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**SOCIAL INSECURITY IN KERALA: SOME REFLECTIONS OF CONSUMERISM**

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**ABSTRACT**

*Based on Human Development Index, the state of Kerala is ranked first among Indian states. With high rate of literacy (both among male and female) and vertical mobility in the social set up, the state acquired the most progressive atmosphere for social progress. But, at present, this God's own land attracts attention as a crime prone region which deviates to Devil's path. The present attempt is to examine the extent of social insecurity in Kerala. The facts are verified in the light of data relating to various aspects of social life in the state. The findings substantiate that consumerism with its pervasive influence on socio-economic life of Kerala has contributed positively towards social distress and the situation invites concern of policy makers.*

**KEYWORDS**

social insecurity, crime rate, atrocities, dowry death, suicide rate.

**INTRODUCTION**

The state of Kerala is known for its consumerist tendencies in consumption and spending practices. Receiving a wide-spread nature, consumerist tendencies have emerged into a culture in the state. Though stemming from economic behavior, the adverse fallouts of this phenomenon on social life of Kerala is so serious that it invites concern of administrators, policy makers and social scientists. Security in social life is a major concern of every society. The present attempt is to examine the adverse effects of consumerism in the context of social security in Kerala. The facts are examined in the light of data relating to various aspects of social life in the state. This paper is arranged into five sections. Section two examines the social perspective of the state in general. Third and fourth sections provide brief explanations of consumerism and social insecurity in the state. Fifth section is devoted exclusively for the verification of the adverse impact of consumerism on the social life in the state. Last section offers concluding remarks.

**SOCIAL PERSPECTIVES OF THE STATE**

Kerala had contacts with various parts of the world from time immemorial. These contacts played a dominant role in formulating a Kerala culture. The services rendered by missionaries and other educative efforts contributed towards elevating this state as one of the most educated region in the country. The advent of social reform measures and their effect have played an important role in emanating people from the clutches of many societal taboos and restrictions that hindered social mobility in the state. The level of education along with social mobility worked to make the society more progressive. Large scale migration and consequent inflow of remittances resulted in drastic changes in the socio-economic environment of Kerala.

**CONSUMERISM IN KERALA**

'Consumerism is the cultural relationship between humans and consumer goods and services including behaviour, institutions and ideas' (Martin, 1993). It is economically manifested in the chronic purchasing of new goods and services, with little attention to their real properties. Among the states of India, Kerala is unique in many respects. The so called 'Kerala model' was a deviation from the accepted path in the process of economic development, ie, development from the primary sector to the tertiary sector, bypassing secondary sector (Mohan and Shyjan, 2007). In the state, consumerism might be considered as an offspring of this development experience. As part of vertical social mobility, people started to condone wealth over other variables as a means of status and recognition. In the new atmosphere, spending spree operated as a rewarding system and people started to respond positively through this type of behavior. The spending practices that Kerala society follows are indicative of the consumerist culture prevailing in the state (Nair, 1986; Zacaria, et.al, 2003). The admiration for the cost of outdoing behavior prompted individuals to resort to consumerism. In the state, Consumerism has a wide spread nature and the trend could be seen in all walks of social life.

**SOCIAL INSECURITY IN KERALA**

The term social insecurity is used to denote the prevalence of unhealthy situations leading to social distress. The land of Kerala is very rich in its diverse treasure required for the smooth progress of the society. It acquired the potentials for a healthy social life. It has high rate of literacy, high rate of female literacy, progressive social atmosphere and other positive indicators of human index. Despite this, the state is ranked very high in the case of crimes and other social evils. Kerala, the state with high human development has got a very high rank in crime rates also (economic review, 2010).

Consumerism is found to have produced dangerous consequences on the social life of Keralites. Youngsters might have developed hedonism as the philosophy of their social life. Very often, they might have resorted to foul means for achieving their social objectives. Money making 'at any cost and by whatever means' might have become the accepted philosophy of economic life. A kind of 'mammoth worship' is found to have re-emerged in the society. Accordingly, ruthless exploitation of fellow beings has not been considered a 'sin'. The attitude of the people to a large extent becomes 'money is the be all and end all of life'. The outcome of 'fast buck' seems to have appeared in the form of increasing number of crimes, cases of dowry deaths, aggressive activities of quotation groups, etc. A large portion of the people might have considered the activities like liquor consumption, using of drugs and narcotics, immoral sex, etc as the accepted form of pleasure.

**CONSUMERISM & SOCIAL INSECURITY – SOME EVIDENCE FROM KERALA**

It is widely believed that consumerism produces detrimental effect on the economy that it incorporates. The negative impacts that are expected to be associated with it may endanger the sustainability of the economy and may pose a serious threat to its future. Being a social illness and a massive phenomenon, its impact is supposed to extend to the areas of economic, social and political life as well. Consumerism may produce some serious fall outs on the society it engenders. 'Consumerism can affect more than buying habits and personal and family life' (Stearns: 2001).

As per the records of National Crime Records Bureau, the total cognizable **crime rate** of Kerala is far above the all India average. Statistics showed that Kerala has highest cognizable crime rate. The crime rate (crime per one lakh population) for Kerala during the year 2012 was 455.8 while that was much below 300 for other states and union territories. Statistics also showed that the crime rate in the state is on the rise. The number of crimes registered under Indian Penal Code increased from 1,10,620 in 2008 to 1,48,313 in 2010 and, to 2,05,337 in 2014. The crimes registered under Special and Local Laws also have shown an increase from 1, 41,788 in 2008 to 2,25,458 in 2010 and, to 4, 09,852 in 2014. As per records, atrocities against women have increased by 300 percent in the state during the period 1991 – 2003. It is to be noted that the increase in population growth in the state during this period was only by 14.58 percent. Contrary to the expectations, atrocities against women in this state with highest female literacy are on the rise. The number of cases increased from 8049 in 2009 to 13002 in 2012 and, to 13738 in 2013.



TABLE 1: EXTENT OF SELECTED OFFENCES AGAINST WOMEN IN THE STATE

Offences	Year			
	2008	2010	2012	2014
Rape	568	634	1019	1283
Molestation	2745	2936	3735	4357
Dowry deaths	31	22	32	19
Cruelty by husbands & relatives	4138	4797	5216	4810
Sexual harassment	258	537	498	257

Source: Economic Review, various volumes

The crime rate against women in Kerala was 23.2 against the all India average of 17.4 during the year 2009. Crimes against children reported during this year was 587. The number of complaints received by Kerala women’s commission during 2013 was 7089. The nature of the complaints shows the dominance of domestic crimes and family problems among the crimes. Of the total, there were 1371 cases of domestic violence and 1357 cases of family problems. The complaints regarding dowry harassment from this state which ranked first in literacy were 81.

TABLE 2: CASE-WISE DISTRIBUTION OF MAJOR COMPLAINTS

Nature of complaints	Number of cases	Nature of complaints	Number of cases
Domestic violence	1371	Family problems	1357
Harassment of women	444	Use of abuse language	199
Nuisance after drinking	114	Dowry harassment	81
Suspicious death	53	Harassment by husbands	37
rape	26	Attempt to rape	27
Cyber/Mobile nuisance	20	Sexual cheating by offering marriage	39

Source: Kerala Womens Commission/ Economic Review, 2015

Now a days there are evidence to view that crimes in the state is passing to the fields of Cyber crime. The recently reported case of online sex business offered a great shock to Kerala society.

The per capita **consumption of liquor** is said to be very high in the state. Kerala has been increasingly becoming a state of ‘drunkards’. ‘Liquor tragedies’ which take hundreds of lives are common in this small state. Almost every celebration passes the state by leaving sorrowful memories. ‘As per the available statistics, per capita liquor consumption is the highest in Kerala. The consumption of other banned drugs and narcotics is also on the rise in the state’ (Dr. Abdul Bari, Superintendent, Mental health care, Thiruvananthapuram, 2006). The youngsters are seemed to have developed a craze for liquors and drugs and, the campuses – even those of schools, have become the raring places of such habits. The intensity of such habits and its expansion, surpassing any controlling measures, has become a challenge for the very existence of the society and a threat to the future generation. A cause-wise examination of suicides in the state showed that drug abuse was the cause for 235 cases in the year 2008.

In liquor and narcotics, we may observe the roots of many **vices**. In their search for money, youths may have attracted towards various anti-social groups like theft groups, quotation groups or the camp of smugglers. The quotation groups have become more active these days in the state. We may not deny the role of politics in the emergence and existence of such anti-social groups. It is either by political ‘support’ or by ‘neglect’ that such groups became prominent in the state. ‘Muscle power’ and ‘criminalization’ have become the distinguishing marks of present day politics. Whatever is the cause, the existence of such groups and their growth has become a social nuisance. The under-ground activities of such groups as well as the rivalry among various groups, and the consequent ‘fights and deaths’ have become a threat to the peaceful social life in the state. The pity thing is that such activities are getting wider respect in the present social environment and such groups are being used extensively.

**Dowry** has become a ‘necessary evil’. This social nuisance has become a source for and force of consumerism. Considering the social spectrum of the country, we could see that, out of greed for acquiring products of western culture, expensive consumer goods are increasingly demanded as part of bride’s dowry by grooms. In the case of Kerala, huge amounts of money along with vehicles and consumer goods are demanded as dowry. A shortage in this amount or putting away a part of its payment may lead to the total collapse of the marital relations. The compulsion to obtain the consumer goods whatever its cost and also for additional money may very often manifest in the dowry deaths. In Kerala, dowry disputes were the reason for 32 suicides in the year 2008. Nineteen cases of dowry deaths are reported even during the year 2013. Actual cases of deaths and harassments may be higher than those reported. In this connection, let us recall a shocking incident that happened in the state a few years ago. A girl who was married off with a hefty dowry of 40 lakh rupees, a Lancer car and 317 sovereign of gold committed suicide following harassment from in-laws for more dowry. The root cause of such harassments and following cruelties may be found in the expectation of society that ‘men can re-marry and receive another dowry elsewhere’. To aggravate the situation, the mindset of the youth today has radically changed so as to expose even their family life to the realm of consumerism. J. Mohan Raj, principal counselor of a family court and a researcher on divorce cases, has pointed out that the average divorce cases that are filed in the state comes to around 70 a day. The situation is indicative of the radical change that has come about in the thinking of the youth. Justice D. Sreedevi, the then chair person of commission for women, is of opinion that the options before the present day generation are numerous and hence the youth today are not prepared to wedge an inch from their stand (Mathru bhumi Daily, 15<sup>th</sup> July, 2007).

‘**Suicide**’ is another important problem that invites social concern in Kerala. As per Economic review, 2010, the suicide rate in Kerala is 25.3 per one lakh which is more than double to the national average of 10.9 per lakh. The state with a population of about 3 percent of the country contributes about 10 percent of all suicides in India. Definitely, we may observe the prominent role of consumerism that contributed to the deterioration of mental health among Keralites. The situation may be looked into from different angles. Consumerism developed in the state may have enhanced the aspiration levels of people far ahead of their capacities. The continuous failure to cope up with the enhanced targets, even after resorting to all foul means, might have made them desperate. Suicide might have worked as a natural outcome of this desperation. Secondly, in order to lead a consumerist way of life, individuals borrowed loans from various credit agencies – both institutional and non-institutional. Prompted by the advertisement and persuasion from the sellers who arranged credit loans, the purchase expanded and the liabilities further aggravated.

TABLE 3: SUICIDE RATE – KERALA AND ALL INDIA

Rate (per 100000)	Year				
	2005	2006	2007	2008	2009
Kerala	27.7	26.8	26.3	25.0	25.3
All India	10.3	10.5	10.8	10.8	10.9

Source: economic review, 2010

The ceasing of loan facilities at the time when they are accustomed to consumerist life style may lead them to borrow money from money lenders. The ‘amalgamated liability’ they had to pay back and the impossibility of getting source to maintain acquired level of living might have worked much to the cases of suicide.

During the last decade, Kerala was shocked by massive suicide among the farmers. A total of 942 such suicide cases were reported during the period 2001-2007 (Assembly reports, Mathrubhumi, 27 March, 2007). The main reason reported was that of non-profitability in farming sector. But consumerism might have played prominent role in such incidences. The reports showed that the houses of many of such farmers were filled with consumer durables and, had made huge liabilities in the form of credit loans. Another element that may be attributed to suicide in the state is that of drug habit. The consumerist environment that prevails in the state gives respect to alcohol as a sign of mark. Out of the pressure of situation, people are attracted towards drinking habits. Gradually, they fall prey to drugs.

The diseases associated with drug addiction and the resultant depression might have led them to resort to suicide. The cause-wise analysis of suicides in the state shows that family problems and illness were the main reason. This was followed by bankruptcy and drug abuse.

TABLE 4: SUICIDES BY SOURCE IN KERALA

Source	Year					
	2003	2004	2005	2006	2007	2008
Bankruptcy/sudden change in eco status	1019	888	831	746	756	539
illness	2738	2821	2741	2874	2823	2739
Dowry disputes	10	15	17	19	22	32
Drug abuse	158	80	63	117	137	235
Family problems	2027	2028	2649	3418	3787	3737
Cause not known	1343	1189	852	612	806	601
Total suicides	9438	9053	9244	9026	8962	8569

Source: Economic review, various volumes

## CONCLUSION

It is found that the phenomenon of consumerism that existed and the situation that it created in the state brings insecurity to the social life of the Keralites. The out doing behavior and its social recognition along with social and mental pressures infused insecurity to social life in Kerala. As a result, the state is considered as the country's most crime-prone state (D. Thiwari, 2012). A search for the roots of many dismal situations in the state may lead us to the unsound and injudicious consumption practices in the state. Its growth and extension to various spheres of family and social life necessitate serious consideration and demands effective policy measures to counter its adverse fall outs. "... The major cost of the consumer society is the sense of generalized insecurity it engenders" (Baudrillard, 2003).

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