

**The Enigma of Kerala Women: Does High  
Literacy Necessarily Translate into high Status?**

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## THE ENIGMA OF THE 'KERALA woman' :

### Does High Literacy Necessarily Translate into High Status ?<sup>1</sup>

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#### **I. The Background**

Kerala, a state of thirty odd million people in the southern tip of India, has been hailed as the epitome of women's development in a country that does not fare too well in terms of UNDP's gender development indicator.<sup>2</sup> Unlike many other states in this country of billion plus people, literacy levels are high among women as well as men in Kerala, and the differences between the two are relatively low, thereby contributing to a high level of recorded GDI in the state. Health indicators are equally impressive, with high levels of life expectancy for women and men, and indeed a fairly strong positive tilt towards women, which is as the case is in all developed countries and ---- given the greater biological vulnerability of the male of the species as compared to the female ---- is what it should be in all relatively gender neutral societies. Even those health indicators that do not enter directly into the GDI calculations, such as maternal mortality rates for instance, are pretty good in Kerala, the estimates being significantly lower than those in many other Indian states. It is little wonder that experts have cited the instance of Kerala as one that can and should be

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<sup>1</sup> This paper provides a background to the research on the issue of gender in Kerala which was carried out under the auspices of the MIMAP-Gender Network. A fuller version of the paper appears as the lead chapter in a forthcoming book titled 'The Enigma of the Kerala Woman : A Failed Promise of Literacy'.

<sup>2</sup> According to the 2005 Human development Report of UNDP, in the year 2003, India ranked 98 in a group of 140 countries with a GDI of 0.586, a few notches above Bangladesh (rank 105, GDI 0.514) Nepal (rank 106, GDI 0.511), and Pakistan (rank 107, GDI 0.508), but way below China (rank 64, GDI 0.754) or Sri Lanka (rank 66, GDI 0.747)

emulated as a case that ensures high levels of gender development and consequently a high status for women.<sup>3</sup>

**Table 1.1**

**Gender differences in selected human Development Indicators in Kerala and a few other Indian states**

State	Literacy (Census 2001)		Life Expectancy at birth (1998-2002)		HDI (2001)
	Male	Female	Male	Female	Total
<b>Kerala</b>	<b>94.20</b>	<b>87.86</b>	<b>70.8</b>	<b>75.9</b>	<b>0.638 (1)</b>
Bihar	71.93	56.03	61.4	59.5	0.367 (15)
Madhya Pradesh	76.80	50.28	57.0	56.7	0.394 (12)
Uttar Pradesh	84.01	60.26	59.4	58.5	0.388 (13)
Maha rastra	86.27	67.51	65.0	67.0	0.523 (4)
Punjab	75.63	63.55	67.4	69.5	0.537 (2)
<b>All India</b>	<b>75.96</b>	<b>54.25</b>	<b>61.6</b>	<b>63.3</b>	<b>0.472</b>

Source : Economic Survey 2005-2006, Government of India .

Figures within brackets in the last column are ranks among the major states of India

***The 'enigma'***

Although initially investigations into the Kerala case was not part of the project design, somewhere during the first phase of the Gender Network, a number of contradictory signals from the state made it imperative that one looked into the Kerala story in some detail. Despite the obvious achievements of the state in terms of the standard indicators of gender development, a little exploration outside these indicators brought up more questions than could be answered. One discovered that Kerala has one of the highest rates of recorded crimes against women, including among the highest incidence of domestic violence. Even if

<sup>3</sup> A.K.Sen (2000); Dreze and Sen (1995).

one allowed for considerable reporting bias, the figures were far too high for comfort in a state that boasts of a high status for women. There is growing evidence of female foeticide in Kerala, which suggests that, like in many other places in India, female babies are less valued than their male counterparts in the Malayalee society. And if anything, things have been getting worse over the years. Kerala has been one state where historically, sex ratios have not been adverse against women. But things are changing. Infant sex ratio in every single district in Kerala had declined between the Census years 1981 and 1991, something that one discovered in the course of mapping age-wise sex ratios across all districts of India in the early stages of GN research. It is this unexpected discovery that had initially set the alarm bells ringing. Although the trend has been halted in some of the districts in the later decade, this was too disturbing a piece of evidence to set aside without further probing.

Soon one became conscious of warning signals from other areas as well. In spite of high female literacy, as per the data provided by the quinquennial surveys carried out by the National Sample Survey Organization (NSSO), the state also has among the lowest female labour force participation rates. Detailed interviews with women from varied socio-economic backgrounds under different contexts revealed that contrary to popular belief, women do not enjoy the kind of ‘freedom’ that one would expect to go with high levels of human or gender development. The Gender Network research agenda slowly acquired a new agenda item, namely unravelling the puzzle of the Kerala woman. We needed to understand why, and how, such high levels of standard (or ‘conventional’) gender development indicators could co-exist with these other signals of women’s powerlessness.

### ***The story in brief***

The story begins with the ‘discovery’ that although bits and pieces of information were already available for some time or the other from different sources that questioned the dominant understanding that women enjoy a non-discriminatory and high social standing in Kerala, this information did not find any place in shaping popular knowledge and understanding of the issue. Such popular understanding has after all been supported by a range of sociological and historical explanations. Kerala has had a long history of social

reforms, touching just about every community in the state, and just about every reformer has put an emphasis on the vital role that women can, and should play in the reforms process. The high status traditionally enjoyed by women in matrilineal systems, of which Kerala could boast a few, the history of early spread of female education in the state through the agency of benevolent rulers as well as Christian missionaries, the seemingly pro-active role played by the state government in the post-independence years in terms of early inception of family planning, the long history of left movement which had pushed the interests of the economically disadvantaged sections of the population, were some of the elements of the set of explanations that have been invoked to cement the popular understanding. The major indicators of women's development, such as literacy levels and health indicators, were far ahead of the rest of the states in India, and the dominant understanding about the status of women far too well entrenched for the dissonant bits of information, such as falling infant sex ratios or soaring dowry rates in the state in recent times, to make any dent in the popular perception. High rates of crimes against women could be ignored by ascribing it to reporting bias due to high literacy levels. Low levels of female labour force participation could be explained away by invoking self-selection. Evidence contrary to this dominant understanding coming out of detailed case studies could be ignored as aberrations, and so on. Curiosity drove us to Kerala to understand the nature of the ground reality.

A number of studies were conducted under three phases of the Gender Network during the period 1999 to 2006 to find out what, if anything was wrong with the 'status of women' in Kerala. The first of these was designed to review the history of social and legal reforms in the state with a focus on women's position in society (Eapen and Kadoth 2001). This study was supplemented by a number of intensive case studies of women cutting across various socio economic divides. The second was a survey of Mental Health of women and men in Kerala, which is referred to as the Kerala Mental Health Survey (KMHS). This survey was carried out on a representative sample of one thousand households covering over five thousand men and women from all fourteen districts of the state (E. Mohamed et al. 2002). The third piece was a gender impact evaluation study of the Akshaya Project, a high profile and seemingly gender neutral state government project in the IT sector (ISST, 2005, Mukhopadhyay and Nandi 2006). During the third phase three independent studies were

conducted on the subject. The first is a statistical overview of women in Kerala with a focus on purposive disaggregation of the data on critical variables.<sup>4</sup> The second is an econometric analysis of the data on mental health of men and women collected under the KMHS seeking to unveil the complex interlinkages between the mental health parameters and the ideology of gender subscribed to by the men and women of Kerala.<sup>5</sup>, and the third is a historical analysis of the social reforms process in Kerala from a feminist perspective.<sup>6</sup> All the three studies are contained in the forthcoming book referred to above.

## **II. Limitations of Conventional Indicators of ‘Women’s Status’**

The claims about the high levels of gender development in Kerala have been based, primarily, on high levels of recorded gender development indicators such as female literacy and life expectancy levels, and women’s earnings in the labour market relative to that of men as expounded by UNDP. One has to take cognizance of the fact that a note of caution was indeed sounded in the original UNDP document, with a plea to take these figures with a degree of caution and to desist from reading too much into them. Subsequent years however, witnessed a virtual flood of research in gender studies with the collection and analysis of data on conventional ‘gender development’ indicators, in a range of social, economic, demographic and political arenas, over time and across space.<sup>7</sup>

This has been a useful development in so far as gender disaggregated information has become more easily accessible for ready reference. Most of these indicators may well be good indices of gender development in most situations. However, as with all statistical information, when one is dealing with something as nebulous as the ‘status of women’, one needs to be cautious in interpreting this body of data. Sometimes two different indicators of gender development may pull in different directions altogether, making the

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<sup>4</sup> ‘Gender Disparity in Kerala : A Critical Reinterpretation’ by S. Irudaya Rajan and K.Sreerupa.

<sup>5</sup> ‘Mental Health, Gender Ideology and Women’s Status in Kerala’ by Swapna Mukhopadhyay, Jayanti Basu and S. Irudaya Rajan.

<sup>6</sup> ‘Re-forming Women and Malayalee Modernity : A Historical Overview’ by J. Devika and Avanti Mukherjee.

<sup>7</sup> The earliest set of papers in this genre was published in the Special Issue on Gender in the *Economic and Political Weekly*, Vol. 31, No. 43, 1996 ; many others followed in subsequent years.

job of construction of linear indices next to impossible.<sup>8</sup> Even in isolation, depending on the context, each of these indicators may turn out to be limited in scope, for many of these are only instrumental indicators of women's status. They can indicate at best necessary, but not sufficient conditions for women's empowerment.

Take, for instance, the three basic indicators that constitute the gender development index promoted by UNDP i.e., gender differences in literacy, life expectancy and wage earnings. High levels of literacy open up the world of written communication to the individual, sharpening one's mental abilities and unleashing the potential for individual growth. There is little wonder that literacy has been accorded such a prominent place in the literature on human and gender development. How that heightened potential is utilized for personal growth, however, is the defining issue. This will vary from one situation to another, and from one person to the next, depending on objective conditions and personal parameters and preferences. A literate woman may decide, or indeed be persuaded to decide, to use this new instrument to internalize the message of women's subordination to men all through her life, simply by virtue of being born a woman. Adherence to the dictum from Hindu scriptural writings in *Manusmriti*, which ordains that a woman is subordinate to her father in childhood, her husband in adulthood and her son in her old age, is unlikely to be an empowering message as far as the issue of women's status is concerned.<sup>9</sup> Similarly, better longevity may simply translate into long years of lonely and debilitating widowhood<sup>10</sup>. Participation in the labour market may bring in earnings for the woman, but not necessarily ensure her control over those earnings.

It is vitally important, therefore, that in tracking human development and indeed gender development, which is a more complicated phenomenon since it involves not simply individuals, but relationships between them in an essential way, one is conscious of situations where the instruments could have failed to successfully address the reality

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<sup>8</sup> Female literacy and labour force participation of women for instance may pull in different directions in situations influenced by the process of 'Sanskritization'. Cf. M.N. Srinivas (1952). Also, Mukhopadhyay (2003).

<sup>9</sup> Cf. *The Laws of Manu*. Translation of 'Manu Smriti' from Sanskrit by Wendy Doniger (1992).

<sup>10</sup> Cf. paper by Rajan and Sreerupa in this volume.

they are implicitly believed to have addressed. It is necessary, therefore, to go beyond a mechanical reading of the messages contained in these conventional ‘gender indicators’, into a search for triangulation of the evidence from other sources.

In this search for the portrayal of reality, the ‘outliers’ play a very important role. If all essential dimensions of gender bias were identified, and aligned together, any one of them could be a good indicator of the real picture. Only when some essential dimensions are missing, *and* when things tend to pull in different directions, that one needs to investigate further. Qualitative evidence on certain dimensions of women’s lives in Kerala, such as the evidence on gender violence and crimes against women, has been vitally important in Gender Network research in Kerala. It has impelled supplementary qualitative and quantitative research into related issues, and subsequently into supplementary ‘indicators’ that can capture some of these essentially qualitative dimensions of gender relations. Since gender relations are first and foremost about the relative power balance between the sexes, an inquiry on gender has prompted one to look for manifestations of gender based power relationships that are more direct and immediate in society and the community that one is interested in. No other indicator of women’s powerlessness is as telling and as immediate as violence against women.

### **III. Violence against women in Kerala**

#### ***Violence, or its credible threat, as the key indicator of powerlessness***

The first step in addressing the ‘enigma’ of the Kerala Woman has been to recognize that there is clear, incontrovertible evidence of extensive violence against women (VAW) in Kerala society. This was garnered from the review of a number of recent studies and sample surveys on VAW, as well as several case studies and individual interviews that were conducted by other researchers and by the Gender Network



research team under various projects.<sup>11</sup> It was felt that whatever be the extent of the ‘recording bias’, even if a fraction of the evidence was true, it raises serious questions about the supposed high status of women in the state, for there is no better indicator of the powerlessness of an individual or a group of people in a society or community than evidence of systemic perpetrated violence, or a credible threat of such violence.

It needs to be emphasized here that it is not just evidence on actual perpetrated violence that one should be looking at. Even if there is a credible threat of such violence that is endemic to the society, a threat that may not even be carried out in a majority of cases, but which keeps women ‘in place’, and which acts as a powerful deterrent dissuading women from crossing the socially ordained boundaries of ‘good womanhood’, it is evidence that should tell us that something is not quite right with women’s status. A community that tacitly tolerates systemic violence against women, or covertly supports a credible threat of such violence, cannot at the same time, boast of ascribing a high status to those at the receiving end. Extensive interviews with Kerala women from varied backgrounds using a range of qualitative methods such as case studies, focus group discussions and detailed life histories over the course of the research convinced us that not everything is right for women in ‘God’s Own Country’.<sup>12</sup>

Even at the very beginning of launching the Gender Network Project, before the Kerala studies were initiated, one had been aware of the possibility that for a variety of reasons, high levels of ‘conventional’ gender development indicators such as those that are included in the GDI, may not necessarily translate into high ‘status’ of women in a particular context, however defined. In order to get a fuller understanding of the elusive phenomenon of status, one has also got to look into other indicators, which for want of a better term, we had called ‘non-conventional’ indicators of gender development, --- violence and its credible threat being the most important component of the latter set.<sup>13</sup>

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<sup>11</sup> UNIFEM (2000), ICRW ((2000), Mukherji, Rastogi and Krishnaji (2001), CWDS (2002), ISST (Unpublished Gender Network reports, various years), Mukhopadhyay and Nandi (2006).

<sup>12</sup> The expression used by the State Government of Kerala to promote tourism in the state.

<sup>13</sup> See Mukhopadhyay (2003) for a fuller exposition.

### *'Measuring' Violence*

The next issue is to figure out how best to 'measure' this phenomenon. This was deemed necessary so that violence, and its credible threat, could be mapped against other, more conventional indicators of 'status' to bring possible contradictions into clearer focus. It was felt that it is best if it could be done without having to go after the sordid task of counting how many times a woman gets beaten up, by whom and under what circumstances, or what are the tangible forms of mental torture she is subjected to: questions which are barely ever answered truthfully in standard household surveys. Instead, it was felt, that one could take an altogether different course. One could argue that violence and a credible threat of such violence, in overt or in muted forms in one's daily life, is likely to raise the levels of stress and anxiety in women, *other things remaining the same*. If this argument has some validity, then one could induct available instruments of applied psychology to measure levels of stress and anxiety, and use these indicators as surrogates, so to speak. These psychometric variables could then be used in conjunction with other standard socio-economic variables in order to explore a range of issues using available multivariate quantitative techniques.

This course has some advantages and some disadvantages. The advantages are that there are well established measures of stress and anxiety, and also of mental well-being, which are believed to be reasonably 'culture free' and which have been tested and widely used by applied psychologists in a large number of countries. The major advantage is of course that these indicators being quantitative, or more accurately categorical in nature, they can be used in conjunction with standard socio-economic variables from household surveys in multivariate analysis.

In addition, the use of these mental health indicators within a broader framework of socio economic household surveys has the potential of bringing together two different strains of research, and researchers, who have been investigating issues of gender discrimination; i.e., sociologists, social anthropologists and some feminist scholars on the one hand who have been primarily using qualitative methods, and applied

econometricians and others of similar persuasion who have been using various gender development indicators within quantitative frameworks, in order to explore the subject of women's position in the economy and the society. During the course of conducting research under some other modules of the GN research, these instruments were included in household surveys that were being carried out in several countries of South and South East Asia.<sup>14</sup> One was pleasantly surprised at the ease with which these survey instruments could be administered in the field.

In the present context, the major disadvantage in moving from VAW to mental health is that the jump may appear to be far too abrupt. There can indeed be a host of factors other than gender-related ones that can, and do cause mental stress. However one can try to correct for this, even if partially, by various methods. Through triangulation by qualitative methods such as properly designed case studies or FDGs, one can try to assess the strength of the linkages between gender violence and mental stress of women under various situations. The second way could be through multiple regression analysis where efforts can be made to net out the influence of other factors by including them, to the extent possible, as explanatory variables in the model. The third is to go one step further and try to establish the linkages of the two by directly inducting into the multivariate analysis some kind of a 'gender ideology index' as an additional explanatory variable. This approach has been tried out using the Kerala Mental Health Survey (KMHS) data in the paper by Mukhopadhyay, Basu and Rajan referred to earlier on.

### ***Understanding Routine Violence against Women***

Recent research carried out by organizations and individual researchers suggests that routine violence against women is high in Kerala.<sup>15</sup> The state also has the dubious

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<sup>14</sup> Unpublished versions of the reports of various Gender Network studies carried out in the first two phases of the research have been compiled in nine volumes which are available at the ISST Library. Mental health instruments were included in surveys of 'Gender and Poverty' in six countries, and surveys of retrenched worker households in two. These are contained in volumes VII and VIII of the reports respectively.

<sup>15</sup> The ICRW study, for instance, puts Kerala as the state with the highest incidence of domestic violence among some of the major states in India where the survey was carried out.

distinction of having the highest recorded rate of crimes against women.<sup>16</sup> Even after correcting for reporting bias that is sometimes presumed to be lower in Kerala than the national average because of high literacy rates in the state, the figures are far too high for comfort, especially for a state that has been hailed as the epitome of gender development.

What propels such widespread violence against women in the state where women are so highly literate? Many scholars have dwelt upon the phenomenon of violence, its nature and its *raison d'être*. Violence in our troubled time has invoked all kinds of concerns and explanations, from class conflicts expounded under the Marxist philosophy, to political ramifications of mass psychology,<sup>17</sup> to the consolidation of dominant identities through everyday quotidian acts.<sup>18</sup>

While the latter may not be a good characterization for understanding political violence in the ordinary sense of the term, perhaps it comes closest to characterizing power relationships spawned by the politics of gender, hence understanding the routine violence perpetrated against women. This is what seems to be behind the gender violence that cuts across social boundaries. The identity ingrained in the Indian male is that he is superior to the woman. This understanding may remain unspoken, though it has commonly understood ramifications within different social contexts. Within the marital relationship, for instance, the husband has a right to the body and the mind 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 home, and perpetrated by individuals on who depends the very identity of the woman. The same logic of male identity is seen to be carried over to the arena outside the domestic sphere, and can, in many cases, explain instances of 'crimes against women' in 'normal' times and mass violence against women in troubled times like those of conflict and communal disturbance.

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<sup>16</sup> Cf. Mukherjee, Rastogi and Krishnaji

<sup>17</sup> The classic reference on this is Hannah Arendt.

<sup>18</sup> For a recent exposition on this line of thought, see *Routine Violence: Nations, Fragments, Histories* by Gyanendra Pandey, Stanford University Press, 2006.

For a largely literate segment of the population like Kerala women, the question that needs to be answered is why women tolerate routine domestic violence. As some of the case studies in this volume suggest, this could be a result of the perceived absence of any fall back option outside marriage, however abusive it may be. To that extent, it may be a time-tested survival strategy for the woman, honed and sculpted by generations of experience and propelled by the credible threat of a world outside, which could be far worse than an abusive marriage.

To a certain extent, however, it could also be the result of the internalization of the patriarchal order that invests in the man of the household, not merely an unquestioned right over the mind and the body of the woman, but also the right to disciplinary action at his will, supposedly propelled by perceived deviations from patriarchal norms widely subscribed to by the community. It is important to note that the wide acceptance of male superiority in the community, however covert, is a necessary condition for the persistence of widespread domestic abuse.

### ***VAW, Mental health and Gender Ideology***

During the survey on Mental Health in Kerala, a set of questions were administered to all adults in the sample to assess the extent to which they subscribe to the traditional gender ideology that puts the male above the female in the social hierarchy. A Gender Ideology Index was constructed using a randomly selected sample of 200 households from the set of one thousand surveyed in the KMHS. This index was then used as an explanatory variable along with other socio-economic indicators on the respondents from the remaining 800 households. There were two mental health indicators on which data were collected during the survey. These are GHQ (General Health Questionnaire) and SUBI (Subjective Well Being Indicator). Two versions of both these MH indicators were used in the various versions of the equations. One is based on the individual scores in continuous form, and the second is the binary form of the indices which are used in applied psychology to identify potential problem cases.

Analysing these measures of mental health in conjunction with other socio-economic indices and mapping these against an index of gender ideology has helped in unearthing the complex interlinkages of these variables. In the absence of any established theory relating these variables, the basic model used is of a simple single equation variety. The results of the multiple regression analysis reported in the paper by Mukhopadhyay, Basu and Rajan referred to above demonstrate fairly stable statistical associations between a patriarchal gender ideology and higher levels of mental stress and anxiety. This association turns out to be stable across alternative variable as well as alternative model specifications. What comes out strongly from the data is that the level of mental distress is fairly high in Kerala for both men and women, and also that it is consistently higher for women as compared to men. The women in our sample also appear to subscribe to patriarchal ideology to a greater extent than the men. What is most interesting is the result that subscribing to a patriarchal gender ideology is a much more potent (statistically significant) explanation for mental stress in women than it is in men.<sup>19</sup>

*Using ‘non-conventional’ indicators to understand the nature of the puzzle*

These results strengthen our earlier hypothesis that women in Kerala may be suffering from high levels of stress and anxiety, and some of that stress could be linked to gender related factors. However, while the introduction of the mental health dimension does help us to probe deeper into the phenomenon of women’s well being, it does not quite answer the question we had started off with in the first place. Namely, it does not tell us why the average Kerala woman continues to cling to patriarchal values despite suffering from high stress levels, when they have the potential for breaking free by virtue of their education. Our results seem to offer only a partial answer to that puzzle, i.e., that perhaps women tolerate such gender related stress because they subscribe to norms of patriarchy which put women squarely below men in social hierarchies, so that the message of subordination to the male, along with all it entails, including gender violence, may have been internalized to a significant extent in the women’s psyche.

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<sup>19</sup> For details of the analysis, see Mukhopadhyay, Basu and Rajan.

The question can now be asked in a different form: What are the factors that could have been behind such internalization? Why do Kerala women, highly educated as they are, subscribe to an ideology that invests women with an inferior status?

To explore this enigma, we have had to go back to qualitative methods once again: case studies, life histories and the history of social movements in Kerala. There could be two interrelated answers to this issue. An informed reading of the history of social reforms in the state from a feminist perspective suggests that while all social reformers have emphasized the importance of female literacy, the proposed 'emancipation' of women has invariably been looked upon as an instrument that is to be used for the benefit of the family and society, not for the benefit of the woman as an individual in her own right. Literacy may even have been an instrument facilitating the process of internalization of that message. The message has clearly gone very deep in Kerala society, for in terms of gender related issues in public life, Malayalee society continues to be very conservative.<sup>20</sup>

A second reason could be a steady erosion of fallback options of women over time. A study of the history of legal reforms in the state shows how the state has acted as an agency for facilitating the gradual erosion of property rights and increasing economic vulnerability of women in Kerala. The passivity of the average woman in gender related matters could be the manifestation of a deeply entrenched survival strategy that comes out of an understanding that all things told, staying on in an abusive marriage may be a far better option than walking out of it.

### ***When 'conventional' and 'non-conventional' indicators pull in different directions***

So here is a situation where high female literacy goes hand in hand with passive submission to male domination. One would think that true internalization of traditional norms of patriarchy by the average person in Kerala, i.e., both the men and the women

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<sup>20</sup> J. Devika 2006, J. Devika and Avanti Mukherjee, 2007

in a household truly shared the same patriarchal values would, *ceteris paribus*, lead to lower evidence of gender-based dissonance within the household than otherwise. By the same token, if women of the household start questioning norms of patriarchal subordination in contradiction to the values held by men, one would expect that, other things remaining the same, instances of domestic dissonance and strife would increase. In another study, in a survey of two thousand households in the states of Uttar Pradesh and Karnataka, men and women from the same households in Uttar Pradesh (U.P.) were found to share the same values about gender relations.<sup>21</sup> There was much less evidence of domestic strife and violence within the households in the U.P. sample as compared to a similar study from Karnataka, where men and women had different views on gender. The women in U.P. were much less educated than the Karnataka women and had far less exposure to the outside world. In other words, in terms of standard indicators of women's status, Karnataka was far ahead of U.P. Yet evidence of domestic strife and violence against women was much more rampant in the Karnataka sample as compared to the one from U.P.

The U.P. situation was, therefore, a combination of relatively poor levels of 'conventional' gender development indicators and relatively good 'non-conventional' gender development (GD) indicators in so far as reported levels of domestic violence go. The Karnataka sample instead, combined relatively better conventional GD indicators with relatively worse recorded levels of non-conventional indicators.<sup>22</sup> One could try to explain why these combinations may have arisen in the two cases. In case of U.P., it is possibly the outcome of shared values of male dominance cemented by a process of socialization unchallenged by competing norms brought in by external exposure through literacy or paid work. In case of Karnataka where the women were somewhat more literate and engaged in work outside the home in much larger numbers than their U.P. counterparts, the absence of adherence to shared gender norms brought about by

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<sup>21</sup> Cf. Mukhopadhyay and Savithri, 1998.

<sup>22</sup> For an exposition on the problems of handling contradictory messages indicated by the two categories of indicators, see Mukhopadhyay (2003), op. cit..



external exposure would have unsettled the traditional balance of power, which was evident in terms of high rates of reported marital discord.<sup>23</sup>

The Kerala case does not seem to fall into either of these categories. Here, high incidence of domestic violence and crimes against women coexist with high female literacy levels, higher than is the case in Karnataka. However, unlike in Karnataka, the reporting of marital discord was much lower in the Kerala sample. How does one explain this phenomenon? As mentioned earlier, this could be due to a couple of interrelated factors. It could be a calculated survival strategy that prevents the average woman in Kerala from protesting against the abuse, or is it a credible threat of such abuse if she deviates from the prescribed societal norms. Or it could be that in the perception of women, the fallback options are worse than the abuse. Yet unlike the U.P. woman, who is illiterate and has virtually no exposure to the world of paid work, the Kerala woman can, in principle, be economically independent. The society does not frown on women working for pay in Kerala.

There could be a third hypothesis that may also explain this phenomenon of resigned acceptance of the norms of male dominance. The paper on mental health included in this volume suggests that Kerala women strongly favour orthodox gender ideology, even more so than Kerala men. It is possible to hypothesize then, that the potential accorded to women by high literacy may have been utilized, not so much in questioning norms of male superiority, but in internalizing the message and consolidating it in their lives. The *Manu-smriti* factor may actually have played a role in cementing these views.

Unlike in U.P. or Karnataka, the survey in Kerala drew a blank on direct questions on domestic violence. Most women refused to answer these questions. This is understandable, because compared to the relatively unlettered rural women in the U.P. who may accept minor incidences of violence as routine, or those in the Karnataka sample who may not have been '*Sanskritized*' enough to question them, the literate woman sampled in the Mental Health Survey in Kerala would be less willing to openly

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<sup>23</sup> See Mukhopadhyay and Savitri, 1998.

confess to violence within her home, or a threat to such violence if she goes against societal norms.<sup>24</sup>

If indeed this is so, could one then perhaps argue that this is the price that Kerala woman pays for her high literacy levels? That the potential of logic and reasoning that she is invested with by dint of her education, may be instrumental in creating the high level of mental stress, which the illiterate woman from the U.P. study is spared from?

Even if it were indeed the case, nobody in her right mind would argue that women in Kerala would have been better off had they been more like their U.P. counterparts, i.e., if they were not literate. The evidence cited above only serves to demonstrate the dire necessity of moving out of a mindset that defines human well-being in terms of simplistic, instrumental indicators, like literacy. In our context, it underlines the importance of looking at some of the ‘non-conventional’ indicators of human well-being over and above the standard conventional ones. For both men and women, recorded levels of mental stress are very high in Kerala. High literacy levels could very well be a proximate cause of the high stress levels found in the population, but one needs to go into other environmental factors to understand the root cause of the malaise. Economic worries and job related anxieties could very well top the list among men, and gender relations could very well be one of the major defining factors for high stress levels in women.

#### **IV. High female literacy in Kerala from a feminist perspective**

What the high literacy levels may have meant for the average woman in Kerala is explored from a feminist perspective in the paper by Devika and Mukherjee. In their assessment, historically, literacy for women in Kerala came with notions of social development that consisted of not merely the functional ability to read and write, but also how that functionality had to be used for the good of the family and society, and

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<sup>24</sup> It is interesting to note that a similar situation also obtains in Sri Lanka where female literacy rates are high but women are routinely subjected to actual and credible threats of violence and indignities such as pre-marital virginity tests. Cf. Wanasundera and other CENWOR studies carried out under the Gender Network .

also the state.<sup>25</sup> It is not as if some women, brave and brilliant in their own right, did not question the one-sided message. Writings of women like Saraswati Amma and Antarjanam referred to in the paper, bear testimony to assertions of the self. Such assertions, though powerful and courageous in their time, had no chance of developing into an alternative paradigm. The atmosphere was inundated by ideological messages propagating ‘enlightened domesticity’ for women: not for the development of the self per se, but for the good of society. These messages have had such a powerful hold on the public psyche that even when the first generation of educated feminists in Kerala succeeded in negotiating some space for women in the public sphere, they could do so strictly within the bounds of the ideological framework defined for the ‘good’ woman. This was in the role of nurturers in social sector jobs, well within the limits prescribed by the process of reforms (Devika 2006).

### *Sen’s ‘Capability Framework’*

If the line of argument advanced in these papers is valid, then perhaps one could argue that there is indeed no puzzle, no ‘enigma’ that marks the phenomenon of the ‘woman in Kerala’. In fact, there is no reason to choose between the extremes of ‘utopia’ or ‘dystopia’ to characterise the phenomenon.<sup>26</sup> This disconnect arises due to the limitations of the framework that has been chosen to characterize the gender question in Kerala. Sen’s capability framework, which forms the underlying basis for according a high position to literacy in human and gender development matters, is after all only a framework. Perhaps it was always meant to be one. It is indeed a very powerful framework, which may have changed the way one looks at human development, but it stops short of being a full-fledged theory. In order to make it a theory, one would need to fill in contextual specificities. As some feminist theorists have argued, one would

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<sup>25</sup> Female education, they write, meant ‘not just the acquisition of literacy, but also a set of gendered attitudes and skills.’ As Devika argues in another of her papers, the trend continued in the same vein into the post-independence years within state-sponsored programs on family planning, supposedly designed for the benefit of the family and the state but directed exclusively to women (Devika 2003)

<sup>26</sup> Sharmila Sreekumar 2006.

need a theory of feminism to supplement the capability framework in order to analyse gender development issues within that framework.<sup>27</sup>

To recapitulate, if perception of male superiority is indeed a widely held view among Malayalee women, and if gender violence is widespread and silently borne, then there is an urgent need for careful scrutiny of the results from conventional indicator based analysis of gender development which shows the Kerala women and their position in society in an altogether different light. Conventional indicator-based analysis which depends on standard gender development indicators such as literacy and health status indicators evidently fall short, giving rise to questions about the ‘enigma’ of the Kerala woman.

## **V. Methodological Issues in Gender Research**

During the course of designing this research in Kerala, one has had questions that had to be probed in a multi-disciplinary setting, some that needed to be probed sequentially, and depending on the nature of the questions that needed probing, one has had to move constantly between different kinds of methodologies. This situates this body of research within the arena of what has come to be known in recent times as the ‘Q2 Methodology’, signifying a combination of quantitative and qualitative methods.<sup>28</sup> From a methodological standpoint, this also opens up the possibility of linking up the analysis presented in this volume with new advances in poverty analysis through the combined use of quantitative and qualitative methods.<sup>29</sup> While most quantitative approaches to poverty analysis such as income-based or needs-based approaches depend heavily on objective criteria primarily derived through survey-based methods, more qualitatively oriented approaches such as participatory appraisal methods or empowerment based approaches to poverty analysis depend primarily on qualitative information that cannot generally be aggregated like quantitative measures. It is

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<sup>27</sup> See for instance the paper presented by Ingrid Robyens at the Conference on ‘Sen’s Capability Approach’ at St Edmunds College, Cambridge, June 2001.

<sup>28</sup> For details, see <http://www.q-squared.ca>.

<sup>29</sup> Cf. Ravi Kanvur (2003.)

increasingly understood that in order to make a fair assessment of the poverty situation in a particular context, one needs a mixture of both kinds of information.

These new approaches to poverty research have also paved the way for bringing in dimensions of poverty that were difficult to accommodate in purely consumption or minimum-needs based traditional approaches used earlier. Participatory methods to poverty assessment have brought in issues of social exclusion and human rights within the ambit of poverty research as important, albeit very different, dimensions of self assessed poverty. Notions of exclusion and human rights issues can provide a common platform for exploring an expanded notion of 'gendered poverty', which is free from the pitfalls of a generalized feminization of poverty thesis.<sup>30</sup>

Research in the area of women's studies under different analytical disciplines, however, has not kept pace with these developments. There is almost a clear division between quantitative and qualitative methods used in this body of research. While historians, sociologists, and social anthropologists studying gender relations primarily use qualitative methods, demographers and economists are heavily dependent on gender-disaggregated descriptive statistics. Applied statisticians and econometricians use various methods of applied statistics on such quantitative information to analyse different aspects of gender discrimination. Instances of multi-disciplinary research, especially research that combines different kinds of methodology, are not very common in gender studies. There is need for a greater degree of cross-fertilization of ideas and methods between different analytical traditions in gender research. The bridging of the inter-disciplinary gaps in research methodologies has come naturally in case of the body of research presented in this volume, which evolved in the process of evolution of the research question.

## **VI. Concluding Observations**

It is a pity that the feminist movement in Kerala, until perhaps very recently, failed to connect with working class women within the Left movement. Women's constituency

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<sup>30</sup> See Chant(2006) for a critique of the 'feminization of poverty' thesis.

had been conspicuously absent not merely within the mainstream Congress-dominated political movements but equally so from the agenda of the Left. While the first generation educated feminists were by and large distant from the travails of working class women, the perception of the leadership in the Left movement in the state was dominated by undifferentiated class concerns. Gender was not even considered to be a problem of any importance. The ambiguities created by this blinkered view of social reality was devastating, especially for women who may have been exposed to the empowering potentials of left-leaning ideas, as the life story of one of the women included in the case study section succinctly reveals. The Left movement in the state could have been a natural ally of feminism, since both ideologies are built on the premise of unequal power relations in society. Historically, by turning a blind eye to gender-based inequities, all political parties in the state have not merely denied women a legitimate foothold in the political arena, but have lost a potential for their own growth and regeneration as well.

Benevolent patriarchy has had a long history in Kerala, and social reformers have been especially active. The strength and resilience that this ideology has enjoyed over the years is apparent from the essential similarities in outlook shared by pairs of Kerala women from two generations separated by decades, as shown in a recent publication (Devika 2006). Instead of signs of abatement, some of the mutations of the ideology that are being manifested in recent years are alarming. Apart from domestic violence, there is clear evidence of rampant sex-selective abortions of the unborn female foetus all across Kerala. Evidence suggests that it is more widespread especially among the more affluent and educated households from the southern parts of the state. Clearly, such things can happen only with the connivance of the woman. One needs to understand why women, even or especially the educated ones are willing partners in this act. Why does the state -- that is supposed to be the haven of gender development in India, and has had a long record of high sex ratios in accordance with the normal biological outcomes prevalent in gender sensitive societies ---- display such an upsurge in the preference for a male child ? Is it a result of the perceived 'credible threat of violence' that the daughters are likely to face as they grow up? Or is it the result of soaring dowry rates in Kerala that explains

why daughters are no longer wanted as much as sons? Perhaps it is a combination of factors that have been cited earlier. One thing that is clear from this evidence is that Kerala women, even educated Kerala women who can afford the cost of sex-selective abortions, are willing to be a party to destroying the female foetus; they put less value on their unborn daughters than they do on their unborn sons. There is clear evidence to suggest, therefore, that the average Kerala woman subscribes to the superiority of the male in the social order.

In exploring the gender question in Kerala, the Gender Network has sought to find an explanation for this seeming paradox, and backed by multi-disciplinary research, has provided some plausible answers. In a way, understanding the ‘enigma’ of the Kerala woman has been central to the whole spectrum of research under the Gender Network, since it has involved the contentious issue of defining ‘women’s status’ in an essential way.

The Kerala case clearly demonstrates that if one has to choose one indicator for this elusive factor, it has to be in terms of the human dignity accorded to women by the society she lives in, and not in terms of some instrumental indicator like literacy which may, for a variety of reasons, fail to perform its transformative task of empowering the individual.

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