistics the reported cases of crimes against women in 2012 from January to September show a highly disturbing figure of 9,758 cases. An article published in the Times of India on November 15th 2008, stated that two years after the Protection of Women from Domestic Violence Act was introduced, Delhi has earned the dubious distinction of having the maximum number of cases registered followed by Thiruvananthapuram. The actual number of instances of violation should be far more than the official records.

The economic marginalisation of women in development process has drawn considerable attention during recent years. The incidence of unemployment among females in the state is higher than among males by 5 times in rural areas and 3 times in rural areas. Kudumbashree, conceived and launched jointly by the Government of Kerala and NABARD, and implemented through Community Development Societies (CDS) of poor women, was the product of imagination and political will to empower women. In fact Kudumbasree has brought radical changes into the society of Kerala, particularly in the area of income generation. However, one cannot ignore that fact that it has reduced women to the status of the erstwhile manual scavengers that we claim to have eradicated from our society long ago. Kerala women from low income families are seen cleaning public streets, railway tracks, carrying shit from everywhere, loading and unloading of municipal wastes and garbage from markets etc., and we call them ‘empowered women’. Their husbands, due to acute male frustration, a growing menace to Kerala society, often find their pleasure in assaulting their women only to ensure upper hand over them and to establish their superiority over their female counterparts.

Education and development indices do not influence change of attitudes and mindsets. Women have no choice. Men will think and decide for them. Division of labour has resulted in the concentration of women in low paying unorganised sectors such as agriculture, cottage and traditional industries. Despite the powerful trade union movements equal wages for equal work still remain a mirage. Gender discrimination and sexual harassment at home and work place are widely prevalent. Women have challenged traditional gender stereotypes and roles by becoming combatant and taking on non-traditional roles. Women’s participation in political negotiations tends to play low profile with women often playing only minor roles in formal negotiations or policy making.