



## THE ROLE OF WOMEN IN REDESIGNING THE SOCIAL SPECTRUM OF KERALA

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**ABSTRACT:** Kerala, a state in South Western India, has achieved remarkable social and economic development, surpassing many other Indian States. A significant contribution for this success is the empowered role of women in Kerala society. From the ground of activism to the corridors of power, women in Kerala are leading the charge against traditional norms and for an inclusive development process. This article examines the various dimensions of the role of women in redesigning the social structure of Kerala, documenting and discussing significant movements, personalities and programmes.

**KEYWORDS:** Kudumbasree, Harithakarma Sena, Penkoottu, Vanitha Mathil, Dr. Ayathan Janaki Ammal, K.Chinnamma, K.V.Rabia

**INTRODUCTION:** The development of a nation depends on the social status of women. For centuries women have suffered social and economic subjugation. Women play major roles during various stages of their life as a daughter, sister, wife, mother, etc. According to Hinduism, women should depend on men and should be always under men's control. There was a separate code of conduct given to the widows. There were many social evils like female infanticide, child marriage, sati polygamy, purdah system, dowry harassments, the Devadasi system and bonded labour etc prevailed in the Kerala society. In the social sphere, there were movements of caste reform or caste abolition, equal rights for women, and strikes against social and legal inequalities. Social reformers and women's rights activists have campaigned successfully for the enactment of laws to protect women from cruel and harmful practices as well as to ensure their equal rights with men. The women in the state, who lay in the lines of marginalization in history, have pushed frontiers one after the other, prompting a tremendous change in the social system. This article examines the multiple ways in which women have redefined the social landscape of Kerala.

### I.Grassroots Mobilizations and Empowerment Programs

#### 1. Kudumbashree Mission

Established in 1998, Kudumbashree is a women empowerment and poverty alleviation project of the Government of Kerala. The agenda has enabled microfinance, entrepreneurship and skill development to help women become economically empowered



and socially mobile. The Kudumbashree scheme aims to eradicate poverty and empower underprivileged rural women through the establishment of microcredit and profitable businesses. It's a community-based network of women that works with local self-governments to improve the living standards of poor women in rural and urban areas. The program aims to empower women economically and socially by creating self-help groups and fostering micro-enterprises. The goal is to eradicate poverty and empower women through community mobilization and self-help groups. Kudumbashree has a three-tiered structure- Neighborhood Groups (NHGs), Area Development Societies (ADS), and Community Development Societies (CDS). The importance of understanding the factors that encourage women to participate in initiatives like Kudumbashree Units. It provides insights into the factors influencing women's decision to join such units, offering valuable information for program planning and implementation.

## **2. Haritha Karma Sena**

Haritha Karmasena is a venture working in the field of sanitation and waste management in local self-government bodies in Kerala. In 2017, as part of the Harithakeralam Mission Project implemented by the Government of Kerala, the formation of Haritha Karmasena was held in local self-government bodies. Door-step collection of cleaned non-organic waste and in some cases organic waste, by Haritha Karma Sena members, is carried out from households and institutions by collecting the user fee fixed by the Local Self-Government bodies based on the Government Order. The inorganic waste collected at regular intervals is delivered to the material collection facility. From here, the waste is sorted and sent to the resource recovery facility. They are then handed over for reuse or recycling.

As part of these activities the haritha karmasena is providing clean up means and solutions for organic waste management at homes. Haritha Keralam Mission, Kudumbashree, Shuchithwa Mission, Clean Kerala Company and Local Self-Government are all partners in this mega project. Tons of waste is being disposed of in the state through the Haritakarmasena system. Haritha karmasena is trying to become self-sufficient by creating new products from waste materials promoting recycling and starting innovative green initiatives. More than 3,6000 haritha karma workers are currently working in all the local



bodies of the state. The basic facilities, vehicles, uniforms, identity cards etc. required by them are provided under the leadership of the local self-government bodies.

### **3. PENKOOTTU**

Penkoottu, the movement was led by Viji Palithodi and was focused against the oppression of women in the unorganised labour. Her campaign stir resulted in the creation of the Asanghaditha Mekhala Thozhilali Union, which lobbied for the 'Right to Sit' for their female sales persons, a practice to address exploitative labour.

#### **4. Vanitha Mathil**

Vanitha Mathil was a human chain formed on 1 January 2019 across the Indian state of Kerala to uphold gender equality and protest against gender discrimination. The wall was formed solely by women and extended for a distance of around 620 kilometres from Kasargod to Thiruvananthapuram. On New Year's Day, an estimated 30 lakh women stood shoulder to shoulder along national highways to form a "women's wall" that ran the length of Kerala. Vanitha Mathil, symbolised the participants' resolve to uphold the values of Kerala's renaissance and ensure gender justice. The event, billed the largest congregation ever of women in Kerala, was organised by the state government with the support of several political, religious and social groups. It was essentially a counterdemonstration against the Sangh Parivar's agitation preventing women of menstruating age from entering the Sabarimala shrine in violation of the Supreme Court's ruling.

## **II. Pioneers in Education and Social Reform**

### **1. Dr. Ayathan Janaki Ammal**

Dr. Ayathan Janaki Ammal was born in 1878, Dr. Ayathan Janaki Ammal became Kerala's first female doctor and surgeon. She was born into "Ayathan" family (aristocratic family of Malabar) at Telicherry, the daughter of Ayathan Chandhan and Kallat Chiruthammal. She studied at the Telicherry Elementary School, Mission High School and moved to convent school, Calicut in 1897. She then joined Madras Medical College in 1902 on scholarship and passed the LMP examination (sub assistant surgeon) in 1907 with the highest rank and with honors. That same year she joined government service at Chenkelpet government hospital where her career started as an assistant surgeon and physician. Janaki Ammal was service-oriented and was a social activist. She had worked with the Sugunavardhini movement to



uplift women and people from the downtrodden sections of society. Along with her brother Dr. Ayathan Gopalan, she conducted free medical camps while working at Calicut. Janaki Ammal is considered a pioneer in fighting for women's rights in the Sugunavardhini movement. Her achievements in the medical field broke gender barriers and inspired generations of women to pursue professional careers.

## **2.K.Chinnamma**

K. Chinnamma, an educationist and social reformer, defied caste norms by admitting lower-caste girls into schools. During that time untouchability prevailed in the land of Kerala. K Chinnamma was posted as school inspector at the Kottayam division in Travancore in 1908. She used to visit Christian schools run by nuns as part of her job. There would be orphanages associated with the schools for Christian children. Chinnamma observed the functioning of the orphanages and the discipline they followed. That's when she wondered why there couldn't be a home for orphans and widows of the Hindu community. In 1916, Chinnamma spoke about her idea at a gathering of women, on the occasion of the 60th birthday celebrations of the then King of Travancore, Sreemoolam Thirunal, who has always promoted the education of girls. She later established the Mahila Mandiram, Kerala's first home for destitute women, providing shelter and education. In a room inside the hundred-year-old building, written in large Malayalam letters on scores of white papers, is the history of the Hindu Mahila Mandiram, a home for destitute women and girls in Poojappura, Thiruvananthapuram. A hundred years ago, the mandiram was registered after the very many efforts of a woman called Chinnamma.

## **III. Advocacy and Social Justice**

### **1.K.V.Rabiya**

Kariveppil Rabiya (25 February 1966 - 4 May 2025) was a physically disabled social worker from Vellilakkadu, Malappuram, Kerala in India who rose to prominence through her role in the Kerala State Literacy Campaign in Malappuram district in 1990. As an educator and activist, K.V. Rabiya's efforts led to infrastructural developments in her village and the establishment of 'Chalanam,' an organization supporting education for disabled children and promoting women's health and literacy. Her efforts were recognised at a national level by the Government of India on multiple occasions. In 1994, the Ministry of Human Resource



Development of the Government of India awarded her the National Youth Award for her contributions to society. In January 2001, she was awarded the first Kannagi Sthree Sakthi Puraskar award for the year 1999 for her contribution to upliftment and empowerment of women. Rabia was awarded India's fourth highest civilian award Padma Shri in January 2022.

## **2.Me Too Movement in Kerala's Film Industry**

The Hema Commission's report in 2024 unveiled widespread sexual harassment in Kerala's film industry, leading to significant reforms and the dissolution of the Association of Malayalam Cinema Artists. This movement highlighted the challenges women face in the entertainment sector and the need for systemic change.

## **CONCLUSION**

The role of women in redesigning the social spectrum of Kerala is crucial. Women's empowerment has enabled them to make significant contributions to Kerala's development, and their participation in various fields has improved outcomes in education, healthcare, and the economy. The transformative role of women in Kerala's social spectrum is evident across various domains. Through persistent efforts, they have challenged entrenched norms, advocated for rights, and pioneered initiatives that have redefined societal structures. Their contributions continue to inspire and pave the way for a more equitable and inclusive Kerala. However, challenges still remain, and addressing these challenges will be critical to ensuring that women in Kerala can reach their full potential.

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