

## **Tourism as a New Profession – A Study among Women in Kerala**

**Dr Lekshmi V Nair**

*(Department of Humanities, Indian Institute of Space Science and Technology, Trivandrum, India)*

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**Abstract :** Tourism is one of the fastest developing businesses globally, growing on an scale of 4-6 per cent annually (UNWTO, 2004). Originating from the European tradition of the ‘Grand Tour’ in the mid-1800s, it has flourished on account of the revolution in the civil aviation industry, coupled with globalisation that pave wave for ‘open skies’ policy, as well as the emergence of the WTO that opened up borders for trade and commerce. In Kerala, it exposes the beautiful ecology - beaches, backwaters, lakes, lush green forests pristine mountains, wildlife, etc. spiced with arts, culture, and health, especially ayurveda. Over the years, women too have worked their way into the workforce in the tourism industry of Kerala, which was once predominantly male. The study exposes the employment in the tourism industry for women which ranges from front offices, F&B, housekeeping, personnel, landscaping and gardening, guides, transport - air, land and water, in the organized sector, down to the wayside shops, souvenir shops, food path hawkers, street vendors, florists, dhabas and teashops in the unorganized sector. The study evidences the factors which has motivated women to transform themselves from being a docile homemaker, into becoming an active employee in the tourism sector. It gives an insight of how mental blocks, social ethos, patriarchy and traditions, moderate women engagement in tourism, in Kerala.

**Keywords** - *Tourism, Women, Challenges, Prospects, Stigma*

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### **I. INTRODUCTION**

Tourism development has been an integral part of Sociology, as also from various perspectives economics, gender, commerce and politics. Tourism is studied from different perspectives - economic and cultural, with its implication for bringing about social change. Tourism also plays an important role in literature and in journalism, as the scope of tourism in these two areas is abundant. Tourism may also be regarded as a leisure time activity. The factor that discriminates between tourism and other leisure activities in general, is the element of travel. According to Cohen (1984) there are 8 main sociological perspectives on tourism, viz. tourism being a commercial hospitality, a mode of democratised travel, a modern leisure activity, a modern pilgrimage through traditions around the globe, an acculturative process, a type of ethnic relations, and finally, tourism may be irrefutably regarded as a the subtlest form of neo-colonialism. The finally mention quality may sound political, but it summarises the socio-politico-economic changes that Tourism as an industry is capable of. Although tourism is visualised as a concept modern of the modern times, it has a historical background. The charting of the new frontiers and the discovery of the continents and civilizations, are an outcome of man’s curious exploration of the unknown frontiers; in other words, conquest by the British and colonialisation that eventually followed much before man’s tryst with Renaissance, could be regarded as the most primordial form of tourism. The UN’s General Assembly in 1981, defined tourism as ‘an activity essential to the life of nations because of its direct effect on the social, cultural, educational and economic sectors of national society and their international relations’. Echoing these observations are the writings by Parker (1971) ascribing prime importance to the leisure part of tourism, while Jafari (1983) perceived tourism as ‘the study of man away from his usual habitat’. Even as early as the days of the Roman Empire and Persia, India a highly pluralistic society has been an attraction to the world from time immemorial. India’s diverse caste systems, religions, cultures, villages and people, continue to fascinate the whole world even today. Which other land has so different castes, classes, languages, faiths, attires, cuisines, music? Right from 17th century, different travellers Huen Tsang, Ibn Batuta came to India not just to trade spices, but rather to interact with the “Indian-ness” of the people of India. In fact, the Mughals, the Portuguese, and the British who encroached India, came to India not only for political reasons, but also with the intention of exploiting the cultural and natural resources of the country.

Historically, India consisted of more than 500 princely states. According to history there were a number of empires in India, the prominent among which were the royalties of Mysore, Gwalior, Travancore, Cochin, Kashmir, etc. The kings who were ruling these vast empires invited the foreigners for several purposes, which gave them the occasion to visit India. These initial historical visits to this country increased in frequency over the centuries and gradually evolved into the vast tourism industry as we see it today. As India comes of age, we see tourists from all parts of the world coming down to experience India.

During the past 60 years, i.e., post-independence, several changes have embraced India; the same too applies to India and includes the field of tourism. However, today, tourism is one of the biggest industries in India owing

to its natural beauty and exotic destinations. Kashmir and Kerala were considered as the most preferred destinations alias 'visitors' paradise.' Because of the political mayhem in Kashmir, and the warnings issued to them, tourists from overseas prefer Kerala for their holidays. Although tourism has been having many ups and downs due to the political uncertainties, Kerala has earned the credit of being a Super Brand. Kerala enjoys an added advantage thanks to its "all-weather" potential for tourism. Thus, today tourism in Kerala is one of the most happening and fast developing industries.

The state of Kerala, although geographically one of the smallest states in India, has one of the richest ecological coverage of beaches, forests, mountains, backwaters and perennial rivers. The majestic elephants of Kerala and the temple festivals go hand in hand. As a matter of fact none of the festivals are complete without the majestic display by the gigantic and graceful beings - elephants. Thus, tourism has developed an elephant culture. Onam, the harvest festival of Kerala in addition to other celebrations such as pooram, vallamkali and music festivals, have tourists flocking to Kerala, around the year. Even during off-seasons, Kerala enjoys the Monsoon season, driven by the South-west Monsoon. Ayurveda is another specialty of Kerala which has much acclaim throughout the world, thanks to its rejuvenating qualities as a comprehensive system of medicine. Many tourists flock to Kerala for undergoing the rejuvenating Ayurveda treatment.

As an industry, tourism supports several sectors – financial, health, retail, handicrafts, cottage industries and performing arts in addition to many other peripheral sectors. Incidentally, it is women, who are involved in most of these. Tourism, which was once alien to women folk, has over the years started to engage them in large numbers in different areas of the industry – hospitality, ticketing, guided tours, ayurveda clinics, etc.

The structure of tourism is both vertical and horizontal. Horizontally, the industry includes health resorts- ayurveda, naturopathy, river and backwater tourism, hill tourism, wildlife tourism, etc. Vertically, the tourism structure ranges from the small tea shop owners, through guides to managers of big hotels, from tea shops to the boat houses. The present study considers Cohen's structure of tourism and applies the gender tourism aspect of his theory. According to him, the main structure of tourism is the relation between tourist and locals, the structure and functioning of tourist system and the consequence of tourism.

Tourism is considered a very effective tool for poverty eradication and employment generation. Employment is seen as being of both a direct (in accommodation or tourism facilities) and indirect nature (arising from secondary tourism provision or in work resulting from the general increased spending power within the 'host' area) (Archer, 1982; Mathieson and Wall, 1982). However, it is widely accepted that employment opportunities do arise from tourism development. It is the quality, and type of work activities available, the differential access of men and women to these employment opportunities, the seasonality of employment, and the existing and new gender divisions of labour generated, which are important for development. Though W.T.O. and other international bodies have highlighted women's achievements in the tourism sector, studies point out that women are yet to get equal opportunities and status on par with men, in this burgeoning industry. (Bagguley, 1990; Rees and Fielder, 1992). Levy and Lerch, 1991; Monk and Alexander, (1986) have shown that in many tourism development areas employment opportunities have been confined to unskilled, low paid work, such as kitchen staff, chambermaids, 'entertainers' and retail clerks. In addition, calls for the 'flexibility' of service as envisaged by a new dynamic tourism (Poon, 1989, 1990) that can easily respond to changes in demand, further complicates employment structuring.

Today, the hotel industry engages women in large numbers in various cadres. Women are involved at different levels - in the front office to receive and register guests; in the kitchen on duties such as cooking and washing; in housekeeping for cleaning, sweeping, and laundry; over sundry activities such as providing supplies, thatching, handicrafts, dressing the guests in traditional attires; even in performing arts and even decorating the hotel for special occasions. All the tourism segments mentioned above will have attached to them ayurveda clinics as well as health clubs. Both of these generally employ women because of the nature of the work involved and the disposition required for it. It might not be exaggeration to state that there were more women engaged on wages, than salary.

Women are preferred for their engagement in the tourism industry for more than one reason:

- female employees are generally more pleasant and are better predisposed to deal with tourists than their counterparts
- emerging trends of home renting/paying guest accommodation to foreigners fetch them an additional income
- demographically speaking, more women are coming forward and asserting their positions due to their changing status in society
- more women are taking to courses in travel, tourism, hotel management and catering
- women are more preferred for several segments in the hospitality industry especially reception, housekeeping, ayurveda treatment, tour guides, etc.

It is estimated that in Kerala, the largest inflow of foreign exchange is through tourism. Thus, women are actively but indirectly involved as ambassadors as well as marketing agents on behalf of the entire industry.

They are not only engaged in tourism, but also directly and indirectly promote the state's economy. The very fact that it is remunerative and suited to their temperament and desires, attract young girls to take up work in the tourism industry, making it an attractive occupation for women. A peripheral sector, yet a major influence of tourism, and one that supports it, is the hotel industry. Hence, this sector is regarded as the main area of the present study. The present study is on women who promote and operate in the hotel industry in Kerala. Hence the objectives of the proposed study are to study the challenges faced by the women in the tourism industry and to study the prospects of tourism industry for women.

## **II. METHODOLOGY**

Qualitative method was used to collect from the women employed in the tourism sector. We have used the "restaurant, catering and hotel industry" to provide a proxy for the "tourism industry": these sectors are the largest employers in the tourism industry overall. Tourism industry in Kerala are mainly categorized into – hill tourism, rural tourism, backwater tourism, city tourism and beech tourism. After the review of secondary data available and discussion with experts in the field, the different areas for data collection was finalized. Thus Thekkady (rural tourism), Munnar (hill tourism), Trivandrum (city tourism), Kumarakom (backwater tourism) and Kovalam (beech tourism) were selected as the area of study. The pilgrim and ayurveda tourism has been excluded from the purview of the study. After the review of secondary data available and discussion with experts in the field, the different areas for data collection were finalized. In each category studied, a government and private hotel each, was selected using purposive sampling method. The purposive sampling method was used since the investigator wanted to purposefully include those hotels with maximum number of women employed in the different hierarchies. Case studies were conducted among women employed in various echelons of the hotel industry. The findings of these are recorded below.

## **III. FINDINGS**

There were also some interesting observations regarding the attitude of women engaged at various tiers in this sector. There was a marked difference in the perception and mindset of those who were professionally trained for higher level jobs, as against those who were unqualified and confined to lower echelons. The ones taking up jobs in the upper echelons had professional training, were consciously confident and determined of moving 'up the ladder'. They also believed in the capability of the Private sector to reward competency and efforts much almost immediately. The motivation of a qualified manager differed remarkably from that of an unqualified housekeeper. While the former being professionals and daring to go a distance, the latter perceived the employment to be safe as they were close to their homes, or because they were second generation workers familiar with the environment, on account of their parents being employed in this sector. Others found such employment, especially in the Government sector, to be safe and to their advantage given the fact that they could consistently earned supplementary income, with limited involvement. Security and flexible timings which did not hinder their family life seemed to be their primary agenda in the area of employment. Only those in the higher echelons had real interest in the field and came out of love for this job with suitable qualification and training. They were fascinated by the scope of the industry and had this ambition since childhood. The students of tourism studies aspiring to man the higher echelons cite many reasons for being attracted to the sector and perceptively described careers in tourism as 'glamorous', 'exciting', 'demanding' and 'active.'

The Tourism sector presented numerous challenges. Many came attracted by the perceived glitz and glamour. However, this glamour and glitz eventually were challenged, when it came to actual work. Balancing work with married life, domestics and work at home was a major cause stressor and also the cause of women leaving the tourism industry. Hence, support from the in-laws and more importantly an understanding spouse who was conscious of the demands of the industry as well as knowledgeable of the nature of the work, were a strong imperative for their survival. In the hotel field, a "day-off" was subject to guest flow and season; they might have to work on Holidays and leave days, even though it may be compensated. Sometimes, they may also have to remain longer at the hotel, until the work gets over. Many women had to quit job when their spouses or respective families saw priorities differently and forced them to resign from work in order to serve the family better. Balancing the needs of the family and achieving good family adjustments is the key to more participation of women. In private sector most of the burden being on the permanent staff, managements were lenient towards the contract and trainee personnel; the timings were comfortable and flexible and they rarely had to stay beyond 5pm. However, the management in the Government sector had to be strict as most of the hotels were understaffed with regard to permanent staff. Another factor that posed a challenge to aspirants, was the interpersonal relations - superiors and subordinates - in immediate work environment. The lack of support manifested as discrimination. This was especially faced by management trainees or contract personnel occupying the higher ups in the Government sector. Some of the women working in the government sector, stressed about the need to have a Godfather. Even in the private sector it was difficult for a woman to assert herself. Men there too in general did not accept the authority of women and they made use of an opportunity to

put down women. Women working as managers and supervisors faced this problem as men were found to be reluctant to obey orders from a female. Some male members also made it a point to challenge the fresh recruits. However, none of the interviewees at the lower level perceived any gender discrimination; this was non-existent on jobs such as heavy cleaning, dusting, laundry, and housekeeping. The lack of accommodation and the absence of adequate transportation failed to attract women to the industry. In good many cases, given the conservative attitude of the society posed problems; job in hotels came with stigma. People reacted with an air of caution when told that the woman worked in a hotel. The operatives, who come from lower and middle class socio-economic backgrounds, experienced much stigma when compared to the women in the higher echelons. In the case of the former, the family slowly accepted as they began to contribute substantially and more importantly consistently to the family pool. The portrayal by the electronic media and film industry, especially of themes on crime and criminal activities being undertaken in hotels, put the industry personnel in bad light among the public. Harassment from a guest was a very rare occurrence. But women preferred those settings where the guest traffic was better. The work conditions were definitely good. The better units in the government sector allowed grievances to be voiced to unit chiefs and also during staff meetings. Such establishments took up issues related to work as well as inter-personal problems. The managements in Private sector, especially resorts, were even more proactive; they convened on their own initiative an annual staff family gathering and organised tours. This primed the families making them more loyal to the establishment. But despite all the attraction, turnover among women was substantially high. The reasons were simple; the job was often tedious and demanding, not necessarily glamorous as perceived from outside. Even though women face several challenges in their lives, tourism and hospitality has opened new avenues in the lives of these women. Learning to mix and deal with strange people from different lands, and building good contacts, are other advantages they perceive of working in the tourism industry. Such exposure helped in totally “transforming their personality” was the oft repeated refrain, especially among girls hailing from middle class backgrounds and aspiring to rise higher. For many especially those in the front office of the government sector a permanent Government job offers more security. Women have become more confident to deal with different kind of people and are able to handle tensions and heavy work load in a more relaxed manner. Most of the women were unanimous about their happiness in meeting important people, the improvement in their personality and communications skills and regarding the confidence on how to handle things smoothly. Learning to mix and deal with strange people from different lands, and building good contacts, are other advantages they perceive of working in the tourism industry. Most of the women claimed that their language had improved, and she has learned how to behave and interact well. Many vouch of having also learnt to dress properly. An executive House Keeper says that she has become more social, has improved public relations, keep meeting new people and learn about people all the time. Problem solving skills has also improved substantially through this job. Attitudes have changed remarkably too, and they were confident in meeting a lot of people. Confidence level has gone up. Others explain how “stage fear” (self-consciousness) has reduced and presentation skills have improved. For a waitress in the government sector, the greatest development she believes, is her ability understand people. She meets different kinds of people with varied temperaments on a daily basis; so, she has an ability to predict character, adjust according to people's temperament and tailor services exactly as they expect. She also has developed patience and also takes things very easy. KTDC for them is a cocoon and they know personally all the staff- so they work in a protected atmosphere.

The House Keepers, hailing from low income families, were extremely happy when they meet VVIPs particularly; one of them shared the excitement of meeting, Dr. APJ Abdul Kalam, the then President and many other celebrities. They were proud to be working here. Hospitality Industry has provided them with livelihood. Nothing could be more phenomenal than the change in confidence that employment brings in. Money gives them power to go out, purchase and even influence decisions to a great extent. This confidence grew over the years, and moreover, they had a constant income and could contribute to the family income. A Senior Office Assistant was happy that she was able to support her family. The job has given her independence. Many have bought land and house, are economically developed and have gained dignity and reputation in the society. Wider knowledge and awareness, improved communication skills, are other added advantages. She would never recommend the hotel field to her children or other women unless they were employed in the ‘office’, because she said that for a woman looking after her family was a very important priority, and on hotel jobs they might have to stay late. For those women working in the lower echelons, they were better able to earn their livelihood, and further the employment was safe and the timings comfortable.

#### **IV. CONCLUSION**

Even though women face several challenges in their lives, tourism and hospitality has opened new avenues in the lives of these women. For those hailing from low socio-economic backgrounds, such an employment not only offers supplementary income, but it also empowers them psychologically and socially, giving them the necessary confidence and much exposure to face the real world. Nevertheless, one could not

overlook the challenges posed at work. The work during peak season demanded women sacrifice statutory provisions related to welfare and leave. The domestic front by way domestics, child birth and care, unsupportive in-laws and paranoiac spouses complicated their life. Further, women had to struggle silently as they were expected to fulfil all household chores on their own, before presenting to work. Their domestic work was not considered as remunerable and earnings only regarded as “supplementary. Work ‘in a hotel’ bore a stigma, as it was linked with reputation and virtue of the woman, in the eyes of the public. Because of this husbands and in-laws tacitly forced them to move to less visible positions to save the latter from embarrassment. Pseudo-morality of the siblings, family and the society at large clashed with the liberal values of the aspirants taking a toll on their very survival within the industry. At work, male colleagues were reluctant to accept orders from trainee women and invariably harassed their female colleagues by taking women lightly, pass jokes and gossiping. Trade Unions were keen at retaining those who toed their ideology and complied with their ‘work by rule’ strategy and made concerted efforts to discourage those otherwise. The nature and the locale of the property and the guest traffic were significant factors that determined the ambience of the work place. Media portrayal of hotels as breeding grounds for crime, drugs, booze and misdemeanors, dealing a huge blow to the public’s confidence in the tourism industry. But, women in spite of resistance at different levels braved on and transformed life for themselves and others around too. Kinnaird and Hall argue that tourism involves processes constructed out of complex and varied social realities and relations that are often hierarchical and usually unequal. The division of labour, the social construction of “landscape” - both natural and human - influenced how societies construct the cultural other. An exploration of the relationships and realities of experiences of tourist and host, all show differences, and inequalities do indeed exist. Thus, tourism’s identification as an industry based on the economic, social and political power relations between nations or groups of people represents the extension of politics of gender relations.

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