



## **Feminist research and fieldwork methodology**

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### **Abstract**

The topic of the present paper is conducting feminist research in South Asia and the way politics works in this process. It is specifically based on the experiences of empirical work done in Kerala, the southernmost state in India, which is unique in being one of the only two states with a strong communist movement. In addition, the numerous religions, castes, and communities of the Kerala region can be profitably analyzed in connection with the policies of the Left, emerging feminist movements, and mechanisms of power.

As an indigenous, feminist activist and researcher, I have been working with a Western feminist scholar who is also a university professor, in a project concerning marriage and inheritance in Kerala in the twentieth century. The project is based on various archival materials, as well as interviews with families of different classes and communities, politicians, and religious leaders.

The purpose of the paper is to elaborate upon methodological experiences gained from my collaboration as a research assistant for the Western scholar. Specifically, I wish to explore the way power, as based on gender, ethnicity, generation, and the researcher's position in society, operated when data was collected and interviews carried out. The main thesis of my study is that, through our cooperation, we managed to overcome difficulties that each of us, working alone, would not have been able to surmount. Our production of "knowledge" must be seen in the light of the complex political and cultural power relations prevailing in Kerala, as well as of our own position in society and the role we each played within the research project itself.

**Keywords:** feminist, fieldwork

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### **Introduction**

Kerala is the southernmost state in India situated on the west coast. It is the first state in the world where a Communist government was democratically elected (Menon, 1994) <sup>[6]</sup>. After the state was formed in 1956, a Communist leader became the first Chief Minister by the 1957 election. Until then the election results showed a mixed trend, making victory to both Congress and Communist alternatively. But among these two major political parties, Communism has been holding an upper hand among the intellectuals as well as in general social realms, because of its philosophy for the upbringing of the lower-caste and lower-class people. It was more than a political party in Kerala uniting the proletariat and the peasantry. Since major part of the population is working/lower/middle class, communism and socialism were gradually accepted by the people in Kerala. It was after a stringent move against the feudalism (power exercising by the landlords) prevailed in the society, Communism flourished. Robin Jeffery has explained in her study (Jeffery, 1992, pp: 126-128), how the attack on low-caste disabilities introduced in Kerala's intellectual life with new ideas of Communism. But some part of the same write-up reveals to what extent the communist politics neglected the gender issue. If we go through the line- "Damodaran brought home an Ezhava and forced the women to cook-" (Damodaran is the name of an upper caste upper class Marxist man and Ezhava is a lower caste), - we can see the way an upper-caste communist intellectual activist forget about gender discrimination while trying to dissolve the caste discrimination. He could have been a "model" for a progressive perfectly, if he could cook himself for the lower-caste guest, conveying the message to the women in family (who have no social exposure for sure to know the progressive thoughts!). The Communists have been preoccupied by the male power, even when they fought against the Caste hierarchy and untouchability prevailed in Kerala (Lower caste people were not allowed to touch the upper caste people). It is clear, even with the Marxist/Communist political background, the society was incapable to accept Feminist politics and its ideological demands as it happened in the West.

Feminist movement originated in Kerala during early 1980s. It was very weak in the beginning and gained acceleration during late '80s with the feminist literature in Malayalam (the mother tongue). And in 1990s a state level feminist platform, of individuals and local women's groups, was formed and the activities started getting more public attention. The society was critical about Feminism, pointing out it as something borrowed from the West! But gradually by the feminist intervention in to the issues of discrimination and women battering, the feminist activism was recognized in Kerala as a relevant new social movement. The politics of the motto 'personal is political' started getting absorbed by the public intervention activities by the feminists. But it was never accepted or understood well as an ideology like communism. And the power structure of political parties seemed to be quite irritated with a new politics initiating a new social movement. All the major and minor

political parties were not encouraging the sort of women's politics emerged all over India. But Feminism began to be discussed in the society around the issues in which the activist women involved. And it got scientific momentum very recently, when varied research projects were set forth. More serious debates are being carried out in the light of research done on the status of women in the society. Even if the scientific research on women issues started only recently in Kerala, the last decade presented some relevant studies. Different projects were implemented by the government for the improvement of the status of women. Even though these projects were not actually eligible to be called 'feminist research', they provided some space for the possibility of understanding women's issues. It is the point to be noted, that it would have been more fruitful if they were designed as 'feminist activist research'. Such research programs are originating in Kerala now, with the initiatives of individual feminists and women's organizations.

### **Fieldwork and the Issues around It**

In the diversified society in Kerala, fieldwork becomes very complicated process. Particularly when the method is direct interview or ethnography; different cultural and political measures influence the knowledge production. Kerala is holding a different position among the twenty eight states in India, having total literacy and high education level for women. Still, the religion, caste, sub-caste, community and class barriers, to deal with people are frantically high.

In India the population is a mixture of three religions Hindu, Muslim, Christian mainly, in which Hindus constitute the major part of the population. In Kerala also same is the case and these three religions have hierarchically ordered sub-divisions. According to the ancient Hindu *Chaturvarnia* (four *varnas* / order/statuses) system, there are four divisions of people, in terms of the occupations they are supposed to hold. Among them, *Brahmins* are the upper-most ones who are priests. Then come the *Kshatriyas* who are warriors. The next is *Vaisyas* who do business and the fourth is *Sudra* who are laborers. This is believed to be divine social set up prescribed by *Vedas*, the ancient scriptures, which are the first available historical material in the world itself. There are arguments that the four *varnas* form statuses but not classes (Ram Saran sarma, 1983, p.4). The kind of status prescribed this way, is followed in present India in the name of castes which have become many in number.

If we are targeting to study any particular issue of women in Kerala, we have to read the above said caste status factors with the class status, and their influences, which would affect the generalization of the point we extract. This is predominant in Kerala and in almost other parts of India too. The caste system is believed to be the formation of Aryanisation during 1500 B.C. Even if there are different disagreements among historians about the invasion of Aryan tribe from middle Asia to South to out win the Dravidian natives, one can see the hierarchical caste system existed in India and it is still in practice. Such a hierarchical power relation has been stronger in Hindu sub-divisions than that among the Christian and Muslim sub-divisions.

The cultural diversity and its influence on studies of social groups are widely analyzed in social science research methodological discourses. But the feminist research and its complications around methodology are to be analyzed more as a particular social science research methodological issue. Feminists have proposed changes in research methodology introducing greater intimacy and increased collaboration among researchers and participants and addressing the ethical issues of exploiting the women as subjects of study (Kirsch.1999, p.26). Feminist dilemmas in fieldwork revolve around power, often displaying contradictory, difficult and irreconcilable positions for the researcher. Indeed the power dimension is threaded through out the fieldwork and post fieldwork process and has created a major identity crisis for many feminist researchers (Wolf, in Pole-ed.2005,pp:131). Anna Lindberg (a Swedish Researcher) has written about the way she felt as an "outsider" when she did the fieldwork among the women Cashew workers in Kerala. She says "we (researchers ) are always outsiders because of such factors as the epoch we live in ,our class, education ,gender, ethnicity,religion,generation,and many other elements" ( Lindberg,2001,p:65). She points out about the need to discard the insider/outsider dichotomy by revealing the fact that all researchers might feel as an outsider, no matter she was a foreigner or local person. (Its my pleasure to share with you that I was working with her in her second project in Kerala which made me more thoughtful about the fieldwork dilemmas in qualitative feminist research and that inspired me to write this paper.)

### **Methodological Concerns of Feminist Research**

I'm trying to analyze in detail, the methodological issues I experienced from the empirical work done with a particular project around dowry and inheritance in marriage, collaborating with a Western researcher. I think, it would help to substantiate some of my methodological arguments on doing qualitative feminist research in Indian sub-continent, which is the major portion of South Asia. This particular work was a different experience for me which made me think more of the methodological problems of doing a qualitative feminist research. I could identify different aspects of subjectivity and reflexivity since I worked with a Western researcher, and the possibilities and necessities of research activism, as both of us politically were having feminist standpoints and were going to the field together for Sometime.

The research project was on the gender sensitivity of the marriage institution, in terms of dowry and inheritance. It was a deep study of the marriage and customs of different castes and communities. We met people from all the three religions Muslim, Christian and Hindu. And we noticed the sub-divisions under each religion too. The population involved families from different regions of the state Kerala, which helped us to see the regional

differences too. The experiences I had during the venture was quite fitting around the methodological issues of feminist research, particularly arising around the fieldwork in a culturally complex geographical areas. And it was more evident to me since, I being an indigenous activist researcher, was collaborating with a foreign researcher.

Since the study was around marriage, it is clear it was around the institution family too. So we had to be very careful not to insult the religious/caste and family (which is considered as the holy institution) emotions while asking questions. The way we interviewed people was quite with a neutral standpoint in the beginning, about the issue under study. It was clear that they won't give right information about the amounts of dowry and inheritance, if we ask about its gender sensitivity first. And when we started becoming intimate to the interviewees sharing their own experiences too, especially during the talk with women, there arose the ethical issues what Gesa Kirsch pointed out. (Kirsch.1999, p.26). The 'inadvertent ethical dilemma' was true for me as a local researcher, not being able to tell all about me without appropriating or polishing the truth. For example, if they ask whether I'm married, I was not able to tell them "no, but I'm cohabitating with somebody". As an inhabitant in Kerala the cultural shock the people might feel by talking against the norm prevented me from being open about my status of marriage/divorce/cohabitation. As I was only sharing about my thoughts about such topics the foreign researcher could more easily open up about her personal details.

Although one is doing a feminist research, it is not easy to be an activist researcher in Kerala for a local woman. Nancy Naples has written about the nature of activist research and the issues around it. (Naples, 2003). When I was in the field, I felt the interviewees were playing the role of ethnographers, asking questions to me. They asked questions like, "Don't you know these customs? What is your religion/caste? What is your father/mother? Are you married?" etc. They wanted to measure me in all ways. As I belong to the upper caste Brahmin Hindu, I had to be very sensitive, clearing my position that I don't believe in any caste hierarchy, especially during the interviews with Hindu -caste people. While I was talking to the other religion people, I had to be more conscious not to show any disagreement with any of their belief. Even though I see the gender disparities in the customs, I was struggling not to point out my opinion, since I was aware the feminist politics is still more or less a harmful one according to the Kerala society. So the gender sensitive projects itself would have to be conducted holding no gender politics for the first step. It was only after making sure that I got all the information, I dared to talk about the gender elements. These were the dilemmas I had clearly as Diane L. Wolf (Pole, ed. 2005, p: 131-133) elaborated about the contradictory, difficult and irreconcilable positions of the researcher.

We were doing in-depth interviews with women (possibly old women) and men in the families belonging to different classes, caste and religion. And local religious and political leaders also were included in the list to interview. The responses we received from them reveal crucial methodological issues. Surprisingly among all these groups, the foreigner was accepted to question more authentically than a local researcher, about the social evils in the system followed. And she could easily play the role of a research activist, throwing more revolutionary points into them about the gender issues involved in the dowry and inheritance as well as in the marriage institution. The people just took it for granted telling with a smile "That is your culture, this is our culture". They were thinking she would just talk like this and go back. She won't harm their beliefs and customs. And in the case of giving the details about the marriage payments also they were quite open to the "outsider". Even if Dowry is legally prohibited, giving and taking it formally or informally is prevalent in Kerala and people knew it was a crime. The political leaders were more or less trying to convince the foreigner that the practice of dowry does not exist since it is prohibited. They were strategic to show the foreigner, their country is perfect because they think they are the rulers and law makers. And they were thinking of me as just an ignorant guide/translator, since I didn't dare to show up with my politics and opinions. And some behaved as if they were thinking me just as a student doing fieldwork for writing something for the purpose of some certificates when I was going with a friend other than the foreigner. It can be seen in the light of the ignorance of gender aspects in the political and social platforms in Kerala. (This must be because of this reason too, that most of the fieldworks in Kerala were not done by the senior officials holding the projects, but by their juniors or students.) Even the political or religious leaders and (sometimes the so-called intellectuals too) were not able to imagine the women would conduct feminist research with a commitment to women. Daphne Patai has written about feminist research which is not just for pursuing merely their own careers and adding knowledge to the world (Patai, 1991 p: 138). Such feminist activist researches could be explored more for making favorable social changes.

The religious leaders who talked to us were frank about the dowry system existence and they were trying to claim that they are working strongly against it. The people we met at their homes told they do follow dowry system, since their girls would get good alliance by that. The details of payment were not spoken by upper class families from any religion when the local researchers went to them. They were just responding that they do give some gifts to the daughters. May be they were afraid their status would be graded by the local researcher who will go to the next door too. I could feel the difference as they were more open when we went to some rich families for a second time with the foreigner. They seemed to be feeling as if they don't need to conceal much from the foreigner who will not play in this society with the information about their private matters. And also they had this concern that the foreigner was someone from higher class than them. But for the lower class people both of us were alike. It could be because of my dress code and language (I was mostly in jeans and with cut hair and speaking English, which is not common in rural areas), they felt a local person also somebody higher and somebody outside their life situation. And it was clear they still internalized the kind of highness and lowness in terms of caste and class. Only some among educated middle class people seemed to be out of such power

relation barriers. They showed mixed trend. Some of them were hesitant to give information to the foreigner since they had the view, which we don't need to sell our culture and system to them. If it was just for a study in our own country, it was ok for them, even if they bothered about my whereabouts as a researcher. At the same time both the upper and middle class educated people sometimes had the doubt with a local researcher about the purpose for which she is doing it and if she would miss- utilize their private money dealings etc. And they were anxious about the politics behind such projects too. The lower class and caste people seemed to have no such doubts and they were very open and were hoping we would do some good for their development. They were responding to me well, even if they wanted to know my details. The only difference was that they were more excited when the foreigner also came to them. These all pictures refer to the way caste, class and the positions of the researcher and participants affect the knowledge production.

The plight of a local woman feminist activist researcher is complicated with the issues of subjectivity and self-reflexivity. The traditionalist view of 'observer effects' as mere annoyances to be subverted, to show that there is no means of removing the observer from the production of scientific knowledge. There is no means of achieving an observer free picture of nature.(Green and Gergen,1991,p:76-77). The local researcher herself would be subject to all most all the evils of the system, which she is going to study. Then she would have to engage in 'intersubjectivity', a dialectical relationship that allows the researcher to compare her own experiences as a woman and scientist and share it with their subjects who then add their opinion (Klein, 1983:94). For example, any woman in Kerala would be affected by the evils of dowry system and inheritance system, no matter she is a researcher or activist. And this would be different type of influence in different religion/caste/class people. Thus, any sensitive researcher could share what her/his experience was. For a while, to some people I felt it was good to get response sharing them that I don't believe in dowry and so I didn't go for a typical marriage thus arranged by my parents.

### Conclusion

Doing feminist research is a thorny task for a local researcher in South Asia. Especially in a region like Kerala, where different measures are overlapping while the process of the production of knowledge, the background of the local researcher might obviously affect the data collection. Experiences from the above explained project, one could draw the conclusion that the collaboration of a foreign researcher would make it easier to get factual data in a better way, particularly for conducting feminist research on the impact culture and custom on women's lives .The religion, caste and community measures are very much visible in Indian sub-continent and it makes qualitative feminist research process complicated. The subject /object division during studies on women by women is meaningless and since the issues of subjectivity and reflexivity are to be reckoned in feminist research, methodology needs to be analyzed in every stage of the projects. The researchers would have to be alert to keep the ethics which is the basic in Feminist research.

Effective Feminist activist research is still a requirement, to be developed in Kerala context, since the issues on gender are prevalent in the society. Studies on gender being done with an activist mood would give rise to the positive change in the society improving the mentality towards women. One can easily identify the fact from media sources that the cases of gender discrimination, women battering, sexual harassment etc. are painfully increasing in Kerala. I think, extensive feminist activist research may facilitate to improve the status of women in the society.

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