

## SOCIAL CHANGES AMONG WOMEN- A STUDY OF PATHANAMTHITTA DISTRICT, KERALA

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**Received: 28 Mar 2018**

**Accepted: 17 Apr 2018**

**Published: 20 Apr 2018**

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### ABSTRACT

*This paper studies the changes in the social status of women in an agrarian district of Kerala. During the past three or four decades significant changes have taken place here which changed the economic conditions of the district which in a way changed the society too. Improvement in the status of women is a crucial factor in the development of a region. So the social changes among women in this district are analyzed using the four indicators, sex ratio, and access to education, health, and participation in the labour force.*

**KEYWORDS:** *Social Change, Sex Ratio, Life Expectancy, Work Participation Rate*

### INTRODUCTION

Change, which is the law of nature, simply means alterations in the underlying structure of an object or situation over a period of time. Human society is no exception as it is a part of nature. Social change which occupies a dominant place in the consciousness of humanity is a general term, which refers to changes in social structure: nature, the social institutions, the social behavior or the social relations of a society, a community of people, and so on.

Women have been an integral part of the social structure not only because of their importance in the reproduction and caring of the human race, but also by virtue of their significant contribution to socio-economic progress. Gender analysis views women and men in terms of the roles they play in society, roles that change as societies change. Improvement in the status of women is a crucial factor in the development of a region. The study of social changes among women is important because it forms one of the most trustworthy and reliable indices of the state of society and indicates the nature and direction of social change.<sup>1</sup>

The socio-economic status of women in Kerala related to that of men reveals that the position of feminine folk in the State is much advanced than that in other states of the country. Laudable achievements are there in the socio-demographic realms, such as a favourable sex ratio, high levels of literacy, high health standards unseen in other parts of the country.<sup>2</sup> Thus, it has become a commonplace in development studies literature that the agency of women has contributed significantly to the high social development in Malayalee society.

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<sup>1</sup> Abha Chauhan, *Tribal Women and Social Change in India*, (Bombay: A.C. Brothers, 1990) 34.

<sup>2</sup> Robin Jeffrey, *Politics, Women and Well-being: How Kerala became a Model* (New Delhi: Macmillan, 1993) 11.

## Profile of the Study Area

Pathanamthitta, the district taken for analysis, abounds with natural splendours- undulating hills, dark, mysterious forests, exotic wildlife and enchanting valleys, was formed as the thirteenth district of Kerala.

Earlier, before the formation of the Kerala state, it was a part of Travancore. The district was formed with effect from 1<sup>st</sup> November, 1982 (G.O(M.S)No.1026/82/R.Ddated29.10.1982,withheadquartersatPathanamthitta. The total area of the district is 2642 sq.kms (269462.29 hectare).Of this 2541.72 sq.kms, rural area and 100.28 sq.kms urban areas of the total area 1390.73 sq.kms are forest areas.

## Status of Women –Measurement of four Indicators

For measuring the status of women in the district the following indicators are used.

Sex ratio, access to education, improvements in the field of health and work Participation rate.

## Sex Ratio

Sex Ratio is the most credible pointer towards the status of women in a society. Declining sex ratio for a population has generally been diagnosed as an indicator of worsening female advantage.<sup>3</sup> Migration of male workers, women's literacy, accesses to medical service etc influence the sex ratio.<sup>4</sup> For long the overall sex ratio in Kerala has been favorable to females and has been the most widely discussed indicator of women's status.<sup>5</sup>

Pathanamthitta district has a unique position with regard to sex ratio. The district has a sex ratio favoring the female population. The sex ratio of the district has steadily increased over the preceding decades. In all the censuses taken after the formation of the district, females outnumber males and the district has the topmost position in the State in this regard. In 1991 it was 1062 as against the State average of 1036 with second position in the State. In the 2001 census, Pathanamthitta district has the first position among the districts of Kerala with 1094 females per 1000 males as against 1058 females per 1000 males in the State. In 2011 it again raised to 1129 with the second position in the State.

Regarding the rural and urban sex ratio also the picture is not much different. The rural area of the district has reported 1095 females per 1000 males in 2001 as against a sex ratio of 1063 in 1991. In the urban area, the sex ratio increased from 1061 in 1991 to 1078 in 2001. In 2011 the figures were 1129 for the total as well as rural and 1125 in urban areas.

The out-migration of the male population for better avenues can be considered as one of the reasons for domination of the female population in the district. Declining sex ratio for a population has generally been diagnosed as an indicator of worsening female advantage. Considering this point the advantage is more to the females in the district.

## Access to Education

<sup>3</sup> Dhairiyarayar Jayaraj and Sreenivasan Subramanian, "Women's Wellbeing and the Sex Ratio at Birth: Some Suggestive Evidence from India", *The Journal of Development Studies*, 40, (2004): 91-119.

<sup>4</sup> Amitabh Kundu and Mahesh Sahu. "Variation in Sex Ratio: Development implications", *Economic and Political Weekly* (Oct.12, 1991): 2341-2342. Zachariah K.C, Mathew E.T. and Irudaya Rajan S., *Socio Economic and Demographic Consequences of Migration in Kerala* (Thiruvananthapuram: Centre for Development Studies, 2000) 44.

<sup>5</sup> Government of Kerala, *Human Development Report* (Thiruvananthapuram: State Planning Board, 2005) 21.

Education, a fundamental human right confers various advantages on individuals. Besides economic and political development, education's multidimensional advantage also includes social development. This is more possible when gender equity is achieved. When Education acts as a vehicle for professionalization and social mobility among women an upward movement can be witnessed.

Kerala in general and in the District of Pathanamthitta in particular, female education received a great fillip due to historic and socio-cultural factors. The educational policies of the State in general and the district ,in particular, helped promote considerable vertical social mobility by making school education accessible to students from all socio-economic strata. Women are the foremost group enjoying the benefits of education and social mobility. From household works and agricultural occupations, more and more women are coming outside as higher education is being accessible to them. This change propelled through educational achievements provides social mobility.

Pathanamthitta district has a unique position in the educational map of Kerala. The district itself had a good educational tradition. Evidence are there stating that in the earlier period itself educational institutions like *Salais*, *Ezhuthupallis*, *Kalaris* existed here. The Thiruvalla *Salai* associated with Srivallabha Temple is well known for its Gurukula system of Education. In the 19<sup>th</sup> century, several Sanskrit schools existed here. The princely State of Travancore had its own way of life and educational and social institutions. In Travancore education was started as a state programme as early as 1817, 53 years before England started that programme. The roles of Christian missionaries, who set up schools and colleges and imparted western systems of knowledge through the medium of English, were the pioneers in the field of female education. The private enterprise in Travancore also helped the state in the educational endeavor. The government has always pursued a liberal and progressive policy in the spread of education and also encouraged other agencies in the field by providing them liberal grants.

In the area of education, clear progress can be seen if one looks at the figures of literacy rates over the years. Pathanamthitta district has a high position in the case female literacy. In 1991, 2001 and 2011 census, the district had a female literacy rate above the State average. In 1991 it was 93.29, 93.71 in 2001 and 96.26 in 2011. In that place, Kerala had 86.17, 87.86 and 91.98. In the two Censuses, it retained the second position in the State and in the last one bagged the top position.

Education has contributed to the social and economic development of the district. If we take the impact of education in the sphere of health it is clear that education, particularly female education, which has been regarded by both academic researchers and institutions as being the key that unlocks the door leading to fertility reductions, has a fundamental influence on health and health-seeking behavior. Education has also contributed to the decline in mortality rates. Besides this, a strong correlation between life expectancy and literacy can also be seen.

The achievements in the field of health have helped in achieving much-renowned changes in the demographic transition. The reduction in birth rate ,as well as the death rate, has reduced the population growth to the minimum. Education has facilitated the large-scale migration of females from the district whose remittances sustain the economy. The decision making the power of the women is also a by-product of education. Education, especially female education has

a profound role to play.<sup>6</sup> The high rate of female employment, higher age of marriage, higher decision making roles, utilization of health care facilities are other advantages.

When the labour pattern is analyzed a change in the female employment pattern over the years can be noticed. The category “Other Workers” forms the major share of the workers in the district Pathanamthitta. 60.9% of the male workers and 74.5% of the female workers come under this category. In other words, the percentage of female workers employed in the category “Other Workers” in Pathanamthitta are 8.5% higher than the same of the state average. The significantly higher representation of women in this category may be due to the growth in employment in the tertiary sector and an increase in the literacy rate. Thus the changes in job pattern can be witnessed as a result of education and equality of educational opportunity.

## Health

Socio-economic development in a country is very much linked with the improvement of the overall health of the people. Kerala’s achievements in health care are far ahead of other states in the country and rank first in attaining a low birth rate, infant mortality rate and in attaining high life expectancy especially of females.<sup>7</sup>

When the study area is considered, it exceeds Kerala in the field of almost all Health indicators. The rapidly declining growth rate, declining death rate, life expectancy, especially female life expectancy, acceptance of family planning programmes and fertility decline are some among them. Better health has made the demographic transition more speedy, first, an increase in life expectancy, next decline in general death rates, next sharper decline in infant mortality finally a steeper fall in birth rate.

Expectancy of life at birth is an important indicator for assessing the overall health situation of many people and is one of the aspects of human development included in the HDI. The demographic transition in Kerala brought about commendable improvements in the area of health and life expectancy. In all the major reports<sup>8</sup> Pathanamthitta exceeds Kerala in Life Expectancy. Life Expectancy at birth for males is higher in Pathanamthitta among the districts of Kerala. The figure is 76 which is 2.3 higher than the state average 73.7 which is quite notable Female life expectancy at birth is also higher in Pathanamthitta compared to the state average. The advantage is of 1.9 years.

Kerala made achievements in total fertility rate with a low per capita income. The high status of women, female literacy, age at marriage and low infant mortality were thought to be factors behind the rapid fall in the fertility rate. Researchers in the field of health have come to the conclusion that one of the most important factors behind Kerala’s remarkable performance in reducing fertility is the high level of female education.<sup>9</sup> The total fertility rate of the district was 1.7 in 1984–90, which further declined to 1.5 in 2001. Pathanamthitta in 2001 registered the lowest total fertility rate

<sup>6</sup> Mari Bhat P.N. and Irudaya Rajan S., “Demographic Transition in Kerala Revisited”, *Economic and Political Weekly*, 25 (1990) 1957-79. Panikar P.G.K., “Resources not the Constraint on Health Improvement: The Case Study of Kerala”, *Economic and Political Weekly*, 3 (1979) 1802–1809.

<sup>7</sup> Jean Dreze and Amarthya Sen, *Hunger and Public Action* (New York : Oxford University Press, 1989) 221-25.

<sup>8</sup> *District Plan Pathanamthitta*, District Planning Board, p.229 *Human Development Report*, op.cit., p.168

<sup>9</sup> Mari Bhat P. N. and Irudaya Rajan S. “Demographic Transition in Kerala Revisited”, *Economic and Political Weekly*, 25 (1990): 1957-79.

among the districts of Kerala which was 0.2 lower than the State average.<sup>10</sup> In other words, the total fertility rate of the district Pathanamthitta was almost 12% lower than that of the State average. It is one of the lowest fertility districts in the country besides metropolitan districts such as Chennai (1.3) and Kolkata (1.4).

Higher female literacy in Kerala has contributed significantly toward higher utilization of maternal and child health services by the women of the state. Indirectly higher literacy has contributed to a higher level of political participation of the rural poor, which, in turn, has forced the state government in the post-independence era to cater to their health needs along with other needs. High levels of female literacy, rapid gains in the sanitation front and an extensive network of modern medical care institutions, both in rural and urban areas have served as push factors in accelerating health development.

Health is one of the important indicators for assessing the status of women in any society. The state of an Indian woman's health is intrinsically related to her socio-economic status and affects all aspects of her life. The major indicators of good health like more life-expectancy among females, less fertility rate, less maternal mortality rate, etc point to the health standards of women in the district.

### **Participation in the Labour Force**

The Work Participation Rate of a State indicates to a great extent the economic empowerment of women in the society. There still exists a large difference between the work participation rates of males and females, which is an important aspect of gender inequality.<sup>11</sup> The status of women is intimately connected with their economic position, which in turn depends on opportunities for participation in economic activities.

Female Work Participation Rate of Pathanamthitta marked an exceptional growth during the period 1991-2001 even though it stood only in the 12<sup>th</sup> place among the districts of Kerala. Changes in the female Work Participation Rate in Pathanamthitta district from 1991 to 2001 show very different tendencies. In this head, Pathanamthitta marked a growth by 0.7%. This growth is significant because it was achieved when 9 districts of Kerala showed a decline in female Work Participation Rate.

Regarding rural woman Work Participation Rate Pathanamthitta stands 11<sup>th</sup> among the districts of Kerala when the Work Participation Rate of rural women in 1991 is considered. It was 12.6 in 1991 and the figure is only slightly higher (0.1) than the total woman Work Participation Rate. But the district marks a 1.8% positive change when compared to the state average. Regarding the urban women Work Participation Rate in the year 1991 it was 11.8. In 2001 we find her almost in the same position and figure in comparison with the other districts of Kerala. She marked only a 0.2% of the increase over the period. We may note that the growth in urban women Work Participation Rate of Pathanamthitta from 1991 to 2001 falls 0.3% behind the state average of change over the period when the rural woman Work Participation Rate of Pathanamthitta registered an increase of 1.8% above the state average in Kerala. The Work Participation Rate of female

<sup>10</sup> Christophe Z. Guilmoto and Irudaya Rajan S., "District Level Estimates of Fertility from India's 2001 Census", *Economic and Political Weekly*, 37 (2002): 665-72.

<sup>11</sup> Lakshmy Devi K.R., Education, "Health and Women's Empowerment - Kerala's Experience in Linking the Triad", *Gender Issues and Empowerment of Women*, (2007): 1-13. Lakshmy Devi K.R., "Education, Employment and Job Preference of Women in Kerala: A micro-level case study", Discussion Paper No. 42, Thiruvananthapuram: Kerala Research Programme on Local Level Development Centre for Development Studies, (2002) 7.

main workers shows the same tendency during the period. When a majority of districts in Kerala showed a considerable decrease in the Work Participation Rate of female main workers, Pathanamthitta almost maintained the status quo with a slight decline by 0.2%.

Pathanamthitta had attained 0.9 point increase in the Work Participation Rate of female marginal workers over the period 1991 to 2001. The rate of change in Pathanamthitta's Work Participation Rate of female marginal workers from 1991 to 2001 is 0.5 points below the state average. The demise of many traditional household industries such as handloom and weaving may account for the lower representation of women in the marginal category, at least in the rural area of Kerala.<sup>12</sup> In the all Kerala levels, the tendency of change in the Work Participation Rate of female marginal workers is opposite to the tendency of change in the Work Participation Rate of female main workers. Pathanamthitta showed a tendency of change similar to that of the all Kerala tendency, but with a lesser degree of change.

## CONCLUSIONS

In the case of Pathanamthitta district, the role and status of women in the district are influenced by a variety of factors. The geographical area included in the present Pathanamthitta district had a good tradition in female education pioneered by missionaries and other socio-religious reformers. Now the district has a high demographic advantage, and a lower fertility rate even compared to metropolitan cities in India

The role and status of women are changing. Women had adequate extra time to spend for productive employment outside. Even though the female work participation is low, that does not mean that the supply of female labour is low since a certain percentage of women would be unemployed. Due to educational effects and gender equality, more women are changing their traditional occupational structure and this can often be a trigger of change.

Education, especially female education pioneered by the missionaries has a profound role to play in the condition of womenfolk of the district. Now gender equity opens avenues for more women in higher education. This triggers social mobility and upward mobilization among the womenfolk. Female education acts as a good catalyst for progressive social changes in the district like changes in family and life patterns and changing social norms, improvement in scientific knowledge and ability to plan a family.

Female education, a significant catalyst for the progressive social changes in the district, provides a chance to females to go out for work or study. This brings them a changed mindset and they would transmit it to the young generation which in turn hastens the process of social change. Even though the female work participation is low, more and more women are entering into the labour force from the district due to educational effects and gender equality and this can often be a trigger for change. The change thus initiated, provides a considerable amount of social mobility also. The educational policies of the State in general and the district, in particular, helped promote considerable vertical social mobility by making school education accessible to students from all socio-economic strata.

The district with a high migration prevalence ratio, migration had its effects on women in the district. Migration and its consequent 'income effect' can be cited as a reason for the lower female work participation in the district. Migration

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<sup>12</sup> Mridul Eapen, "Women in Informal Sector in Kerala: Need for Re-examination" *Economic and political weekly* (2001): 2390-2392.

is also the reason for the increasing 'female-headed households' in the district. When men in large numbers embarked on migration for work, women had to maintain the affairs of the public space in the locale and this further strengthened their role there.

Female entry into the labour market made significant familial changes, especially in the relationship within the family and between generations. Changes are taking place in women's roles in families.

Significant familial changes, especially in the relationship within the family and between generations and especially for the elderly, are being witnessed in the district. The district, which is ahead of the state in demographic transition, especially sex ratio and growth rate of population and female life expectancy, the number of widows are more.

A decline in birth rate would mean a higher standard of living, the emancipation of women from childbearing drudgery, better care for the young and perhaps a healthier society. There is also a close relationship between the growth of population and the level of physical health. On the increase in the number of mouths to feed, there is chronic malnutrition and other related diseases. All these affect the quality of population and the social structure and social institutions. A strong correlation can be seen between Education, mortality rates and life expectancy. The achievements in the field of health have helped in achieving much-renowned changes in the demographic transition. The reduction in birth rate, as well as the death rate, has reduced the population growth to the minimum. The inverse relationship between education and fertility can be seen in the district. There has been a steady and more recently a sharper decline in the proportion of children of school going age, while the proportion of the aged population has increased significantly which is evitable during the transition. The processes of development of education and modernization were mutually reciprocal, complementary and directly proportional.

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