Feminisation of Invisibility and the Politics of Presence
Samatha SHGs in the Peoples’ Planning Campaign of Kerala

MANJULA BHARATHY

In this article, an attempt is made to contextualise the historicity of women development approaches in India, with particular reference to Kerala. The notion of the Kerala development model was deconstructed from a gender perspective where — to a large extent — women were marginalised politically, socially and economically. Further, an attempt was made to understand the Peoples’ Planning Campaign (PPC) process and the conscious gender interventions carried out in the PPC. This is followed by a critique of the SHG intervention and how the PPC had engaged with the ideological notions of the SHGs to challenge the feminisation of invisibility and the culture of silence among women in Kerala. An attempt is also made to throw light on the impact of SHGs in bringing about increased levels of participation, social awareness and confidence among SHG women members.

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INTRODUCTION

One of the crises of the post-modern context is the breakdown of organic links between creativity, communication and communities. When the tools of communication determine the content of the message, communication gets increasingly alienated from communities. This often gives rise to hypothetical communities, which are mechanically connected but organically alienated from each other. Similarly, when ‘development’ ceases to have organic links with communities, it becomes a dehumanised dissemination of information. The paradigmatic shift of development towards people-centred development has brought back emphasis on a praxis that has evolved from ‘people as a mirror of their aspiration and needs, rather than
one imposed on them’. The most striking assumption of this approach is the stress on people’s participation in development, which is a central feature of Peoples’ Planning Campaign (PPC).

The Ninth Plan of Kerala forms the basis of discussion of this article, which is divided into three parts.

- Part I is an attempt to contextualise the historicity of women development approaches in India, and Kerala in particular. In this section, an effort is made to deconstruct the notion of the Kerala development model from a gender perspective where women were, to a large extent, marginalised politically, socially and economically. Further, an attempt is also made to understand the PPC process and the conscious and conspicuous gender interventions in the PPC.
- In Part II, a critical effort is made to look at SHGs and the ways in which the PPC had engaged with the ideological notions of the SHGs to challenge the feminisation of invisibility and the culture of silence among women in Kerala.
- Part III presents the findings of the study taken up by the author that throws light on the impact of SHGs as an intervention in bringing about increased levels of participation, social awareness and confidence among SHG women.

I

SHIFT IN THE WOMEN DEVELOPMENT APPROACHES

Five decades of developmental plans and programmes did not result in any significant impact on the gender empowerment of women in India. Women, who comprise nearly half the population, still remain marginalised and invisible in the socio-political and economic spheres of life. The trajectory of planning in women’s development reflects the paradigmatic shift in the focus of developmental demands and needs of women on the basis of their existential links with the society in which they live (Cooper, 1995).

Welfarist approaches in the 1950s and 1960s, focus on efficiency in the 1970s, and Women Integrated Development (WID) plans in the 1980s — all of these, in one way or the other, helped only to marginalise women further and isolate them from mainstream development. These shifts in the development policies of women were reflected at its micro level, too, in Kerala. However, Kerala with its socio-development indicators — especially with regard to women — typifies the marginalisation of women through a different framework.
MARGINALISATION OF WOMEN IN KERALA

The invisibility of women in the public domain of Kerala, despite the commendable achievements in their educational and health status, is a paradox that has drawn considerable attention during recent years. As pointed out by Isaac (2001), Kerala’s female literacy rate of 86.2% (as per the 1991 Census) was nearly equal to that of their male counterpart, while the corresponding average at the national level for women was only half that of men. The infant mortality rate of Kerala was 13 as against the all India rate of 80 and number of children per couple had declined to less than two. The relative better health status of women was also reflected in the favourable sex ratio. However, the higher social capability, thanks to better education and reduction in child care, had not led to an increase in the work participation rate (WPR) of women or in their social leadership role. The economic marginalisation of women in the development process is reflected in their WPR when compared to the national average. Further, the WPR ratio has been declining over time — from 16.6% in 1981 to 15.9% in 1991. Table 1 shows the low WPR of women in Kerala against the national average despite their high literacy rate.

TABLE 1
A Comparison of Work Participation Rates in Kerala and India

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year</th>
<th>Kerala</th>
<th>India</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>Female</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1961</td>
<td>65.66</td>
<td>19.70</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1981</td>
<td>44.89</td>
<td>16.61</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1991</td>
<td>47.58</td>
<td>15.85</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: Kerala State Planning Board (1994).

The low WPR was also partly caused by changes in the structure of employment. The resultant lack of control of women over resources has been a major impediment in improving the social status of women. Unemployment among women in the state is three times higher than the men in urban areas and two times higher in rural areas, despite the close literacy levels between the sexes. Besides, atrocities and violence against women increased by 125% during the period 1991–1996.
Similarly, in spite of the general progressive political environment in the state and their active involvement at the grassroots level political processes, women are virtually absent at the leadership level. The percentage of women representatives in the Kerala State Legislative Assembly from its inception has been marginal; except in 1996, representation never reached the two digit number.

It is in this context of unbalanced and asymmetrical gender power equations prevailing in Kerala that a gender aware and gender sensitive decentralised planning that is, a Peoples’ Plan assumes significance as a topic for research to understand the implications of gender in the planning process.

**INTERVENTION OF PPC IN WOMEN’S DEVELOPMENT**

Reservation for women in the local bodies in Kerala was introduced in 1991 with the formulation of district councils. But this lasted only for a very brief period to leave any significant impact on the status of women in Kerala. However, the presence of 34% women as councillors in the district leadership brought the first major breakthrough in the long tradition of invisibility of women in government leadership. The 73rd and 74th Constitutional Amendments made 1/3rd reservation for women at all levels of local bodies mandatory, and significantly, made the office bearership also mandatory. In 1996, Kerala had 4,153 gram panchayat, 595 block panchayat, and 116 district panchayat members from among women.

As mentioned earlier, one of the objectives of the PPC was to infuse gender sensitivity in the process. This growth process was envisaged to result in an increase in the work participation of women and to undermine the traditional sexual division of labour. The following gender sensitive measures were initiated as part of the PPC:

1. Guidelines were issued to encourage participation of women at every stage of the planning process.
2. Local bodies were given instructions to elect 1/3rd of the resource persons for the PPC from among the women activists.
3. A separate subject group on women welfare was made mandatory. A structured questionnaire on gender problems was provided to facilitate the discussions at the gram sabhas.
4. In the Development Report, guidelines were given to have a separate chapter on women and development and to include a historical review of the status of women and their problems—both economic and social.
5. A separate task force was constituted to prepare projects for women’s development based on the recommendations of the Development Report.

6. The Women Component Plan (WCP), a first in the planning history of India, was introduced (Manjula, 2001).

All these measures indicate that a conscious effort was made from the onset of the PPC to make the planning process gender sensitive by incorporating gender concerns. The major activities of the WCP in different phases of the PPC are shown in Table 2.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Objective</th>
<th>Activity</th>
<th>Gender Component</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>I. Sabha</td>
<td>Identify the felt needs of people</td>
<td>Gram sabhas in rural areas and ward conventions in urban areas</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Special subject group in the gram sabhas to discuss gender related problems</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>II. Development</td>
<td>Objective assessment of the resources, problems and formulation of local development perspective</td>
<td>Preparation of development reports, organisation of development seminars</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Special chapter in development report on gender issues. Special subject group for discussing gender issues in the development seminar.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>III. Task Force</td>
<td>Preparation of projects</td>
<td>Meetings of task force</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>A special task force for women development projects. Gender impact statement of projects</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>IV. Elected Body</td>
<td>Formulation of plan of grassroots tiers</td>
<td>Plan formulation meetings of elected representatives</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>A separate chapter on women development projects - 10% to be set apart for WCP</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Objective</td>
<td>Activity</td>
<td>Gender Component</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>-----------</td>
<td>----------</td>
<td>------------------</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>V. Elected Body</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Formulation of plan of higher tiers</td>
<td>Plan formulation meetings of elected representatives</td>
<td>A separate chapter on women development projects - 10% to be set apart for WCP</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>VI. Volunteer Technical Corp</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Appraisal and approval of plans</td>
<td>Meetings of Expert Committees</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Source: Manjula (2004)*

**CRITICAL INTERIM EVALUATION OF THE WCP**

In spite of the efforts to make the PPC process gender sensitive, an interim evaluation of the WCP made at end of first year of PPC revealed certain crucial weaknesses, which hindered the incorporation of women’s interests in the planning process. These weaknesses were two-fold: first, the campaign failed to ensure sufficient participation of women in the planning process; and second, the women participants were not fully empowered to effectively intervene in the process from a gender perspective.

A survey conducted by the Kerala State Planning Board in 1998 among elected women representatives to explore the reasons for low participation in the gram sabha in the first year of the PPC revealed interesting findings (Table 3). As can be seen, the frequently mentioned reasons were discouragement from men, inadequate awareness, reluctance to participate in public activities and the burden of household work.

**REDEFINING STRATEGY IN THE WCP**

This feedback from women elected representatives, with respect to the WCP, gave scope for serious thinking about redefining the intervention strategy. Accordingly, the following changes were made:

- 10% of the plan fund for the WCP was made mandatory because panchayats did not comply, despite an earlier suggestion for the same.
- A member of the Woman and Development Task Force was included as an ex-officio member in each of the other sector task forces in order to ensure that gender concerns were incorporated into general projects too.
• A new subject committee on women and development was constituted at all levels to appraise whether the projects for women satisfied the criteria laid down for them.
• A special gender training programme addressing women activists was implemented.
• Training programmes focussing on women elected representatives were held with the objective of developing some of the trained women into a team of key resource persons and organisers.

Even these conscious and explicit changes could not bring about the desired gender sensitivity in the PPC. Evaluation of projects earmarked for women revealed that though the mandatory provisions were complied with, the qualitative changes envisaged through the WCP did not materialise. The evaluation proved to be an eye-opener to the planning authorities that even though there were attempts to bring about a qualitative shift in the WCP, the projects were in fact trekking the same path as the WID approach which was to be replaced.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Reason</th>
<th>Most Important Reason</th>
<th>Second Most Important Reason</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Inadequate awareness</td>
<td>715 (50.9)</td>
<td>250 (25.2)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Aversion to public activities</td>
<td>333 (23.7)</td>
<td>214 (21.5)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Burden of household duties</td>
<td>245 (18.40)</td>
<td>266 (26.8)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Discouragement from men</td>
<td>34 (92.4)</td>
<td>124 (12.5)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lack of adequate preparation</td>
<td>53 (3.7)</td>
<td>99 (10.0)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Absence of special consideration in gram sabha</td>
<td>18 (1.3)</td>
<td>37 (3.7)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Others</td>
<td>7 (0.4)</td>
<td>2 (0.3)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>1,405 (100)</td>
<td>992 (100)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: Kerala State Planning Board (1998)
SHIFT OF WCP FROM WID TO GAD

Evaluation of previous failures of the WCP led to the realisation that the development process itself needed engendering. Hence, there was a need to refocus the strategic emphasis from a narrow WID approach to a more dynamic Gender and Development (GAD) approach. In the GAD approach, the strategic emphasis is widened to include women’s rights, women’s role as active participants in development, and their role as actors with a specific agenda for development. Emphasis is placed on the need to understand the ways in which unequal relations between women and men may contribute to forms of exclusion that women face in the development process.

The GAD approach sees gender as a cross-cutting issue with relevance for and influencing all economic, social and political processes, and seeks to redress gender inequities through facilitating strategic, broad-based and multi-faceted solutions (Lotherington, Haug and Flemmen, 1991). It is in this context, that the study of SHGs in the Ulloor Panchayat in Thiruvananthapuram district illustrates the transformation of WID to GAD.

II

SAMATHA SHGs

The Samatha SHGs of Ulloor panchayat in Thiruvananthapuram district evolved a working model incorporating the elements of microfinance, decentralised planning and grassroot level participation for the empowerment of women. Ulloor panchayat is an example of the gender development paradox in Kerala. Though the female literacy rate of the panchayat was 83%, their work participation rate was only 15%. Around 40% of the population lived below the poverty line and were in debt to moneylenders and traders. Women mostly worked as vegetable vendors, daily labourers, domestic help, or as fisherwomen. In addition to the social and economic problems, these women also shouldered familial responsibilities. Though a few women’s organisations worked in these areas, they were unsuccessful in addressing the economic needs and problems of the women. Consequently, these organisations were unpopular, especially among women from the lower socioeconomic group.

It was at this juncture that the Samatha groups emerged. In 1997–1998, the Ulloor panchayat prepared the Samatha SHGs project as part of the
mandatory WCP. Most WCP projects were prepared by panchayats without a clear understanding of the status of women in that area and their needs and problems — an essential criteria for decentralised planning. Against this background, the process was initiated in Ulloor to capacitate women, both socially and economically, by organising them into SHGs. The purpose of this activity was to mobilise women towards improving their social and economic status in the family and in the community. It was thought that an improvement in their economic position would be achieved through enhancing their income generating potential by integrating them into regular delivery system for credit and support services.

The Basic Approach

The women of Ulloor panchayat mostly belonged to the lower socioeconomic groups of the society. Hence, the panchayat — through the WCP — decided to introduce SHGs to address the economic problems of the women where the concept of microcredit in the SHGs could be used as a powerful tool to address their practical needs. The Ulloor SHG project broadly envisaged to:

- address the economic problems by providing access to credit, technical advice and training;
- expand the resource base through improvement of the socioeconomic status of women in the family and community;
- form and enable SHGs as a source of mutual support to raise the level of awareness and confidence among women;
- create better access to health, nutrition and other services; and
- address the economic problems first and then, enhance the social conscientisation of women.

Idavacodu SHGs

The Idavacodu unit was the first SHG of the Ulloor Panchayat with 20 members — six fisherwomen, four vegetable vendors, four domestic help, and four daily wage labourers. All members were from the poorest households and were indebted to moneylenders and traders. Therefore, credit was thought to be an essential instrument for initiating the process. Continuous conscientisation classes about the benefits of SHGs and its positive economic impact on their lives were imparted to the women of the Idavacodu locality. The objectives of SHGs, the procedures to be followed, and the norms and rules regarding credit were given in detail to them. Bank officials, representatives from the National Bank for Agriculture and Rural Development
(NABARD), Kerala Sastra Sahitya Parishad (KSSP) members and panchayat members took an active part in this conscientisation process.

**The Process**

The SHGs were formed with the clear understanding that poor women’s problems cannot be tackled individually, and that it required collective interventions. Groups were organised on the basis of locality and each group was registered under the Charitable Societies Act. The SHGs evolved their own bylaws and norms for governing the group and for the operation of savings and loans with guidance from the key resource persons from the Panchayat and KSSP members.

Each group elected its president and secretary and functioned in a participatory manner through dialogue and regular weekly group meetings. The participant’s economic and social needs were identified in these group meetings and activities designed to respond to these needs. The SHGs pooled the microsavings from their members at the rate of Rupees 25 per week per member.

After a period of three months, members could avail of a personal loan by submitting a requisition for it to the group. The members were provided financial assistance at a nominal interest of 2% and though the sanction was on a first-come first-served basis, it was flexible. A woman received a loan from the group on her own right without co-signing with her husband, son or father. Loan was given on the guarantee of other women in the SHGs, who trusted in the woman’s ability to earn and repay the debt.

Each SHG had 15–25 women members and formed within a locality. Weekly group meetings were held on different days at different members’ houses. Groups worked on the principles of mutual trust, cooperation, accountability and transparency. After the meetings, the groups would break for tea, where all members were expected to join. Two or three members were expelled from the SHGs following their reluctance to have tea from the house of a low caste member. Group members felt that this practice had a considerable impact in addressing the caste issue, which was very strong in the neighborhood. After tea, members discussed the pros and cons of their microenterprises and also about their families and financial problems, if any.

**Increased Popularity of SHGs**

Easy and accessible loan facility from the SHG at a nominal 2% rate, instead of the 30–40% interest rate charged by the moneylenders, made the
Idavacodu SHG popular among women, especially those from the lower socioeconomic strata. This popularity was evident at how rapidly the groups were formed — 100 groups, each comprising 20–25 members, were registered within six months after the formation of the Idavacodu SHG unit. In a way, these SHGs represented nearly half the women population of Ulloor panchayat. The first 10 groups were formed in four months, whereas within 40 days, the registration of the remaining 90 groups was completed.

This phenomenal growth and popularity of SHGs among women is not because of the role played by the media in the dissemination of information regarding SHGs. Rather, it was the beneficiaries, the women themselves who passed on the message about the need for an SHG to other women. It was this horizontal interpersonal networking and communication among the beneficiaries that made the SHGs a dynamic and vibrant phenomenon at the grassroots level. Table 4 provides the details of the SHGs in Ulloor panchayat.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Performance of SHGs in Ulloor Panchayat</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Number of wards</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Number of SHGs formed</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Number of women enrolled</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Asset of SHGs (savings+bank loan)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Groups assisted with bank loans</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Recovery percentage of bank loan</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Recovery percentage of personal loan</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Source: Manjula (2004)*

III

The results of the study of the selected SHGs are presented here, while critically examining the impact of SHGs as an intervention model on different dimensions of empowerment of women.

THE STUDY SAMPLE

A sample of 60 Samatha SHGs comprising 1,395 women were selected for the study. A brief questionnaire was used to ascertain the socioeconomic
characteristics of the respondents. Qualitative approach was used to collect information from members of SHGs. The researcher attended the weekly meetings of the 60 Samatha groups held at members’ houses on different days of the week for a period of six months. Participant observation, focus group discussions and semi-structured interviews with key informants were used to gather data from the members. The houses of presidents and secretaries of all the 60 groups were visited, where SHG members were also present. Discussions were held with members about their problems, their evaluation of the SHGs, and their contribution and understanding of the WCP and PPC. Information about their interactions with the KSSP was gathered to understand the dynamics of the transformation of the women.

Profile

The monthly family income of 73% of the respondents (N=1,395) was below Rupees 1,000. Around 41% of the women were unemployed, 63% were in the 20–40 years age group, 56% were domestic helps, fisherwomen and vegetable vendors or belonged to unorganised sectors like construction work, quarrying, and on on. About 33% were illiterate or semi-literate.

Among the Samatha women trapped in debt with moneylenders, theoretical discourses on gender problems would not be successful. Their situation demanded conscious intervention in their economic problems and alternatives to tide over their economic crisis. Ulloor Samatha became popular because it addressed the economic issues first and then the social agenda.

Samatha and the PPC

The conscious attempt of the PPC to encourage women to participate in different stages of planning had a significant impact on women SHGs in Ulloor. The most explicit outcome was increase in the attendance of women in gram sabhas and development seminars after the formation of the SHGs. In the second gram sabha in 1999–2000, more than 50% of those who attended were women; and 90% of them were from the Samatha groups.

Another significant achievement of Samatha women in the PPC was that they played an important role in the beneficiary selection process. The PPC project has to provide financial assistance to persons below the poverty line to help them build houses, latrines and wells. Samatha women
played a key role in selecting the right and suitable beneficiaries in their locality, and gave the list to their respective group leaders. This list was used by the panchayat in selecting the beneficiaries. Since most women in the area were below the poverty line, they enthusiastically attended the gram sabha and seminars, where the final decision on the beneficiary list was made and read out. Whenever they felt that the selection of the beneficiary was wrong, they registered their protest. Their dissent was given due respect and corrections made accordingly.

Thus, one of the primary objectives of the PPC — participation of people at the grassroots level in the planning process — was actually realised in Ulloor, where the most socially and economically backward women played an important role in the beneficiary selection process — the most crucial phase of the planning process.

**Samatha and the KSSP**

Support for NGOs like the KSSP has grown in recent years largely because the government, people and funding agencies have recognised the cultural sensitivity, originality and dedication of such groups and their role in decentralising and de-bureaucratising development initiatives. The role of the KSSP, an outsider, can be conceived as consisting of two main elements.

**Animation**

This was the process of helping Samatha women investigate the reality of their life situations, analyse relevant issues, understand the factors creating poverty and deprivation and through such understanding, perceive possibilities for change. They were ‘animated’ when they understood the reality and perceived the possibilities for changing that reality. The outcome of animation is conscientisation. Here, animation is to be seen as the outcome of a specific mode of interaction between the KSSP members and the Samatha women. The essence of that interaction mode was the evolution of a subject-to-subject relation between the two players (replacing the conventional subject-to-object relation). The women had a knowledge base, were rooted in experience and practice, and lived in the social realm. This knowledge had its own validity and rationality. To that pool of knowledge of members, the KSSP members brought their own knowledge derived from formal education that was used to animate the Samata women.
Facilitation
The KSSP members worked as facilitators too. A host of factors — both at the familial and societal level — kept the Samata women passive rather than active. With their formal education, wider knowledge of the PPC, gender perspective, links with Ulloor panchayat and institutions (like cooperative banks, insurance agencies, NABARD, and so on), the KSSP members were able to assist the Samatha women to address their practical problems. It was the joint effort and collective participation of the Ulloor panchayat, KSSP members and the Samatha women that made SHGs a success story.

PPC, POLITICS OF PRESENCE AND THE FEMINISATION OF INVISIBILITY
Philips (1995), the political theorist, makes a distinction between ‘politics of ideas’ and ‘politics of presence’. Relocating and redefining the centres of power, thus, becomes crucial in the struggle for inclusion of women in decision-making institutions. Panchayati Raj, the institution of local governance in India, forms one of the largest constitutionally elected forms of governance of its kind in the world. The ‘politics of inclusion and presence’ have been the result of a number of local, national and international initiatives, many of which have emerged from a growing movement for women’s human rights and gender equity and equality.

Commenting on the invisibility of women, De Beauvoir (1952) puts it succinctly as ‘He is the Subject, he is the Absolute — she is the other’. To be the other (she) is to be the non-subject, the non-person, the non-agent — in short, the mere body or an invisible self in a patriarchal society. This sums up why the visibility of the self is such an important issue for women.

Women’s visibility has been systematically subordinated, diminished and belittled in society, in customary practice, in cultural stereotypes and in political and economic spheres. In a society engendered by the hegemonic values of patriarchy, it is common for women to come to terms with themselves by scaling down their aspirations, and by embracing gender-compliant goals (Burman, 1998).

Feminists account for this phenomenon by explaining that women internalise patriarchal values and norms — where these pernicious values and norms become integrated in the cognitive, emotional and psychic structure
of womanhood. Once embedded in a woman’s psyche, internalised oppression conditions her desires. Therefore, paradoxically, the more she strives to fulfil these desires, the worse she becomes. Women are, thus, consigned to selflessness and subservient passivity which is a form of invisibility (Burman, 1998).

The claim that women are systematically subordinated and subjugated to invisibility and that the subordination and subjugation have a grievous impact on women’s lives is central to feminism. This positioning of women is labelled as mutilated and immanent (De Beauvoir, 1952). Excluded from socio-political life, waiting to be chosen by their future husbands, and busy with tedious and repetitive housework, women never become transcendent agents. Indeed, they are content not to assume the burden of responsibility for their own freedom. Cast in the role of man’s other, and at the mercy of feminine vices, women succumb to bad faith and surrender their agency. Thus, what society systematically represses provides clues to what is oppressive about society and how society needs to be changed.

From this perspective, one can argue that womanhood is positional with two dimensions. First, it is the social context that locates the individual and deprives her of power and mobility. Second, it is a political point of departure from the affirmation of women’s collective right to take charge of their gendered identity. Which means that to be a woman then is to be deprived of equality and to be a feminist is to take responsibility for redressing this wrong and for redefining the meaning of being a woman.

In short, in a society like Kerala, where strong patriarchal norms prevail, women view themselves as mirrors designed by men in many ways. Most often this happens in an unconscious way as the hegemony of gender is strongly embedded and internalised by women, supporting their current status quo by providing visible roles to men and invisible roles to women in all social, political and economic spheres.

Both the PPC and the KSSP tried to break this phenomenon of invisibility by using a conscious intervention of gender component in the planning process based on an understanding of the cultural fabric of Kerala society. It was precisely this reason that accounted for an increasing presence of women in the development projects of the PPC, their increased attendance in gram sabhas, development seminars and their entry into political and economic spheres of life.
ENHANCING CONSCIENTISATION

The success of Samatha SHGs could be measured not by the amount of their savings, but by the way family and community problems were shared and addressed and the confidence gained by the SHG women while undergoing the process. At the family level, women in the SHGs discussed issues such as domestic violence and alcoholism. Young married girls were better able to deal with abuse by their husbands or in-laws when they had the support of SHGs. At the community level, field workers supported group members in dealing with problems like open drains, poor sanitation or irregular power supply.

One of the remarkable achievements was the growing confidence of the SHG women. Before joining an SHG, many would have rarely, if ever, left their homes. Now they learnt to assert their rights, attend meetings and trainings, spoke in public and dealt confidently with the police and other authorities. Weekly meetings, discussions and participation in the gram sabhas enhanced their level of understanding of various issues, especially gender. Though the economic benefit from SHGs was their initial attraction, slowly the women extended their activity to address problems relating to their neighbourhoods. Samatha women increasingly addressed familial problems of group members like wife abuse, dowry-related violence in their neighbourhood, filed written complaints against the perpetrators and lent support to the victims. They mobilised Rupees 5,000 from their savings to help those Samatha women who suffered because of floods. Such instances reflected changes in the perception of the women, who began to see the world beyond their homes.

CHALLENGES EMERGED

Political Effectiveness

However, all is not well with gender interventions of the PPC either. It is worth remembering that the relationship between women’s formal representation in politics, and their actual representation and empowerment is still unclear. Most gender interventions were unsuccessful in transcending the domain of practical gender needs to strategic gender needs. Also, a closer look at Kerala’s experience tells us that women’s political effectiveness — that is, the ability to use voice to politicise issues of concern to women, to use electoral leverage to press demands on decision-makers, to trigger better responsiveness from the public sector to their needs, and better enforcement of constitutional commitments to women’s equal rights — is not explicitly visible in Kerala.
Sustainability of Economic Enterprises by SHGs

Most of the mobilised money of SHGs was spent on consumption loans to members and not utilised on income generation activities. Out of 60 units, only 16 could start microenterprises where the activities included catering, making garments, soap, hotbox, electronic chalk, squash, pickles, baking, and so on. Though these microenterprises enjoyed flexibility, the profit margin was minimal despite their hard work and, thus, was a strong deterrent in the promotion of such ventures. The soap-making unit, for instance, with its seven members, invested Rupees 500/- and worked for two days (purchasing raw materials and making soap) and earned only a profit of Rupees 32/-! If the mobilised money was not invested in income generating activities, the success of the project was not sustainable. Evidently, the forward and backward linkages were absent in these microenterprises, which, in turn, had an adverse impact on the sustainability of the enterprises.

Levels of Understanding

Though the level of understanding of women on various issues showed improvement, they were yet to internalise the concept of working on a five-year plan, people’s campaigns, and so on. Interaction with members revealed that they had a good/high level of awareness/understanding about SHGs, the immediate context in which they placed themselves, but were yet to understand the wider framework, like the PPC and the WCP, that encompassed the smaller ones. Though their level of internalising the complex planning process was not negative, nearly 79% of the women felt the need for training classes/sessions to acquire more information on the PPC.

Visibility of Women

The PPC has, to an extent, succeeded in making these invisible women visible by breaking their spiral of silence. But their visibility is still not sharp enough to be identified; their voice so feeble that one cannot hear them. The process of decentralisation in planning becomes meaningful and effective only when women’s presence is felt and their voices heard distinctly and clearly.

CONCLUSION

A participatory grassroots experiment such as the Ulloor Samatha SHGs initiative reveals that poor women — while achieving their limited task — can acquire awareness about their conditions, and the ability to use and build on
their own knowledge system to develop critical awareness about their eco-
nomic, political and physical environments. At the same time, the achieve-
ment of specific objectives for improving their resource position through 
collective effort imparted confidence, brought the women out of isolation, 
and resulted in reinforcing their community consciousness.

Thus, if initiatives such as Samatha were linked to each other they can, 
through an exchange of ideas, contribute to the emergence of new kinds of 
structures where decentralisation of power and women’s participation in 
social and economic decision making would become a reality.

Two voices heard from the spiral of silence, express the essence of 
women empowerment as contemplated in the WCP:

I am 68. I started a family life at 18. For five decades, my family was my world. 
Confined within the four walls of my home, I never knew the world outside. But 
the gram sabha opened up my world. Today, I know there is a society outside of 
my family. In the gram sabha, I heard myself and through many voices similar to 
mine realised, for the first time, that voices like mine are important for society 
too, a fact which I was unaware of. This changed my world completely.

Chellama, a grassroots worker

I have three kids. My husband and my children have different demands and needs. 
I manage to meet their needs without much complaint within my limited resources. 
Society too, I know, is not much different. I think, I can manage that too.

Jameela, 45, Chirayan Keezhu Panchayat President

Personal is political. The Marxian feminist thought cannot perhaps find 
a better expression than the voices of these women.

NOTES

1. The sexual division of labour had resulted in the concentration of women in low paying, 
unorganised sectors, such as agricultural labour, cottage and traditional industries and 
selected service sectors. The shift in cropping pattern from female labour intensive 
paddy cultivation to commercial crops had resulted in the decline in the share of women 
aricultural workers from 43.6% in 1981 to 36.1% in 1991(Isaac, 2001).

2. In 1993, the 73rd and 74th Amendments gave constitutional status to local self 
governments and provided a more politically mandated platform for decentralised 
planning from below (537 district panchayats, 6,097 intermediate panchayats and 
2,34,676 village panchayats). Over the past 10 years, Panchayati Raj Institutions in 
India have made progress in enhancing the representation of the marginalised in the 
local governance structures; 41% women, 18% SC and 11% ST in district panchayats, 
43% women, 22% SC, and 13% ST in intermediary panchayats; and 40% women, 
16% SC and 11% ST in village panchayats (The State of Panchayats in India, 2006).
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