

BA Political Science Programme

State & Society in Kerala
MODULE – VI

New Social Movements among
Dalits and Adivasis
Women
Fisherfolk
Environmental Groups etc

NEW SOCIAL MOVEMENTS AMONG DALITS AND ADIVASIS

Dalits were the fifth caste which fall outside the Indian traditional caste system and were regarded as low caste and ‘untouchables’. Dalits are a mixed population of numerous caste groups all over India. Dalits include leather-workers (called *chamar*), carcass handlers (called *mahar*), poor farmers and landless labourers, night soil scavengers (called *bhangi* or *chura*), street handcrafting people, folk artists, street cleaners, washermen dhobi, etc. Currently, there are an estimated 160 million Dalits in India. Discrimination against Dalits still exists in rural areas all over India where majority of the population live. The situation in Kerala may be different, but discrimination of all sorts exist in the state also.

In the all India scenario, it was Baba Saheb Ambedkar who began the efforts for bringing human identity for Dalits. It was Mahathma Jyothi Rao Phule, the social reformer of 19th century Maharashtra used the term ‘Dalit’ to mean the oppressed, the exploited, and the suppressed untouchables who formed the foundation of the Indian society. In Kerala Ayyankali warned that if Dalit are prevented from education and other civil rights, the paddy fields would produce only weeds. In the mean time, there were large scale conversion from among the Dalit communities to escape the caste frame work. On all India basis, the conversion was only 4% of the Dalit population in India. Conversion was not a solution to the problem.

The political parties also did not come up to the expectations of Dalit aspirations. In 1956, the Republican Party which was formed after the death of Ambedkar was split after its electoral alliance with the Congress. In 1970 s the Dalit Panthers in line with Black Panthers of USA was formed in Maharashtra. They also split owing to Marxian ideals in the Party. In Kerala in 1999, the Dalit united meet held at Kochi generally agreed that Ambedkarism was the best course of action for Dalits. Presently, Dalit movement with its various manifestations in politics, ideology, art, and literature is an omnipotent force in the Kerala society today.

It was in the 1970 s that the Government of Kerala passed the Adivasi land act. The objective was to restore alienated Adivasi land back to them. It was mainly lost due to migration of peasants from other parts of the state to hitherto Adivasi areas. The settlers also brought with them a new concept alien to the Adivasis. It was the concept of personal ownership. Those who does not believe in it was bound to get no benefit from it. As a result of it, the land and its treasures were lost to the migrated farmers. However, the act was given effectiveness only from 1982. The act was supposed to give effect from 1960. As a matter of fact, no efforts were taken to implement the same. In 1988, the High Court of Kerala was moved to implement the act with necessary amendments. In 1996, the amendment act was passed by the legislature. But it did not get the sign of the Governor. Again in 1999 the Kerala legislature passed another amended act.

An irony about the much acclaimed Land Reforms in Kerala is that it did not in fact make the farmers in any way powerful. I was only the upper and middle class tenants who could become owners of land by proving their tenancy by presenting rent receipts. Dalits and Adivasis being the laborers could not prove their ownership. They were only given hutment rights for a small piece of dwelling land. It was said that the total area of land thus transferred was only to the tune of as low as 0.04 hectors in a village. This legal denial of ownership and access to land meant that Dalits would never evolve as land owning peasants despite their continued role in the agrarian society.

In the 1980 s, the demand was for cultivable land rights for Dalits and Adivasis. Though various political parties appear to support the move, on the practical front, nothing could be done because of vote bank politics.

The constitutional struggle of the Adivasis were well received by the general public. Coherent and articulate leadership also arose from among the Adivasi and Dalit communities. M. Geethanandan from Kannur and C. K. Janu from Wayanad are examples of objective leadership for Dalit and Adivasi movements in Kerala. Under their leadership, the Adivasi Gotra Maha Sabha occupied Eucalyptus plantation of Forest department in Muthanga in Wayand in 2003. The incident resulted in the death of an Adivasi and a policeman. Following this, the leadership launched another struggle in Aralam in Kannur District, where there is a large Paniya population.

On particular nature of the Adivasi struggle in Kerala is that while Adivasi rights are advanced by Maoist leadership elsewhere in India, in Kerala, it is still in the form of constitutional struggle. However, there were reports that Maoists are trying to woo Adivasis to adopt their methodologies for struggle.

In 2007, Dalit activist by name Laha Gopalan, under the banner of Sadhujana Vimochana Munnani launched a struggle at Chengara in Pathanamthitta district. This time, it was a rubber plantation leased by Harrison-Malayalam Plantations. The siege lasted for months. They had to face a two pronged opposition. While the government considered it as illegal, the plantation workers thought that it is against their rights. It is out of question, whether the struggle was a success or not; as a matter of fact, it brought Adivasi and Dalit land right into the lime light once again. At least, the land rights became a political issue rather than a marginal issue of a marginal community.

The nature of Adivasi and Dalit movements in Kerala could be summarised as follows:-

1. The new social movements of Adivasis and Dalits in Kerala are fundamentally targeted towards land rights.
2. There is coherent and articulate leadership for Dalit and Adivasi movements in Kerala today.
3. The various struggles led by the leadership has brought Adivasi Land rights to the lime light. It is no more considered as a marginalized issue.
4. Lot to be done than done. Majority of the demands of Adivasis and Dalits still remains to be met. The struggle is to continue in the future.
5. Generally speaking, the methodology adopted by the leadership is constitutional in nature.
6. The constitutional struggle of Adivasis and Dalits are increasingly getting public support and sympathy.
7. No particular political party could fully take the credit of protecting Adivasi and Dalit rights.

WOMEN

The following table gives the conventional indicators for comparing the status of women in Kerala in comparison with that of India.

Indictors	Kerala	India
Sex Ratio (for 1000 males)	1058	927
Literacy	88% for women and 94% for men	54% for women and 74% for men
Life expectancy of women	73.1 (67.1 for men)	65.43
Maternal mortality Per 1000 live births	1.3	5.7
Child death rate/1000	14.0	73.0
Birth rate/1000	16.0	27.2
Work participation rate	15.8%	22.3%
Age at marriage	22	18

In spite of the positive demographic indicators mentioned above there is every reason for working for women's rights in the state. The history of women's rights can be traced back to the era of social reform movements and democratic movements in the state when women from both the lower castes and upper castes imbibed the ethos of national movement. The Channar agitation and movement against the purdah system among Namboothiri women are some of the oldest movements for women's rights. Today, many are the women's organisations working for the rights of women. Thanal, SEWA, Anweshi and RASTA are examples of active women's organisations in the State. Though they may slightly vary in their approach and style of functioning, the fundamental objectives remains the same. All of them work towards alleviating the gender and other discriminative practices still prevalent in the society.

There are organisations working among marginalized groups also. An example is that of women's wing of Kerala Swatantra Matsya Thozhilali Federation (KSMTF). The objective is to promote leadership among women and to raise issues faced by the women - fish workers. One of the objectives of the groups is anti-liquor campaigns.

The crisis women face today is discussed below.

1. The sex ratio favorable to women is declining. The number of men for 1000 women is now in an increasing trend. Though sex determination and infanticide is not much heard in the state, the trend is alarming.
2. Increase in gender based violence against women: There is an increase in the number of gender based violence against women in Kerala. Molestation and rape cases are reported almost every day. Even atrocities against girl children are on the rise. These are apart from domestic violence perpetrated against women. Women are also at the receiving ends of alcoholism and other drug abuse. Alarmingly, a study on domestic violence in Kerala found that more than 60 % women in Kerala are subjected to physical torture and mental harassment in the state. The national average is only around 35 %. The capital city Thiruvananthapuram ranks among five cities in India for domestic violence against women.
3. One poignant concern is about the mental status of women. Studies showed that poor mental health status of women is reported owing to degeneration in the status of women, emotional deprivation, and de-empowerment due to economic and social reasons. Large scale migration of men for work outside the state is one of the reasons for poor mental status of women in Kerala.
4. Statistics also suggest that even when expectation of life is high for women, the physical health status of women is not as good as men. There are more chronic and acute medical cases among women.
5. Studies also indicates that the economic output in terms of domestic work by women is tremendous and beyond calculation. Apart from the usual domestic chores like washing, cleaning, and looking after children, more often they have to shoulder other responsibilities which are normally taken care by men, due to the absence of men folk at home because of job outside the state and also because of alcoholism. Looking after the elderly is another increasing responsibility for women folk as the life span is on the increase in the state.
6. Paradox to the domestic work input of women, there is an interesting fact about work participation of women in the state. The women in Kerala are known for their high educational status as compared to the rest of the state. Ironically, their work participation is less than the national average.
7. In spite of the education and awareness levels of the women in the state, the participation of women in politics is less than expected. Statistics shows that the number of women representatives in the state legislative assembly had never been more than 10%.
8. Another interesting aspect about gender discrimination is regarding professional education. The proportion of girl children in regular colleges is increasing while that in professional colleges is decreasing.
9. Another inequality is in terms of wages for women. The wages for women in the manual labour is always less than that of men even in equal labour. Even when the woman is the income earner in the family, the decision making power vests with men. Higher wages and salary for women also is not tolerated within the family. Especially in the marriage market, men want women with less salary.

10. Gender bias in family planning is another issue of contention. It is the women who are always made to undergo contraception even though the medical procedure is cheaper for men.
11. Apart from the above, the condition of women from the marginalized sectors like Adivasis and fisher folk is worth mention.

FISHERFOLK

Kerala fisher folk consists of more than 25% of the total fisher folk in India. They are equipped with more than 17,000 country boats and 14,000 mechanized boats. They form about 3% of the total population of the state and belongs to all the prominent religious sects in the State. Many are the organisations which work for the advancement of interests of fisher folk in the State.

The earliest social formation of the fisher folk was rather communal in nature. In the northern parts, most of them were Muslims. In the central parts of the State, most of them were Hindus and in the Southern parts of the State, most of them were Christians. As a matter of fact, especially in the southern parts, the Christian church was successful in organizing the fisher folk in the early periods. Since most of them belonged to a particular sect of the Catholic church namely Latin Church, the organisation of the fisher folk was rather easy. It was not very much so in the northern and central parts of the state. Thus the Kerala Latin Catholic Fishermen Federation was formed in 1977 by amalgamating the Church formed unions in different districts. In the 1980s many social service organisations were formed among the fisher folk. The Kerala Independent Fishermen Federation was formed in 1988. It was actually a changeover of the earlier church formed union of 1977. All Kerala Dheevara Sabha also was formed during this period by unifying Hindu fisher folk like Valan and Arayan communities. As a matter of fact, the unions formed by Congress, Communist Party, Muslim League or Revolutionary Socialist Party are as powerful and militant as the Federation formed in 1988.

A special mentions should be done about Self Employed Women's Association (SEWA). Its work among the fisher women is worth mention since women are the most exploited among the fisher folk.

Some of the pertinent issues the various fishermen organisations are addressing today are as follows:-

1. Severe inter union rivalries which often fought on religious lines. Many a time, the conflicts result in violent clashes. Sometimes, parts of coastal region remains quite volatile for months.
2. Over exploitation of sea results in lack of jobs for months.
3. Over mechanization in the field had made the traditional fishermen jobless.
4. Compulsion to opt for deep sea fishing to earn a living as coastal fishing proves useless.
5. Exploitation of fishermen in terms of price they obtain for the product. They don't get even 10% of the market price of fish they catch and bring to the shore. There are a chain of exploitative middlemen who take the majority share.
6. There is severe trade unionism among traders as well as owners of large fishing boats.
7. Security threat in the deep sea is another serious issue which sometimes goes out of proportion. The large vessels often mistake the fishermen for pirates.

ENVIRONEMNT

The landscape of Kerala falls within the eco system of Western Ghats. It is one of the most bio diverse eco systems in the world in terms of the diversity of species as well as topography. However, it is one of the most threatened ecological systems in the world also.

The eco system of Kerala is so heterogeneous. The ecological problems Kerala facing today also are heterogeneous and so varied. Popular actions to protect the environment with the objective of sustainable life acquire the shape of state level action to very local level resistance in the form of action against a local sand mafia who sieve sand from the narrow village stream.

The following is a discussion of the environmental threats Kerala is facing today.

Lakes and Action Groups in Kerala

Vellayani, Sasthaamkotta and Pookode are some of the 34 lakes in the State. The case of Saasthamkotta lake is quite pathetic and local population as well as NGOs and governments have taken serious note of the fast depletion of the lake due to drainage and over exploitation.

Mining

Environmental depletion due to mining in stone quarries and sand mining are major issues in Kerala. Quarries leave large open areas as water bodies. Sand mining results in the fall in the bottom levels of rivers. Clay mining results in total wastage of fertile lands. Besides the above, there are industrial mining also. For example, Kerala Clays and Ceramics Products Ltd in Kannur district makes use of clay deposits. The top soil deposited as a result of mining pollutes air as well as water.

Deforestation

Kerala has less than 10,000 sq Kilo Meters of forest area which comprises of less than 25% of the state's area. A healthy situation should be more than 30%. Unfortunately, even the government had resorted to converting pristine forest lands into Eucalyptus and Teak plantations resulting in the total de balance of the eco system resulting in climate change and depletion of food resources to animals and birds. At the same time the strict environmental laws prevent the development of roads and other amenities. NGOs all over the state are quite conscious about these developments.

Drinking Water

In spite of the fact that the State gets the highest rain fall in an year, the provision for safe drinking water is still an issue. Lowering of ground water levels is reported from all over the state except in Wayanad. There is total dependence on bore wells neglecting the traditional open wells, ponds and lakes, is the usual practice in the state. Low pH, high iron content, high salinity, high TDS, are the common problems not only in the coastal areas. In Alapuzha and Cherthala, the fluoride content is very high. Iron and magnesium also are very high. The existing safe water sources are polluted by water released from prawn farms. 80% of water prone diseases are caused due to pollution of water sources due to release of human faeces, bathing water etc into water sources.

Oil Pollution

Oil Pollution from refineries and by transportation has not received much attention from NGOs. Benzene is toxic and Sulphur causes damage to Liver and Kidney. People living near Southern refineries at Parassala in Thiruvananthapuram have reported health problems. IIT Madras and Cochin University were engaged to study the issue.

Water borne diseases

Water borne diseases form 40% of communicable diseases in Kerala. Acute Diarrhoeal Diseases (ADD) including Cholera and Typhoid are common in the State. They are caused due to lack of safe drinking water.

Bio Medical Waste issue

Kerala accounts for 3% of national population but 27% of hospital beds. There are more than 5000 medical establishments in the state. Bed capacity is more than 30,000. Safe disposal of waste, solid waste, water waste, bottles, syringes, needles, bio wastes is a great challenge.

Coastal Erosion

Sea coasts cover 10-15 % of the total land area of the state with a total length of 560 Kilo Meters. Coastal soil erosion acquires un controllable proportion during monsoon rains. One of the reasons for the situation is uncontrolled construction activities along the coasts.

Plastic Waste

There are 65 lakh families in Kerala. Three to twenty carry bags of different sizes reach each family every day. Moreover, there are 10 lakh tourists and 50 lakh pilgrims who visit the state every year. All of them dump carry bags, plastic bottles and other such plastic wastes into the environment. The greatest hazard due to plastic waste is caused due to carry bags below 20 microns. Components like benzene and vinyl chloride are cancerous.

Water bodies in Alapuzha-Kuttanad region

There are great water bodies in the Alapuzha –Kuttanad region with the inter linkage of lakes, rivers and canals. But the irony is the lack of fresh water sources. Floating African Algae has proved itself to be the greatest menace in the region. About 200 tonnes of waste material are dumped into the fresh water canals every day. This adds injury to insult. Local environmental organisations are really concerned about the situation.

Urban waste problem

The capital city alone produces around 4 crores litres of sewage every day besides non recyclable solid waste material. Dumping of waste in the nearby rural areas has invited violent opposition from the public. Vilappinsala issue is an example. Permanent waste management system based on scientific principles is a must. When waste management is a political issue than a technical issue, the solution is far away.

Apart from the general issues, there had been a number of particular cases which attracted much attention and public action. Some of them are briefly discussed below.

1. Silent Valley Movement of Kerala

In the 1970 s the State Government decided to construct a Hydro Electric Project in Silent Valley in Kerala. The dam site included some 10,000 hectares of pristine forests which is the habitat to innumerable number of flora and fauna including the lion tailed macaques, horn bill etc. The monkey could survive only in silent Valley because of its particular nature of diet. Voluntary organizations like the Kerala Sastra Sahitya Parisad picked up the issue. They tried to educate the public about the evils of deforestation. In 1979, the Kerala Government finally decided to drop the plan and protect the ecosystem of the area. Later, the State Government declared Silent Valley as a National Park in 1985. Perhaps it was the first time in the history of the State, a ‘man vs monkey’ situation culminated in ‘man and monkey’ situation.

2. The Mullaperiyar Dam Issue

The Mullaperiyar dam in Kerala was constructed over the river Periyar in the year 1895. The dam was constructed with rubble and lime surkhi. The life span is 50 years. However, after 111 years of its existence, the State of Tamil Nadu has demanded for the raising of water level in the dam. The plea was to meet rising demand for water for the agricultural fields. Apprehensive about the safety of the dam, the Kerala Government did not accept this proposal. The dam is situated at a place which has high seismic potential. So the people of Kerala living in the down stream areas of the Dam started agitations demanding reconstruction or decommissioning of the Dam. The matter was brought to the attention of the Supreme Court.

3. Gwalior Rayons and Pollution in the river Chaliyar

The Gwalior Rayons factory at Mavoor was situated by the river side of Chaliyar. The factory producing synthetic yarn was accused of polluting the environment beyond repair. In December 1998, Rahman, the leader of agitation, who later died of Cancer, marched to the factory along with 7,000 villagers behind him. In 1999, many villagers were hospitalized after inhaling sulphur dioxide gas leaked from the factory. Kerala’s human rights groups called for the boycott of Grasim products. Finally, the ‘man or machine’ situation was decided by closure of the plant in 2000. This is another success story of people’s science movement in the state.

4. Movement against Endosulfan

The villagers of Padre village of Kasaragod district in Kerala had been fighting against the usage of endosulfan, in the cashew nut plantations of the Plantation Corporation of Kerala in and around the village. Since the method of usage was aerial spray, the toxic pesticide poisoned almost everything on the surface and beneath the earth including wells and fresh water ponds. It was raining hazardous pesticides in Kasargod rather than mountain dew water. The practice had been continuing for decades since 1976. New borns were born crippled, retarded and less than human. Those who could take birth normal were cursed to live a scary life, if death does not beckon them early enough. Men would never take their bride from the villages. No man would send their daughter married to the villages. Finally the nozzle of death was closed after 25 years in 2001. Central agriculture ministry banned the chemical in Kerala since. It was possible only through the concerted efforts of the local people, the general public of the state, NGOs and the media alike. It was an 'end or endosulfan' situation.

5. Plachimada agitation against Coca Cola

A 40-acre plot at Plachimada of Palakkad District, Kerala was the site of the unit of Hindustan Coca-Cola Beverages Pvt. Ltd since 1998-99. Every day 15 million liters of ground water was extracted by Coca Cola at free of cost. Bottle washing involves the using of chemicals and the effluents are released without treatment contaminating the surface water. The area was already short of fresh water supplies. As a result of over exploitation of ground water, the situation worsened. The foul smelling slurry waste was sold as fertilizer to the unsuspecting farmers who were already suffering from water shortage. The struggle against the Plachimada Plant of Coca Cola was launched in 2002, which demanded the closure of the Coca-Cola Factory.

6. Industrial Pollution at Eloor, Kochi

In 1999, international NGO Greenpeace declared the Eloor industrial area one of 35 Global Toxic Hotspots. The Periyar river carried the entire brunt of effluents from the factories. In August 2004, the Supreme Court Monitoring Committee threatened Kerala State Pollution Control Board officials with contempt of court proceedings. It served closure orders on 32 industrial units and ordered over 100 more to tighten up hazardous waste disposal. Periyar Malineekarana Virudha Samiti was among many environmental groups which protested against large scale pollution in the area.

7. Haritha Keralam Programme

The objective of Haritha Keralam Programme was to grow one crore trees outside the forest area with the help of all the 999 Grama Panchayats of the State. The aim of the programme was to reduce and control environmental pollution to a certain extent.

8. Tourism Industry and Environment in Kerala

One particular threat the environment in Kerala is facing today is from the Tourism industry. The threat is particularly visible at the high lands and the back water region where large scale encroachments were reported. While mountain ranges are encroached to build tourist resorts, the back waters are encroached by filling up. In the Munnar hills alone, encroachment was to the tune of more than two lakh acres. The anti-encroachment drive was not a complete success. The problem with resort mafia is that it totally disturbs the eco balance by an unwanted human presence.

As far as the back waters—the unique feature of Kerala ecology—are concerned, conservative estimates shows that more than 65 percent of the lake has fallen victim to reclamation projects. There are only 23 percent of its backwaters left. In the Kumarakom bird sanctuary, there were large scale destruction of mangrove forests resulting in the reduction in the number of bird species in the sanctuary from 189 to 66. Only 1% of the original size of mangrove forests is left. There is a mushrooming of hotels and resorts in the area. The house boats in the area cause environmental pollution by means if waste disposal and oil pollution.