Kerala is peculiar with its ecstatic natural beauty and elegance. The climatic conditions, flora and fauna attracted the world to the land in the southern end of the greatest republic. The beauty and lush greenery of Kerala gained it the glory of ‘Gods own country’. Along with natural elegance and fame, Kerala is bestowed with surplus human resource. The human and natural resources of the state helped Kerala to ascend the zenith of progress. Progress of the state is not limited in the economical or financial aspect. Development is marked by the wellbeing of the society with its entire citizen enjoying equal rights without problems and chaos in the society. High rate of literacy, better condition of weaker sections, low rate of female discrimination and higher income of the people compared to the other states in the country makes it ‘developed’ among the offspring of the nation. But the progress of the state is the result of years of tireless struggle and unquenchable thirst for change. In the prosperity of the state, people from all corners of Kerala joined hands and toiled together to attain the goal. Even from the period of independence struggle great fighters fought for the attainment of freedom along with equality in the society.

The advent of communism and other movements led by great reformers helped Kerala make ripples in the society for the upliftment of the weaker sections of the society eradicating caste system. The lower sections of the society and women suffered much in the colonial period as they were exploited by the higher class for their luxurious life. The sufferings of women were infinite as they were considered as inferior creatures by the male chauvinist, caste driven society. Both the higher class and lower class women suffered in colonial period as they enjoyed little freedom, victimized to superstitions and religious dogmas. While they were co-modified by the higher class, the colonial powers exploited them sexually with the help of the higher clergy. Patriarchy and the ever pervasive caste system suffocated women and made them to confine themselves to the inner corners of their homes.

But with great effort of legendary reformers like LalithambikaAntharjanam and VT Battathirippad the condition of women changed gradually. The fresh breeze of independence and the growth of communism in the state helped to wipe out caste system through legislation and stringent laws. The women folk in the state enjoyed the freedom, shattering the shackles of the male chauvinist caste system which kept them alogf from their fundamental rights and needs. They enjoyed the freedom for education and to establish their own part both in the society and in the family. They banished the laws and dogmas in the name of caste and gender, which blocked them from the public places, dressing properly and expressing their views in the matters of both the family and the society.

As he changes in the society is hard to reach the core, the rural areas of the Kerala is not yet free from the evils of caste consciousness and problems affecting women. Contemporary rural women in Kerala are facing many problems in the name of caste and gender. The rural women differ from the urban in many aspects. The facilities and occasions for the urban women to express themselves to alleviate their woes and problems are comparatively better than the rural women. The living conditions and family environment of rural women is quite different from the urban women who enjoy much freedom than
the rural women. The voices of women empowerment are hard to reach the rural areas. The main problem is that the women folk adjust to their circumstances, neglecting or ignoring the sufferings and problems. “The rural areas are strikingly varied in terms of social and economic structure, geography and culture. Rural women too are not a homogenous group” (Malhotra 1). So there must be special consideration for the empowerment of the rural women.

The problems of rural women include both the problems they face from the public and in the family. The main problem the women in rural side are facing is the discrimination based on gender from the part of the fundamentalist ideas of the religious apostles and the clergy. Though most of the religious scriptures advocate dignity for women, the established taboos and conventions of the fundamentalist ideas and the patriarchal agents who took shape of the fraud religious apostles and authorities of the clergy ditches the status of women. The religious apostles and the clergy, misinterpreting the religious scriptures, put shackles of slavery over the women in the rural Kerala. Thus, the religion is painted as an institution which binds the women folk to the inner corners of their houses. They are not allowed to take part in public affairs and in the local administrations. This patriarchal fundamentalism develops as a major impediment in the participation of rural women in the public affairs. They are forced to be in their houses looking after their family obeying the orders of their husbands and other patriarchal authorities. “Fundamentalist regard a woman’s economic independence as undesirable since it will reduce her commitment to patriarchy” (Ross 122). It is a fact that the old men and women who control the family in most of the rural families had developed a patriarchal mind, influenced by the fundamentalist ideas.

Though the fundamentalist authorities restrict women in the name of religion, they are unable to control or wipe out the evil system of dowry from the rural sides. It is evident that dowry is one of the main reason behind discrimination in the name of gender in the society. Shattering the stringent laws and prohibition of dowry, both by the state and religion, it exists in the society with all its manifestations. The consequences of dowry are far reaching and deadly. Even the reaction of the parents at the time of the birth of a girl child is different from that of the boy child. The birth of the boy makes the parents happier than the birth of the girl as they think of the need to make money for the marriage of the girl. But it is fact that the women folk play a major role in the encouragement of dowry. Women in the family as mother in law and other elder sisters of the groom demands dowry and develops a system of comparative analysis of dowry, based on the marriages both in the family and in the society. They consider the bride without dowry as secondary or value less. The comparative analysis leads to chaos and problems both in the society and in the family. This comparison is the root cause for the atrocities against women in the name of dowry. The increasing number of domestic violence against women in the name of dowry points to the dirty role played by the other women in the family. In most of the criminal cases related to dowry women are found to be the masterminds. “It is unfortunate that mass female literacy and high levels of educational attainments among the women in the state cannot dissuade them from rationalizing domestic violence” (Rajan 61).

Most of the girls in the rural areas are unable to imagine their marriage without dowry and gold. They feel that the dowry and the amenities they bring to the groom’s house will make them secure and valuable. In most of the marriages dowry is considered as the symbol of reputation. The superiority in the name of dowry also makes the women in the family proud and pomp. So, though, dowry remains a patriarchal construct, the women folk plays a vital role in advocating it. The craze for gold is very much evident in the rural women, which encourage the evil system of dowry.

Women employment rate is very much low in the rural areas of Kerala. Most of the house wives and women in the family depend on the income of the husband for their living. Though the lower class women engage in the local works, they have to inform their husbands about their income and the expenses. Both the educated and the uneducated women’s earning are low in rural Kerala. Especially in the Malabar area the number of employed women is comparatively low. Most of the women are destined to be housewives looking after their children with the income of the husband from abroad or from the country itself. The family which depends on the income of the male restricts the women from the affairs of the family. In the process of decision making the men in the family plays the pivotal role. The suggestions of the wife or other female members are ignored or taken into little consideration. Even the matters concerning the children’s education and in the ceremonies related to marriage the final word is of the male in the family, as the income is derived from the male in the family.

Though Kudumbasree project and the rural employment guarantee programme made some ripples in the economical development of the rural women, corruption dismantled the expected aim of the project. Especially the Kudumbasree project is exploited by the rural men to attain the fund from the government. But the projects accomplished in making a collective mentality among the rural women. The rural employment guarantee program helped the rural women to have their own share in the family. The reservation for women in the local government in the rural areas has not attained the expected goal as most of them are controlled by men in the administration.

Since the family ties are very much strong in the rural areas, compared to the urban areas, the rituals and other unwanted functions are increasing in the rural areas. In the encouragement of these functions and rituals the women in the rural areas plays a pivotal role. In almost all the functions gifts are given in the form of golden ornaments and precious items. As the rich or middle class families in the rural families encourage this system the poor are forced to follow the system.

Though the rural women are entangled with a sea of problems the voices of women empowerment never reaches them properly. Lack of proper education and public awareness makes them unable to realize their own problems and find their solutions. The women empowerment associations and NGOs find difficult to mingle with the problems of rural women. Their voices are heard only in the exclusive issues which catch the attention of the media. But most of the rural women limit their acquaintance with media in the mega serials and entertainment news. The women activists like Sara Joseph, Ajitha and Sugathakumari are unfamiliar to most of the women in rural Kerala. So, women empowerment must begin from the root level, analyzing the problems and finding solutions for the fundamental problems of the rural women.
REFERENCES

