

The Educational Empowerment of Dalit Women in Kerala

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Abstract

Education is for the upliftment and development of a society. India is a very rich and prosperous country, both culturally and demographically. It showcases diversity in caste, religion, language, gender, and education.

The education in India in the early period of time was based on the Vedas. Later, Indian education shifted to astrology, mathematics, and philosophy. Kerala played a significant role in Indian education. The state has the highest literacy rate in India. Many students are enrolled in school and pursuing higher education. They all live in ideal conditions to succeed academically. Excellent classrooms, libraries, and other surroundings encourage children to learn.

However, it is necessary to discuss Dalit education in Kerala, especially the education of Dalit women. Although it has changed a lot in the 21st century, there are still social and political changes to be made. The people of the Dalit tribe, who were denied education during the feudal system in Kerala, started getting education due to the intervention of renaissance leaders Ayyankali, Sree Narayana Guru, Pattam Thanupilla, K. P. Appan, etc. At that time, only a very few people started getting an education. Among them, the number of women was very less.

Therefore, it is essential to study the importance of Dalit women's education in Kerala. The role of educational institutions, including universities, in this regard is covered in this paper. The present study aims to address the need for inclusive education policies and examine Dalit women's education and the problems faced by Dalit women in Kerala society. By using Subaltern theory, its positive effect on Dalit women's education in contemporary Kerala society is explored in this paper.

The study will be a tool for developing targeted-based programs fostering consciousness and self-awareness among Dalit women. Dalit women's pursuit of education thus emerges as a lived philosophy and redefines the discourse on social justice, human dignity, and the emancipatory potential of knowledge.

The study also identifies the traditional caste system and Dalit women's education in the context of Kerala based on a review of available literature.

Keywords: *Dalit women, education, higher education, empowerment, Kerala society, caste, gender, social change.*

Introduction

India is known for its diversity, which includes a wide range of languages, customs, cultures, faiths, and educational methods. India is the most populated country in the world; over 1,600 dialects and 22 officially acknowledged languages are spoken in India, according to the Eighth Schedule of the Constitution. Hindi, Bengali, Tamil, Telugu, Marathi, Urdu, Gujarati, Punjabi, Malayalam, and Kannada are among the most widely spoken languages.

India is a center for yoga, meditation, and traditional religions like Sufism and Vedanta. There are numerous popular reminders of Mughal architecture in North India, including the Taj Mahal, Qutub Minar, Humayun's Tomb, Red Fort, and others. Lively festivals such as Diwali and Holi. South India is known for its Dravidian architecture, Meenakshi Temple in Madurai, Bharatanatyam, Carnatic music, and numerous other artistic forms. Tribal customs, bamboo crafts, and festivals such as Bihu and Hornbill are essentially defining Northeast India. Rich in Gujarati Garba dance and Rajasthani cultural heritage, East India is famous for Baul music and other things.

This much-diversified culture makes India a very rich and prosperous country, both culturally and demographically.

In the early period of time, Indian education was completely concentrated on the Vedas — mainly the four Vedas: Rigveda, Yajurveda, Atharvaveda, and Samaveda. The Vedas are considered the earliest literary record of Indo-Aryan civilization and the most sacred books of India. The Rigveda is one of the oldest Vedas. Sama Veda is a liturgical collection of music. The Yajurveda is also a liturgical collection, and the Atharva Veda consists of spells and charms.

Later, education expanded to astrology, mathematics, and philosophy. At that time, new education centers were formed — e.g., Takshashila (6th century BCE) and Nalanda (5th century CE). Nalanda University was mainly considered a Buddhist studies university, and

Takshashila was known for language, literature, and grammar. Famous alumni of these universities include Chanakya, Charaka, Panini, and Xuanzang.

Then, the Indian education system moved in a different direction. At this stage of education history, we want to examine Dalit education in India. The most prominent character in women's education in India is Savitribai Phule. She was the pioneer of women's education and the Indian feminist movement. She started the first-ever school for girls in 1848 at Bhide Wada, Pune. Her efforts to spread awareness about women's education saw her face boycotts and abuses, mostly from men at the time. Jyotirao Phule, her husband, was one of the pillars of support to her in her journey to spread awareness about the importance of women's education and uplift the status of women in India.

By 1851, Phule had set up three schools and was the teacher of 150 students. She would go on to establish 17 schools in the country, and although most of them were for upper-caste women, she and her husband set up schools for Dalit and lower-caste women as well. Phule encouraged women to attend school by offering them stipends (Sarvamangala, 2022).

Regarding the Dalit community of Kerala (referred to as Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes during the pre-colonial and colonial periods), there were a lot of reformers who fought for Dalit education. Jyotirao Phule, Dr. B. R. Ambedkar, and Kerala reformers like Ayyankali, Sree Narayana Guru, Pattam Thanupilla, and K. P. Appan played crucial roles.

Social empowerment is mostly dependent on education, which is also a vital instrument for attaining equality and upward mobility for India's Dalits, who have historically been marginalized by the caste system.

The 2011 Census found that India's Scheduled Castes had a literacy rate of 66.1%, lower than the national average of 72.98%. Kerala, however, played a significant role in Indian education, with the highest literacy rate in India. Many students are enrolled in school and pursuing higher education. They all live in ideal conditions to succeed academically.

Nonetheless, the topic of Dalit education in Kerala, particularly the education of Dalit women, must be addressed. Despite the significant developments that have occurred in the 21st century, social and political reforms still need to be implemented. With the participation of renaissance figures like Ayyankali and Sree Narayana Guru, Dalit communities who had been excluded from education during Kerala's feudal regime began receiving it. Few people

were beginning their schooling at that time, and the proportion of women among them was quite low.

Consequently, research on the significance of Dalit women's education in Kerala is imperative. In this context, this study discusses the function of educational establishments, especially universities.

Methodology

The study employs a qualitative research approach. The study is based on secondary data collected from books, published research articles, newspapers, journals, websites, etc. It focuses on analyzing historical and contemporary educational conditions for Dalit women in Kerala, emphasizing social reforms, governmental policies, and challenges Dalit women face.

The study uses Subaltern Theory to explore the intersection of caste and gender in education and empowerment. It highlights marginalized voices of society. This methodology is aligned with inclusive education policies through theoretical perspectives.

Historical Social Condition in Kerala

Looking at the social background of Kerala, it was formerly a feudal state. As a result, caste prejudice was prevalent throughout the community. Castes including Paraya, Pulaya, Nadar, and Panan, the main Dalit communities in Kerala, were subjected to several social insecurities such as untouchability.

The Janmi-Kudiyani period can be called a dark period in the history of Kerala. Agriculture was the main occupation. The owner of the agricultural land was the Janmi, and the worker who worked on it was known as the Kudiyani. These tenants did not have a regular wage or source of income and were denied education, which is an important part of society and a person's basic rights.

It was also a period when child marriage was common and women were denied education. In this social situation, reformers like Ayyankali, Sree Narayana Guru, Chattampi Swamikal, and Vaikunda Swamikal, along with women renaissance leaders such as Akkamma Cheriyan, Arya Pallam, and Anna Chandi, worked against these practices and led prominent struggles that shaped the Kerala Renaissance.

Ayyankali

He was one of the social reformers to come from a Dalit family. He belonged to the Pulaya community. Ayyankali disregarded these limitations and battled for numerous rights, including the ability to enter public areas, the freedom to dress with dignity, the ability to travel on public highways, the opportunity to receive an education, etc. The Untouchables were granted access to most roads in 1900, with the exception of those that contained temples. Ayyankali saw the value of education as a means of Dalit emancipation. He fought for Dalit children's access to public education. He organized a walkout of agricultural workers who worked on upper-caste men's land in order to get his demands met. It is likely that this was the first strike by agricultural labourers in the area. Demands made by Ayyankali to end the strike included granting Dalit children the right to an education, allowing workers to take breaks while they were working, and requiring monetary payments for employment.

Sree Narayana Guru

He was a prominent social reformer in Kerala. His famous slogan is “One caste, one religion, one God for all.” In 1888 he built a temple dedicated to Lord Shiva at Aruvippuram. It was against the caste-based restrictions of the time. He kept mirrors instead of idols. He promoted equality but believed that disparities shouldn't be used to convert people and saw discord in society. It was said to be the first All-Religion Conference in India, which Narayana Guru hosted at Alwaye Advaita Ashram in 1923. The Ezhava community was vulnerable to religious conversions; therefore, this was an attempt to combat it. He promoted girls' education and social marriage. That's why he formed Sree Narayana Dharma Paripalana Yogam (SNDP).

In the pre-independence era, Kerala had lots of Dalit women protests. One of the prominent protests happening in the era in 1859 is called the Channar Revolt.

Channar Revolt (1859)

The Channars, or Nadars, of South Travancore were a polluted caste, and they revolted for the right of their women to dress like the upper-caste Hindu women. The agitation is also known as the ‘breast-cloth agitation’ as it was waged for the right to cover the upper part of the body of Channar women. The Christian missionary work inspired in them a new spirit of social reform, and they began to wear jackets. It was resented by the caste Hindus, and large-

scale confrontations erupted in different parts of South Travancore, such as Neyyatinkara, Kalkkulam, etc.

During the Dewanship of Colonel Munro, an order was issued permitting the Channar women who became converts to Christianity to cover their bodies with jackets (kuppayams). Yet they were not allowed to wear an additional scarf over their shoulders in the manner of the Hindu caste women. But gradually the Hindu Channar women also began to wear jackets, and sometimes they dared even to wear an additional scarf, which invited strong protests from the upper castes.

The confrontations between upper castes and Channars often led to violent situations and arson attacks on the houses and other properties of Channars. Finally, the revolt came to an end with the intervention of the British government, who forced the Travancore administration to implement the reform.

The agitation of the Channars eventually led to the Royal Proclamation of July 26, 1859, abolishing all restrictions in the matter of the covering of the upper parts by Channar women, though there was still the stipulation that they should not imitate the dress of the women of upper castes. Even this stipulation was subsequently removed at the instance of the British Government. It was a great victory for the lower-caste women and a bold step for their empowerment (Valsa, 2018).

The next famous protest is the Kallumala Samaram, which leads to Ayyankali. This protest happened in 1915. Ayyankali challenged caste restrictions on dressing, as the polluted castes were not allowed to dress neatly and appropriately.

Besides, the untouchable women were not allowed to wear ornaments made of gold or silver; instead, they used to wear stone necklaces—a mark of subjugation. The Dalit women were not allowed to wear upper cloth to cover their breasts. He persuaded the Pulaya women in South Travancore to discard the stone necklace, which was a badge of a slave past, and to wear upper garments to cover their breasts. The upper castes reacted sharply against the call of Ayyankali to violate the age-old customs. Ayyankali established an organization to protect the interests of the untouchable castes. Ayyankali and his co-workers Thomas Vadhyar and Harris Vadhyar, learning a lesson from their experiences, tried to organise the untouchables, both Hindus and Christians, under the banner of Sadhu Jana Paripalana Sangham (SJPS) in 1907 (Valsa, 2018).

After this much struggle, education was not available to everyone at the start of the 19th century. At the time, education was likewise centered on caste, just as caste laws governed every aspect of life. Two types of educational institutions might be identified in Kerala's traditional system: mutts and ezhuthupallies. Only the Namboodiris were intended to use the former, whereas some other castes were intended to use the latter. Higher education was meant exclusively for Brahmins. Religious instruction constituted the majority of higher education in those days. Following their studies in the ezhuthupallies, the pupils were sent to the Kalari, or military school, to receive instruction in gymnastics and the use of weapons. Pupils who wished to specialize in astronomy or Ayurveda went to the appropriate experts. The exclusion of girls and students from lower castes was the primary flaw in this educational system. The education of the people of Kerala in general, or those of women in particular, was not showing any signs of development at the dawn of the 19th century. As already mentioned, the social status of women had deteriorated considerably at the end of the 18th century. The society in general was prejudiced against female education.

Education was considered rather profane and immoral for aristocratic ladies. There was a general belief that a girl taught to read and to write would become a widow. As a result, the upanayana, or the initiation to the education ceremony, came to be prescribed for boys only, and the right to education was denied to women. According to Mateer, the denial of education to females springs to a great extent from the fear that they would misuse such advantages and become unfit for obedience and humble labour. But as pointed out earlier, there was a small section of women who had received education.

Contemporary Educational Condition In Kerala

The All India Survey on Higher Education 2021-22 reports that of the 4.33 crore students enrolled in 2021-22, 15.3% belong to Scheduled Caste, 6.3% belong to Scheduled Tribe, 37.8% are from Other Backward Class, and the remaining 40.6% of students are from other communities. The enrolment of Scheduled Caste students has increased to 66.23 lakh in 2021-22 from 58.95 lakh in 2020-21. There is a 25.4% increase in SC enrolment during the last 5 years (i.e., since 2017-18). Overall increase in SC female enrolment since 2014-15 is 44%. The enrolment of Scheduled Caste students has increased to 31.71 lakh in 2021-22 from 29.01 lakh in 2020-21. A 26.6% increase in SC female enrolment is seen in the last 5 years. The overall increase in SC enrolment since 2014-15 is 51%.

In 2017-18, Scheduled Tribe students' enrolment increased to 27.1 lakh overall from 24.12 lakh in 2020-21. A 41.6% increase in ST enrolment is observed since 2014-15. The enrolment of Scheduled Tribe students has increased to 13.46 lakh in 2021-22 from 12.21 lakh in 2020-21, and an increase of 47.6% in ST female enrolment is observed during the 5-year period, with an 80% increase since 2014-15.

We already mentioned the high literacy rate of Kerala's education. Kerala has a progressive educational government, and Kerala is a model state in India. The government is implementing many policies to support the education of Dalit students. The governments have implemented policies like free education, scholarships (E-grants, post-metric scholarships, etc.), and midday meal schemes. The Kerala State Higher Education Council has done a survey about all Kerala higher education.

Higher education is of vital importance for the country, as it is a powerful tool to build the knowledge-based society of the 21st century. Kerala possesses a higher education system that offers endeavors in mathematics, education, and training in almost all aspects of human creative and intellectual sciences: arts and humanities; natural, communications, and social sciences; especially engineering; medicine; dentistry; agriculture; education; law; commerce and management; music and performing arts; national and foreign languages; culture; communications, etc.

The official statistical system plays a key role in any society, especially in a large and diverse democracy. A key principle of the system is that it must be completely independent and transparent. In view of the above, Kerala State Higher Education Council (KSHEC) is launching an All Kerala Higher Education Survey (AKHES) (2019) to build a robust database and to assess the correct picture of higher education in the state. The main objective of the survey is to identify and capture all the institutions of higher learning in the state by collecting all the relevant data pertaining to higher education from the higher education institutions in the state. A unit was constituted in the KSHEC with the active support of the state Higher Education Department to conceptualize the following and to provide technical guidance. The state government has entrusted the survey to the KSHEC, and it is going to be an annual exercise.

Moreover, uplifting marginalized people, especially Dalit women, who have historically experienced systemic discrimination on the basis of gender and caste, has long been facilitated by education. In the state of Kerala, which is frequently praised for its high literacy

rates and progressive social policies, the educational empowerment of Dalit women is both a continuing problem and a success story. As a result of education, Dalit women in Kerala have been able to tear down obstacles and see a better future.

The progressive policies and high literacy rates of the state offer a solid basis, but addressing the remaining issues requires a coordinated effort from the government, the general public, and grassroots organizations. Through education, Kerala may continue to be a model of equitable and inclusive growth in India, empowering Dalit women. As role models, accomplished Dalit women encourage the next generation to seek education. The best example of a Dalit woman IAS officer is Sreedhanya Suresh, the civil servant.

She is the first tribal woman to clear the civil service examination, and Nitya Kothenmaril got the PhD scholarship from Dublin City University under the Irish Government. The future goal of Dalit women's empowerment should ensure that the most disadvantaged are reached by efficiently implementing current policies and reservations and also doing some vocational training and skill development programs. It will encourage subaltern employability theory to be improved. According to Gramsci, marginalized Dalits in India are subaltern groups.

The meaning of underclass is hegemony. It is the oppressed subaltern in a society where the ruling authority wields creed. The theory is not limited or restricted to any caste, class, gender, race, colour, world, or country. It voices the sufferings of the victims of discrimination from all over the marginalized Dalits in Kerala. It is also a group increasingly considered scholarships in the feudal system in Kerala. But the current situation in Dalit women's education status is very good because the government provides a lot of gender and other programs. It is more empowered in Dalit society.

Challenges

They are facing issues about women's education, which are: They are a marginalized category in society. They are facing a lot of social, economic, and institutional factors. Kerala has a high literacy rate in India and progressive social conditions. However, Dalit women continue to face numerous challenges.

The first thing is they are facing a lot of social discrimination. Caste-based prejudices in Kerala are the main cause. Economic hardships force young women to do household duties, care for young siblings, and work in the field to collect food. Lack of infrastructure means they do not have proper study rooms. Lack of transport facilities from home to educational

institutions forces a lot of people to go and come by walking, trekking, canoeing. This is one of the reasons they drop the education. Dalit girls often drop out of school due to early marriage and household responsibilities.

Strategies to Overcome Challenges

Addressing the challenges faced by Dalit women in Kerala's educational landscape required a multifaceted approach taken by the Kerala government. They are providing a midday meal program and promoting intersectional awareness and caste and gender discrimination, sex education, etc.

The Kerala government provides economic support and introduces a lot of scholarships, grants, and stipends from school to higher education. Infrastructure development in rural areas includes transport facilities. Providing educational materials like free textbooks, uniforms, mobile phones, laptops, smart classrooms, etc. Includes high-protein-rich food for lunches and breakfasts: high-protein foods (milk, eggs, and boiled bananas). Kerala reserves a high percentage of government jobs for Dalits, including teaching positions and other governmental positions, to ensure representation.

Conclusion

Indian culture's diversity is a wealth of knowledge about humanity's shared past. It shows the world that diversity can coexist peacefully and inspires others. India is a live example of the beauty of diversity, with its diverse range of languages, faiths, arts, culture, caste, gender, etc. India's cultural journey is a modern phenomenon where tradition and modernity coexist harmoniously, rather than merely being a history. In India, education is still the most effective means of empowering Dalits.

Although there has been a lot of progress, there is still a long way to go until equality is achieved. India can establish an inclusive society in which Dalits not only engage but flourish as equal contributors to the development of the country by tackling structural issues and guaranteeing fair access to high-quality education.

According to Kerala's education journey, literacy education is a very important part. Dalit women are still subjected to prejudice, inequality, deprivation, and marginalization. These issues are reflected in the educational system, where they deal with high dropout rates, illiteracy, and a lack of high-quality education due to discriminatory cultural norms. Their

socio-economic situation becomes fragile and disadvantaged as a result. Compared to other segments of society, their involvement in schools, colleges, and universities is not significantly higher.

As a result, the educational status of Dalit women in Kerala has to be improved, strengthened, and increased. This paper presents the importance of Dalit education and empowerment in Kerala.

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