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Gender Disparities in School Education in Keralam: A Historical Analysis in the Context of Inclusion and Social Justice

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Abstract

Education of Kerala has always been considered to be a model of human development but a deeper understanding of history has made evident gender inequality associated with schooling system in Kerala. The paper conducts a historical analysis of the development of schooling in Keralam from princely reforms in Travancore and Cochin to colonial negligence in Malabar and post-independence growth of schooling in order to trace the ways gender inequality was produced despite growth in literacy rates. Using qualitative, literature based historical method the paper utilizes socio-historical research as well as literature on gender issues and educational data in order to question the relation between access to schooling and the actual inclusion and justice for women and girls in Keralam. Placing gender disparity into a wider context of regional disparity, reforms in castes and changes in family structure especially the decrease of prevalence of matrilineal inheritance among Nair communities the paper demonstrates how education has been used as a tool of upward social mobility as well as a means to reinforce the domesticity of women. The paper argues that although quantitative gender gap in schooling rapidly decreased after 1950s qualitative disparities continued due to curriculum contents and expectations of society regarding education. It also shows how overlapping discrimination in terms of location, caste, and religion created areas of exclusion that could not be seen in any statistical data on literacy. It can thus be concluded that real inclusion and social justice in the educational system of Kerala need to transcend mere equality in enrolment rates and embrace curriculum changes as well.

***Keywords**: Gender Disparity, School Education, Keralam, Historical Analysis, Inclusion, Social Justice.*

Introduction

The high literacy rates, universal education enrollment, and good indices of maternal and child health in Kerala have been noted all over the world as examples of how development can be achieved by poor countries. However, behind these achievements is a complex history whereby the fact that children had access to education did not necessarily mean equality between genders or even equality among regions or various social groups. The current paper is going to explore through history the gender gap in education in Keralam, looking at this issue through the lens of social justice and inclusion.

Historically, the origins of education in Kerala have to be traced to the earliest reforms undertaken in the princely states of Travancore and Cochin, where royal proclamations, missionary efforts, and caste reforms combined to facilitate the spread of schooling in an early period, even among girls, prior to independence. Malabar, on the other hand, was part of the direct British administration of Madras Presidency, and thus lacked the state's investments in education, the impact of which would

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endure long after the political unification of the three regions as the state of Kerala in 1956. The issue of gender disparity in education in Kerala is thus bound up in this uneven history, as well as in the caste-based structures of access to education.

Since its independence and particularly after the reorganization of the state, policies on education in Kerala have developed rather fast. A series of legislative efforts such as Kerala Education Bill of 1957 and Kerala Education Act of 1959 aimed at universalizing education and regulating more effectively the private schools and those which were managed by communities (Government of Kerala, 1959). Numbers of girls enrolling into schools became very high and within the last decades of the twentieth century, gender equality in school enrollment was attained much faster than any other Indian state. This was considered one of the most important aspects of the "Kerala Model of Development." But despite this fact, there still remained many inequalities in terms of curriculum, subjects selected and even secondary and higher secondary school retention of marginalized communities and in terms of translating education into economic and political power of women.

The main point of view of this paper is that any historical discussion of the gender gap in the school education system of Kerala should focus on the following three interacting aspects: the regional aspect (the legacy of inequalities in Travancore, Cochin and Malabar); the institutional aspect of the curricula and teaching methods (how the education system defined the kind of womanhood it aimed to shape); and the broader implications of social justice of an education system which formally includes girls but in reality channels them towards domestic and reproductive functions.

Theoretical Overview

A number of theoretical perspectives can be gleaned from existing literature regarding the history of education, gender and social development in Kerala.

First and foremost is Robin Jeffrey's historical study about the path of development in Kerala (Jeffrey, 1992). Based on the information gathered from various censuses and records of missionary societies, Jeffrey argues that the competition between the different communities, like the Nairs, Ezhavas and Syrian Christians in Travancore and Cochin, made education an early priority for their members. This means that it was not state policy but rather community desire to develop that caused education to spread in the region. At the same time, Jeffrey makes an important observation that education of females was often sought for the sake of prestige and marriageability instead of preparing women for work. This observation forms the basis for the present paper.

The gendered construction of modernity in Kerala as seen in pedagogical texts by J. Devika (2007) through discourse analysis of the early twentieth century Malayalam print culture supports this idea. Through her analysis of the textbooks, women's journals, and manuals on domestic science, Devika shows that girl education focused on the role of a scientifically efficient housewife who knows about childcare and hygiene, thus representing the educated woman not as an independent being, but as a manager of the house. The above literature will be used in the present research paper to prove that schooling inclusion and limited concept of educated womanhood may go hand-in-hand.

Another perspective on this issue is provided by K. Saradamoni through her legal and historical analysis of the process of transforming the Nair matriliny system (Saradamoni, 1999). Through an expansion in educational provision, the changes in ownership of property have been linked. The destruction of the matrilineal system (marumakkathayam) in favour of the patrilineal and nuclear family system meant the weakening of women's rights to their ancestral property (tharavad). The point made by Saradamoni is that education came about partly as compensation to women for the loss of property, making many educated women economically dependent on marriage rather than inheritance or work.

The regional dimensions of educational disparity are discussed in the case study by T. M. Thomas Isaac and Richard Franke on the decentralized planning movement in Kerala (Isaac & Franke, 2000). Inadequacies in school infrastructure, ratios of teachers to students and drop-out rates continued to exist until late in the twentieth century in Malabar compared to erstwhile Travancore-Cochin regions. This disadvantaged particularly Muslim and Adivasi girls.

The capability approach developed by Amartya Sen (1999) is the general normative theory behind the problem of social justice addressed in this paper. The contrast in Sen's theory between the expansion of particular capabilities like literacy and the expansion of substantive freedom or ability to translate those capabilities into functioning is employed to examine why high female literacy rates in Kerala have not resulted in high levels of women's workforce participation, ownership of assets or

political representation. In addition, the studies of the "gender paradox" in Kerala's development experience conducted by Eapen & Kodoth (2002) and Kodoth & Eapen (2005) illustrate empirically the potential disconnect between well-being indices and autonomy indicators even within one and the same relatively successful region.

Combined, these studies imply that gender gap in Kerala's school education should be viewed from the perspective of regional history, curricula, changes in kinship and property relations as well as capability-agency dichotomy, all of which are the focus of the analysis below.

Objectives of the Study

- To trace the historical evolution of school education in Keralam across the princely, colonial, and post-independence periods, with particular attention to gendered patterns of access and exclusion.
- To critically examine how regional inequalities between Travancore-Cochin and Malabar intersected with gender to shape differentiated educational outcomes for girls.
- To analyse the extent to which the formal inclusion of girls in schooling translated, or failed to translate, into substantive social justice in terms of curricular content, economic agency, and political participation.

Methodology

This study adopts a qualitative, theoretical literature review. It draws upon published historical and sociological scholarship on Kerala's education system, archival and documentary evidence cited in existing academic work, government reports and legislative records referenced in secondary sources, and theoretical frameworks from gender studies and development studies. The analysis proceeds by thematically organising existing scholarship around the categories of region, curriculum, family structure, and capability/agency, in order to construct a historically grounded, critical account of gender disparity in Kerala's schools. As a literature-based study, the paper does not generate new primary data but seeks to synthesise and critically interpret existing historical and empirical findings.

Analysis and Interpretation

- **Uneven Regional Foundations.** The princely governments of Travancore and Cochin invested in public education relatively early, partly due to missionary competition and social reform movements, while Malabar, which was directly ruled by the British as a part of Madras Presidency, got much less funding for its schools. Such a situation made it so that once Kerala became a united state in 1956, it had not one but three different school systems to contend with.
- **From exclusion to subordination.** Prior to 1947, gender inequality in Kerala schools could be seen as an obvious exclusion since there were many more boys than girls in schools, especially among the lower castes and Malabar region. After India gained its independence, the number of students increased, as well as the number of girls, and the gender difference took a new form – that of subordination.
- **Curriculum and the domestic ideal.** Textbooks, educational methods, and the discourses surrounding education presented the ideal educated woman not as an autonomous worker or citizen but rather as the scientifically aware wife and mother. Girls were taught topics related to housekeeping and hygiene, whereas the streaming of boys into science and technology courses ensured different career trajectories for them in the future.
- **Trade-off between matriliny and literacy.** With the legal abolition of matrilineal succession in Nairs and other related castes at the time when formal education for girls was becoming more widespread, education can be seen as compensation for the loss of property rights. Thus, it often resulted in literate but economically dependent women who could not pursue independent career paths.
- **Caste mobility and its limitations.** For Dalits, Ezhavas, and Muslims, sending their daughters to school was quite often a form of upward caste mobility and defiance against caste discrimination. Yet even in these castes, the social capital obtained through girls' education tended to result in increased marriageability.
- **The persistence of the "Kerala paradox."** The high literacy rates amongst women in Kerala have existed alongside low levels of labour-force participation amongst females, little representation of women in political assemblies, and high incidence of domestic violence

reported, a phenomenon termed by academics as 'the paradox of Kerala's development experience'.

- **Capability but no agency.** Using the conceptualization proposed by Sen (1999), education increased women's capability to read, to be informed about health issues, and take care of the welfare of their families, but it did not necessarily increase women's agency in terms of freedom to work outside of the house, own productive assets or participate in politics and public affairs.
- **Intersectional invisibility.** Although average literacy and enrolment rates for the state mask many inequities based on the intersection of gender, religion, caste, and location, disaggregated statistics reveal lower rates of secondary education among Muslim girls from the Malabar region and Adivasi girls from districts such as Wayanad.

Findings of the Study

Analysis of history presented in this paper indicates a number of interrelated points. Firstly, the development of school education after the independence in Kerala was not an entirely new process initiated by the government policies, but rather it was based on already existing education infrastructure and social demands developed during the princely and missionary period, which itself was unequal for Travancore, Cochin and Malabar. It led to regional inequalities in terms of school infrastructure and enrollment rates, and therefore in educational results of girls, which were partially resolved through decentralization and planning in the future.

Secondly, although the number gender gap at schools was bridged soon after the 1950s, this research reveals that gender inequality continued in a different form in terms of content curriculum, subject division, and the societal perception of girl's education based on domestic work rather than economic independence. In other words, schooling not only provided social mobility especially for marginalised castes and communities but also helped in reproduction of patriarchal notions about women's duties in society.

Third, structural transformation of family systems and property systems, including abolition of matriliny, coincided with the concept of education of women and resulted in a trend where there was an increase in literacy rates without a similar increase in economic independence of women.

Fourth, the study reveals that the renowned aggregate measures of equality between genders in education in the state of Kerala conceal many intersectional inequalities in which girls belonging to Muslim communities in Malabar and Adivasi communities in Wayanad District, among others, have far lower completion rates at the secondary level compared to the average levels in Kerala.

Finally, the study shows that formal inclusion, in terms of enrolment and literacy, is an inadequate substitute for social justice in education because social justice would also mean that education broadens the real freedom of women, as Sen suggests, to engage with the economy, society, and politics on par with men.

Suggestions and Educational Implications

Considering the above historical analysis, some policy suggestions have been made by the study. First, considering the ongoing regional imbalance left over from the colonial and princely era, there is need for an infrastructural intervention with regard to Malabar region. This intervention involves the construction of secondary and higher secondary schools, improvement of pupil teacher ratio, and safe transportation and residential facilities that would help retain marginalised girls.

Second, there is need for curricular intervention to go beyond the historically embedded “domestic ideal” of the educated woman. There is need for a gender audit of all school texts and other materials by agencies like the State Council of Educational Research and Training. Such a gender audit would identify material that still stereotypes women in domestic terms and would integrate women scientists, professionals, and leaders.

Third, teacher education and in-service training in District Institutes of Education and Training need to include content on unconscious gender bias and gender-sensitive pedagogy, because informal tracking of girls out of science, mathematics, and technical fields can often be done through classroom methods rather than policy.

Fourth, in order to respond to the historic disconnect between literacy and economic empowerment noted in this research, there should be greater incorporation of skills acquisition, vocational counseling, and financial literacy into the secondary curriculum, thus ensuring that educational success is translated directly into labor market activity and economic autonomy for women.

Fifth, in view of the intersectional invisibility shown in this research, educational planning and evaluation must go beyond average state statistics to disaggregated statistics by district, gender, religion, and caste based on existing administrative systems in order to pinpoint the exclusionary zones that remain hidden behind the celebrated statistics of Kerala.

Overall, this suggests that educational policy planning in Kerala should now shift its focus from access and enrolment, which have been largely accomplished, towards a more intensive process involving curriculum, pedagogy, and conditions under which education will operate as a tool of inclusion.

Conclusion

This essay has looked into the history of the emergence of gender disparity in the education sector in Keralam, by looking into the history through the lens of inclusion and social justice norms rather than taking the increased levels of literacy as an indication of equality. It has been seen that the progress made by Kerala in the field of education is based on an uneven regional development base which has arisen due to the different traditions in Travancore and Cochin and Malabar as a result of princely reform and colonial neglect respectively. It has also been seen that as the gender disparity decreased in terms of enrolment after independence, it has emerged in the form of disparity in the areas of curricula, pedagogy and society and has led educated women to domesticity.

The historical connection between education expansion and the loss of matrilineal inheritance rights, and education as a tool of caste mobility strategy, also creates an additional layer to the story of educational development as schooling worked both as an instrument of emancipation and a way to perpetuate gendered dependency. When analyzed in the light of Sen's distinction between capability and agency, the experience of Kerala proves that some capabilities have been achieved, namely literacy, without the parallel increase in freedom of women to work, to own, and to govern.

This research concludes that the process of including girls in the education system of Kerala is incomplete and historically complex. To achieve social justice in the sphere of education, it is essential not just to pay attention to the number of students in schools, but also to examine what they learn, who teaches them, what geographical and other factors play a role in education.

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