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The Autonomous Women's Movement in Kerala: Historiography

By Maya Subrahmanian¹

Abstract

This paper traces the historical evolution of the women's movement in the southernmost Indian state of Kerala and explores the related social contexts. It also compares the women's movement in Kerala with its North Indian and international counterparts. An attempt is made to understand how feminist activities on the local level differ from the larger scenario with regard to their nature, causes, and success. Mainstream history writing has long neglected women's history, just as women have been denied authority in the process of knowledge production. The Kerala Model and the politically triggered society of the state, with its strong Marxist party, alienated women and overlooked women's work, according to feminist critique. This paper seeks to ascertain the unique kind of feminism in Kerala under such prevailing social conditions.

Keywords: Autonomy, Feminism, Women's Movement, Kerala, Historiography

Introduction

Writing history has always been a male-centered enterprise. The feminist demand has become stronger in India during the last few decades. There are calls to revisit the idea of history as his-story alone and to start writing her-story. Women's lives and the social interventions by women activists have rarely been recorded in mainstream historical writing in India. Although a similar situation formerly prevailed globally, changes occurred in the U.S. and Europe about a century ago. This new approach to history has encouraged like-minded efforts elsewhere and has affected the Indian women's movement. Western publications stimulated feminist discussions and activism in North Indian cities. The considerable efforts that were made to write about women's social activism represent a step forward in historiography. This paper traces the evolution of the women's movement in the southernmost Indian state of Kerala and explores the related social contexts. The so-called Kerala Model and the politically triggered society of the state, with its strong Marxist party, has alienated women and overlooked women's work, according to feminist critique. Social conditions prevailing in Kerala have denied women a place in society and in history. Mainstream history writing has long neglected women's history, just as women have been denied authority in the process of knowledge production. By comparing the feminist movement in Kerala with its national and international counterparts, an attempt is made to understand how feminist activities on the local level differ from the larger scenario with regard to their origin, structure, and success.

The question of authority and of sources in history writing has been raised by feminists who have criticized methods of writing history. Through their epistemological and methodological critique feminists have tried to ascertain their autonomy and leave a record of it. The autonomy of

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individuals and groups has been a longstanding issue for society. Autonomy is denied to women under a patriarchal social structure. In India the many factors that regulate social life have curtailed individual autonomy for women, as well as their freedom to organize for the purpose of obtaining their human rights and for other social purposes. Uma Chakravathy (1993) has produced extensive feminist writings in an attempt to reform historiography in India. Although socio-cultural and religious aspects are similar throughout India for feminist analysis, politics and development in Kerala present a unique picture. It is a myth that increasing attention to education that achieved nearly 100% literacy and resulted in more employment for women has changed the social situations for Kerala women. Despite the high social indicators brought about by the Kerala Model of development, the social status of women has remained dire. The issues of unequal wages and sexual harassment in the workplace are still major problems. Elizabeth Chacko (2003), writing about inequalities in marriage and matters of inheritance, shows that closer social scrutiny would devalue Kerala's high Gender Development Index. It is also evident from media reports that a large number of rape cases and incidents of domestic violence are happening in Kerala, something progressive political movements have not addressed. The record of the women's movement would shed light on the attempt of activists to intervene and change such vulnerabilities in Kerala society.

In Kerala, the autonomous women's groups and the issues dealt by independent small groups of feminists go back to the mid-1980s. Although women's branches already existed in the major political parties in India, a feminist movement had not evolved within that structure. There had been women who actively participated in social reform movements during the nineteenth century and in the freedom movements of the early twentieth century. The beginning of the Indian women's movement may be tracked back to the nationalist uprising (Bhatty, 2002). Women activists such as Sarojini Naidu and Aruna Asaf Ali had never claimed to be feminists on their own but were part of a mass mobilization of women that took place during the struggle for independence. However, neither the freedom struggle nor the reform movement addressed the question of gender equality. The reform movement did a lot for women by questioning certain superstitions, such as *sati* (burning a widow on her husband's funeral pyre), that objectified and harmed women, but the movement was not led by women and was not open to discussing women's rights and equality in depth. The social reforms addressed at the time were ending caste-based and religious superstitions. While these movements were largely headed by men, by the late nineteenth century their wives, daughters, and sisters had joined forces with them, suggesting some kind of autonomy in the entry of these women into social movements (Kumar, 1993). However, their initiative might also be interpreted as a result of their family's involvement and thus should perhaps not be considered true autonomy, but rather a family affair. This is also a very typical way of analyzing women's activities in terms of family feeling, leaving the question of autonomy inconclusive.

Autonomy, Women, and the Women's Movement

Sociologists and philosophers have discussed and defined the term autonomy in different ways. In general, it signifies the ability to make one's own decisions and choose one's own course of action. Conversely, paternalism implies a lack of respect for a subject's autonomy, as it involves interference with a person's actions or beliefs against that person's will. Although paternalism might be advanced as promoting a person's good, it hurts that individual's autonomy. It is quite common for women in India to encounter this issue. According to so-called Indian culture, women are to be taken care of by their men. The ancient Indian *Manu-smṛti* (Laws of Manu) says that the

father protects a woman in her childhood, the husband in her youth, and the son in her old-age (IX: 3). The Sanskrit text has been interpreted in such a way as to indirectly deny the autonomy of the female, saying that she does not have to do anything since everything is taken care of by the men in her family. This is frequently quoted throughout India as a proof-text for controlling a female by categorizing her as just a 'family-woman', an example of how cultural and religious concepts have long denied the autonomy of Indian women (Subrahmanian, 2015). Unlike in the West, the numerous religions and castes in India control women, making a woman's freedom and identity a complex issue on various levels. It has been a constant subject of feminist discussions and has been addressed by autonomous women's groups. But the autonomy of women's groups themselves is a matter of concern.

Women's movements have demonstrated autonomy in their practice, according to Gail Omvedt (2004), who finds the Indian women's movement made up of groups representing all ideologies. Organizations connected with various communist parties, social organizations, and independent groups have reacted to dowry deaths, rape, and issues of personal law. However, the question of autonomy had led women to ask: 'Should we have a separate women's organization?'. The answer was 'yes', although with many reservations. It was clarified by certain individuals familiar with Western feminist theory and activism. Many socially concerned women thought it mandatory to have women's groups to respond to the violence against women. When the autonomous Indian women's movement was formed in the 1970s, its main agenda was to protest against such violence. In most cases, political parties and religious authorities hesitated to take action against people accused of rape or violence towards women, and female leaders allied with them seldom raised their voices in protest. Autonomous women's groups organized women who would speak out in the name of justice without fearing reprisal. A similar situation prevailed in Kerala, in spite of its communist background. Unlike other parts of India, Kerala had elected the first Marxist ministry in 1957. The Left front still is very strong in the state, winning every other election. While the communist/Marxist parties and the imagined progressive society in Kerala did not bring about change in women's issues, they gave feminists more challenges to fight the patriarchy. They had to expose the male domination within the party and outside in society to show what it meant to be a progressive. Most feminists eventually abandoned the Left political parties to form their own women's groups for autonomy and impartial social interventions on behalf of women's welfare.

The Autonomous Women's Movement in Kerala

As noted earlier, the autonomous women's movement that originated in Kerala during the 1980s consisted of small groups of friends from diverse backgrounds organized by women. The Indian women's movement that evolved in the 1970s had also been composed of small groups, but it had more the character of action and research-oriented teams. Since most of their members were academics, they concentrated on documenting and publishing the history of their actions. In Kerala, however, the feminists who came out of the Left political parties and related progressive groups were ordinary lay people rather than academics. The progressive groups that the feminist-oriented women had left were still holding to patriarchal structures, so feminists never could get along with them. Now they were free to talk about women's issues and see feminism politically and theoretically in order to analyze the issues of women separately. Women's groups also reacted to incidents of domestic violence, dowry deaths, and rape cases. Before then, women's issues had not been articulated much in society, although print media reported some cases of dowry deaths.

These groups of women brought such deaths to the attention of society and opened a conversation, using the slogan ‘speaking the bitterness aloud’ to change society. Women who gathered in different parts of Kerala, staged *dharnas* (sit-ins) and protest meetings around incidents that happened in their local areas.

Violence against women in Kerala had been kept out of sight by a veil of socio-political favors and male-dominated culture for a long time. The autonomous women’s movement has made it an issue to be dealt with by law. Various sex scandals, such as the Suryanelli case, in which a 16-year-old girl was kidnapped from the small town of Suryanelli and sexually abused by 42 men for a month, and another case of a girl sexually assaulted in an ice cream parlor, began to be published in the media during the mid-1990s. Women’s groups protested and demanded justice for girls who were raped or sexually exploited. Even before these horrific cases appeared in the media, many dowry deaths and instances of public violence were reported publicly, although in a low-profile way.

The evolution of the autonomous women’s movement may be traced to these issues. However, there is other evidence about who the first generation of feminists in Kerala were. Some writers point to certain women who excelled in a particular field of expertise in the 1930s. For example, Anna Chandy, the first female judge in India, and the first woman candidate elected to the Srimulam Popular Assembly, has been seen as a first-generation feminist (Devika & Sukumar, 2006). Although Chandy never claimed she was a feminist, she proved herself to be a strong representative of socially-concerned women at the time. She took no credit for having accomplished anything special for women, or for having formed a women’s group, but simply considered that she did her best as a career woman in politics. Other women like Akkamma Cheriyan, A. V. Kuttimalu Amma, Sarada Krishan, and Parvathi Ayyappan spoke about women’s issues within the context of the nationalist movements. Parvathy Ayyappan and others who were active in social reform movements, and then in the Indian National Congress during the early twentieth century in Kerala, hardly appear in the historical record. Kalikkutty Asaatty, Arya Pallam, Parvathy Nenmini Mangalam, and Lalithambika Antharjanam were freedom fighters who joined Left political parties later in the 1930s (Chandrika, 2016). However, none of them had come out of the Marxist Party before entering feminist politics.

Initial Women’s Groups in Kerala, Mid-1980s

The first issues addressed by the autonomous women’s groups were dowry, inheritance, and domestic violence. These groups began taking a theoretical feminist look at matters affecting women and launched programs against battering. The Indian Association for Women’s National Conference in 1984 in Trivandrum also brought women together and facilitated group activities. However, unlike the women’s groups in the large North Indian cities, which were primarily composed of academics at universities and colleges, feminist activists in Kerala included journalists, teachers, lawyers, doctors and others. There were few working-class women who were in unorganized or daily-wage sectors in the movement, since they thought the trade unions took care of them properly. What those women did not visualize was a more long-term development with a stricter gender division of labour, where men received higher job security, monthly wages, and were considered as breadwinners for families. Women were placed in temporary or seasonal jobs and often lacked the kind of benefits that men got. As the gap between male and female workers increased, working class women went through a process of effeminization in which they were categorized as housewives and not seen as family breadwinners, although many of them in

reality were exactly that (Lindberg, 2001). In the midst of the struggle for better wages, this process became obscured. They had no leader, and there was no rigid structure to the organizations. The women in the autonomous groups wrote pamphlets and essays in an attempt to sensitize women in the Left-oriented trade unions and the patriarchal society to the feminist agenda. However, they never recorded the history of their autonomous social groups and activities in Kerala. There was one attempt by a scholar from the West to do so, by linking the field of gender and development with the debates within social movement theory (Erwer, 2003). The evolution of autonomous women's groups documented in the present article was assembled by the author, a feminist who took part in the women's movement in its later stages, by talking to women involved in those groups. A self-reflexive, inter-subjective method of discussion was used in its compilation.

In 1985, a group of women calling themselves *Prachodana* gathered in Trivandrum, the capital of Kerala. Prachodana's five or six members would meet in what is believed to be the first of its kind in Kerala, to discuss various women's issues. Initially, they demonstrated against a dowry death that had recently occurred in a suburb in the Trivandrum district. One of the members, A. K. Jayasree, a medical doctor still active in women's groups, recalls going to the area for many days to protest against the death and raise awareness of dowry issues. Pamphlets were distributed and placards used for actions and processions. A *rajbhavan* march (procession towards the legislative assembly office) and *dharna* (sit-in) that they organized received widespread print media attention.

Manushi was another women's group formed by Sara Joseph, a college lecturer who became a well-known author. She wrote powerful feminist stories and initiated *penneshuthu* (women's writing), a literary practice for women in Malayalam, their mother tongue. The group included some of her colleagues and students from Pattambi Government College in 1986 and 1987. They protested against a naked parade of shame case in their locality in which a bold young woman who had refused to marry but demanded her inherited property was marched naked down the street by family men from the community. A police rape case that happened around that time in the Idukki district was also taken up by the group.

Yet another feminist group, *Bodhana*, emerged in the Kozhikode district of Kerala between 1986 and 1987. It also dealt with various atrocities against women. The main person behind this organization was K. Ajitha, an active member of the armed political struggle of the Naxalite movement, extreme Left ideologues who plotted against cruel landlords in Kerala during the late 1960s and early 1970s. After Ajitha was released from prison, she left the Naxalites and began organizing women to fight violence against women in Kerala society.

A group of feminists calling themselves *Sahaja*, with some men joining them, organized meetings in Kottayam to discuss the theory and politics of women's issues. Elizabeth Philip, Anila George, and Ashalatha were among those who started the group. Some *Dalit*² women activists also participated in women's groups near the Kottayam district during that period, introducing the caste issue into feminist discussions. In the late 1980s, the Dalit Women's Society was formed in Kurichi, a rural Kottayam area. Lovely Stefen and Enayammal were the main activists in this group, which was also part of the women's movement. In 1987, some male friends who participated in the activities of Sahaja in Kottayam published the first book in the Malayalam language on the history and theory of feminism in the West. Written by two pro-feminist men, Dr. A. K. Ramakrishnan and K. M. Venugopal, the book was entitled *Stree Paksha Vadam, Charithram, Sidhantham (Feminism: History and Theory)*.

² A term used to denote the Hindu lower-caste people according to the caste system prevailing in India, formerly called untouchables.

Another group that formed in the northern Kerala district of Kannur in the late 1980s was *Prabuddhatha*. T. Devi and M. Sulphath, the women who led this group, organized a protest against *puthrakameshti yagam*, an offering for producing male children. This sparked a discussion on social discrimination against girls and women in the culture. It was also a direct attack on religion and specifically on certain rituals that the group cited as objectifying and subjugating women.

Thus, informal groups of friends formed the beginning of the autonomous women's movement in Kerala. Women from various parts of Kerala also tried to forge links, since they had common friends in these groups. Their discussions included religion, caste, and class. Nevertheless, there were conceptual conflicts in and out of the movement. Groups asked themselves if they should associate with political parties while working in local areas. Some feminists thought it was a good idea to collaborate with prominent local politicians, but others advised against it. Most seemed to be in favor of linking up locally with Left-oriented people, who to some extent supported their activities. Dealing with women's issues from a feminist perspective only happened later, after the emergence of autonomous feminist groups during the mid-1980s. Although these groups dissolved when women had to relocate to pursue education, employment, or for personal reasons, they were reorganized in other forms during the 1990s.

NGO Models of Women's Organizations in Kerala, 1990s

At the beginning of the 1990s, special events related to the women's movement took place in Kerala. Many women, including feminist group members, participated in the National Conference of Autonomous Women's Organizations in 1990. The women's wing of *Kerala Sasthra Sahithya Parishad*, a Left-oriented progressive organization, conducted *vanitha kala jadha* (a women's cultural procession) as an all-Kerala sensitization action in protest against violence towards women. Progressive groups also were active apart from political parties. In 1996 the formation of a Women's Commission as a statutory body was a notable move on the part of the government, especially since it included the female leader of the Left wing, K. R. Gowriamma. Other groups in the women's division of Left parties, such as *Mahila Sangham* and the *Janadhipathya Mahila Association* also instituted programs, although they were organized by male colleagues. The Congress Party also had its women's wing, called *Mahila Congress*. These groups of party women were strongly in favor of gender-sensitivity actions. This was especially true of the Non-Governmental Organization (NGO) models of autonomous women's groups in Kerala. According to Zarina Bhatti (2002), NGOs in India played an effective role in realizing certain rights for women through legislation and government programmes. However, NGOs had a limited range in Kerala, and the NGO model met with considerable criticism even from members of feminist groups. A main point of criticism was directed at an NGO's lack of autonomy, which might diminish political freedom because of the vested interests that their funding agencies may have. However, initial doubts were gradually eliminated by the active members of the NGOs. Nevertheless, Srila Roy (2015) has urged the need to go beyond the "NGOization paradigm" for feminist reflection and remobilization in the context of increasing violence against women in India.

In 1993, *Anweshi*, a women's counseling center, was opened by K. Ajitha in Kozhikode. At first the center worked with individual financial contributions, but gradually it began to accept some funding agency support. *Anweshi* provides a short home-stay for abandoned girls and women, and it provides a counseling center. It has created many activities to address issues of gender and violence in the state of Kerala. A magazine named *Sanghaditha* has been published by *Anweshi* for the past seven years. They also have a large library now. Since Kozhikode has a

majority Muslim population, Muslim women's groups have evolved to address specific women's issues related to caste and religion. The NISA Progressive Muslim Women's Forum (*nisa* means woman in Arabic) was an autonomous women's group started by V. P. Suhra in Kozhikode around 1997, although there had existed women's divisions in some political parties, such as the Muslim League. NISA worked to address issues of interpreting *shariah* (Islamic personal law), *muthwalq* (Islamic divorce granted by a man by repeating the word *thwalaq* three times), and other problems faced by Muslim women.

In 1996 the *Sakhi Women's Resource Center* was set up in Trivandrum. It began as part of a MacArthur Fellowship awarded to a female activist, Alyamma Vijayan, for organizing gender training and other sensitization programs. The center arranged many protest actions to bring public attention to women's issues in Kerala. From this center, small women's groups from different parts of Kerala were organized and the center based the formation of a state level platform. *Stree Vedi* (woman's stage), a platform for individual and small groups of feminists, evolved from 1996 to 1997. The main controversy in the continuing discussion forums of Stree Vedi was about its autonomy. Whether or not the platform should be registered as a large group was the problem discussed in the beginning. In the end it was decided to remain a loose association that anyone could join or leave as they pleased. The decision not to register the group as an organization asserted Stree Vedi's autonomy. Heated debates took place to decide if the women's wings of political parties should be included in the platform. It was concluded that they should not be made part of the platform, but they were welcome to participate in any protests Stree Vedi organized.

The massive protest march over the Suryanelli incident occurred while Stree Vedi was being organized. The procession and public meeting brought together 50 to 60 women who gathered in Trivandrum from various parts of Kerala. They consisted of autonomous groups, individual feminists and some concerned women who would not even claim to be feminists. No political party sent representatives from their women's wings because party figures were also on the list of those accused of the crime. Most of the sex scandals that have taken place in Kerala over the past two decades involved accusations against people from political parties. This forced the autonomous women's movement to continue working in small groups in different parts of the state.

In spite of the protests and strikes by women's groups against NGOs, there were many positive gender sensitization programs for which those organizations were responsible. Systematic ways of studying gender were a result of the NGO models of women's groups. Gender training camps for women and men from all parts of society were first introduced through women's NGOs. Neither women's studies nor gender studies were offered as formal university courses in Kerala until 2005. Meanwhile the autonomous women's groups had created the space for recognizing and discussing women's issues and holding feminist debates.

Recent Developments in Feminist Movements in Kerala, 2000s and After

In the beginning of the 2000s the women's movement witnessed diversified forms of feminisms, including the formation of Dalit feminist movements and queer movements. Although there were already strong Dalit movements in various parts of Kerala the women's wings were not as visible as those of other progressive groups that existed during the previous decades. A new feminist group named *Panchami Dalit Women's Group* organized in Kottayam initiated many discussions on caste hierarchy and women's issues. The group sponsored protest programs on the Chengara land issue, in which tribal people demanded the right to their land. *Sahayathrika*, a network for lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender people (LGBT), evolved in Kerala between

2004 and 2005. The group had a low profile in the beginning, confining their activities to organizing lectures and workshops on sexuality to raise awareness among selected groups of people. There was also a fact-finding project to examine the realities behind the reported suicides of pairs of girls in various parts of Kerala during this period. Another social movement at the time was in support of sex workers. They were organized in Kerala by an NGO working with AIDS prevention projects. The existing autonomous women's groups and individual feminists had heated debates on the issue of sex workers and whether to include them under their banner. Women's groups eventually had to confront this as a women's issue.

In recent years the feminist movement began addressing these issues through extensive discussions of gender. Caste, class, and gender were ever prominent in dealing with women's issues. The postmodern theoretical topics of identity politics were scrutinized, and the women's movement did a lot of re-thinking about ways they should proceed. There were intense differences of opinion among feminists within the women's movement with regard to queer and sex-worker issues. Whether lesbian, transgender and sex-worker issues are, in fact, women's issues, has been the question confronting Kerala feminists over the past decade. Various factions in the women's movement disagreed, but nowadays inclusion has become acceptable for all groups. The issues of transgender people have especially obtained high visibility through discussions in media and seminar programs all over the state. There has been a yearly 'pride festival' celebrating the rights of LGBT people in Kerala for about half a decade.

While there were many issues in accepting the different gender and sexual identities and sexualities, the question of pleasure is also a point on which women in the feminist movement differ. Some argue that the women's movement should also try to ascertain a woman's claim on her pleasure along with her rights, by changing their modes of actions. For example, the protest celebration with 'claiming the night' programs organized by some women activists was not an acceptable action for the whole movement. On another issue, 're-claiming the kitchen', there are different opinions among feminists in Kerala. Due to such disagreements, various groups within the Kerala women's movement are likely to support different platforms in the future.

The current activities of organizing protest programs and discussions in the women's movement have entered into the virtual realm as well. There are e-groups and WhatsApp groups that organize women and sponsor related social activities through e-mail and text messages. The modes of protest against violence and the claiming of freedom have also changed considerably in recent years. Procession or *dharna* with cultural activities that include singing and dancing are very common nowadays. Women dressing up in different ways to support a cause or staging a street-play are also very common methods of social action in Kerala. Other initiatives have tried to bring back the physical presence of feminists for discussion and action. The documentation of these movements is now being done to a certain extent through media coverage, which may leave a record of women's action in history.

Concluding Remarks

The women's movement in India appeared at a time when it no longer had to address certain basic entitlements, such as voting rights and citizenship, as the First Wave of feminism in the West did. But rights to education, employment, divorce and inheritance were central issues to the women's movement in Indian cities during the second half of the twentieth century. The discussion gained momentum as it was directly inspired by the Second and Third Waves in the West. Although one cannot compare feminism in India to that in the West, there are many common

factors that led women to come together and fight in groups. The main element that provided the impetus to the formation of the autonomous women's movement in India was violence. While domestic violence related to dowry and inheritance occurs all over India, the abduction of girls for sexual exploitation and sex trafficking of girls and women have been special issues for the women's movement in Kerala.

The autonomous women's movement in Kerala was built on the work of individual feminists who dared to protest against discrimination and violence in their patriarchal society. In spite of the highly praised progressive society in Kerala, with its strong Marxist political background and high development indicators, feminists have had to struggle to make core women's issues visible. Nevertheless, tireless actions against sexual exploitation and atrocities toward women continue to bring out gradual gender-sensitive social change in Kerala. Feminists have initiated the documentation of women's history from within the women's movement. If the conventional methods of history writing change to include women's perspectives, and if the new forms of media continue their coverage consciously, the social construction of reality in India will shout from the pages.

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