

A QUARTER OF A MILLION WOMEN IN KERALA EARN LIVELIHOODS WITH DIGNITY

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According to the Food and Agriculture Organisation (FAO), 237.7 million Indians are currently undernourished. Yet, the millions of Indians whose food rights are so flagrantly violated are completely voiceless in the policy space. India's problem is not only to secure food, but to secure food justice.

Food justice means that people must have the right to produce food with dignity, have control over the parameters of production, get just value for their labour and their produce. Food justice must entail both production and distribution. Its fundamental premise must be that governments have a non-negotiable obligation to address food insecurity. They must also address the structural factors that engender that insecurity. Most governments, however, appear neither willing nor able to deliver food justice. It needs therefore the devolution of power and resources to the local level, where millions of protagonists, with their knowledge of local needs and situations, can create a just food economy.

“Sangha Krishi” - a collective struggle

Something on these lines has been unfolding in Kerala. The experiment, “Sangha Krishi,” or group farming, is part of Kerala's anti-poverty programme “Kudumbashree.” It is a collective struggle of close to a quarter million women who are farming nearly 10 million acres of land. Initiated in 2007, it was seen as a means to enhance local food production. Kerala's women embraced this vision enthusiastically. As many as 44, 225 collectives of women farmers have sprung up across the State. These collectives lease fallow land, rejuvenate it, farm it and then either sell the produce or use it for consumption, depending on the needs of members. On an average, Kudumbashree farmers earn Rs.15,000-25,000 per year (sometimes higher, depending on the crops and the number of yields annually).

Kudumbashree is a network of 4 million women, mostly below the poverty line. It is not a mere ‘project’ or a ‘programme’ but a social space where marginalised women can collectively pursue their needs and aspirations. The primary unit of Kudumbashree is the neighbourhood group (NHG). Each NHG consists of 10-20 women; for an overwhelming majority, the NHG is their first ever space outside the home. NHGs are federated into an Area Development Society (ADS) and these are in turn federated into Community Development Societies (CDSs) at the panchayat level. Today, there are 213,000 NHGs all over Kerala. Kudumbashree office-bearers are elected, a crucial process for its members. *“We are poor. We don't have money or connections to get*

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elected - only our service”, is a common refrain. These elections bring women into politics. And they bring with them a different set of values that can change politics.

The NHG is very different from a self-help group (SHG) in that it is structurally linked to the State through the institutions of local self-government. This helps ensure that local development reflects the needs and aspirations of communities, who are not reduced to mere “executors” of government programmes. What is sought is a synergy between democratisation and poverty reduction; with Kudumbashree, this occurs through the mobilisation of poor women's leadership and solidarity. “Sangha Krishi” or group farming is just one example of how this works. It is transforming the socio-political space that women inhabit — who in turn transform that space in vital ways.

An experiment with important results

This experiment is having three major consequences. First, there is a palpable shift in the role of women in Kerala's agriculture. This was earlier limited to daily wage work in plantations - at wages much lower than those earned by men. Thousands of Kudumbashree women - hitherto underpaid agricultural labourers - have abandoned wage work to become independent producers. Many others combine wage work with farming. With independent production comes control over one's time and labour, over crops and production methods and, most significantly, over the produce. Since the farmers are primarily poor women, they often decide to use a part of their produce to meet their own needs, rather than selling it. Every group takes this decision democratically, depending on levels of food insecurity of their members. In Idukki, where the terrain prevents easy market access and food insecurity is higher, farmers take more of their produce home - as opposed to Thiruvananthapuram where market access is better and returns are higher.

Second, “Sangha Krishi” has enabled women to salvage their dignity and livelihoods amidst immense adversity. One example is the story of Subaida in Malappuram. Widowed and then deserted, with three young children, she found no means of survival other than cleaning dead bodies. Hardly adequate as a livelihood, it also brought her unbearable social ostracism. Now Subaida is a proud member of a farming collective and wants to enter politics. In the nine districts I visited, there was a visible, passionate commitment to social inclusion amongst Kudumbashree farmers. Our survey of 100 collectives across 14 districts found that 15 per cent of the farmers were Dalits and Adivasis and 32 per cent came from the minority communities.

Third, “Sangha Krishi” is producing important consequences for the Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Scheme in Kerala (MGNREGS). Because of Kerala's high wages for men, the MGNREGS in Kerala has become predominantly a space for women (93 per cent of the employment generated has gone to women where the national average is 50). From the beginning, synergies were sought between the MGNREGS, the People's Plan and Kudumbashree. Kudumbashree farmers strongly feel this has transformed MGNREGS work.

“We have created life (...) and food, which gives life, not just 100 days of manual labour”, said a Perambra farmer. In Perambra, Kudumbashree women, working with the *panchayat*, have rejuvenated 140 acres that lay fallow for 26 years. The same land now grows rice, vegetables and

tapioca. Farmers also receive two special incentives - an 'area incentive' for developing land and a 'production incentive' for achieving certain levels of productivity. These amounted to over Rs 200 million in 2009-10. They were combined with subsidised loans from banks and the State, and seeds, input and equipment from Krishi Bhavan and the *panchayats*.

Challenges

However, serious challenges remain. Kudumbashree farmers are predominantly landless women working on leased land; there is no certainty of tenure. Lack of ownership also restricts access to credit, since they cannot offer formal guarantees on the land they farm. Whenever possible, Kudumbashree collectives have started buying land to overcome this uncertainty. But an alternative institutional solution is clearly needed. It is also difficult for women to access resources and technical know-how - the relevant institutions (such as crop committees) are oriented towards male farmers. There is also no mechanism of risk insurance.

Is this a sustainable, replicable model of food security? It is certainly one worth serious analysis. First, this concerted effort to encourage agriculture is occurring when farmers elsewhere are forced to exit farming - in large numbers. It re-connects food security to livelihoods, as any serious food policy must. But more importantly, the value of Sangha Krishi lies in that it has become the manifestation of a deep-rooted consciousness about food justice amongst Kerala's women. Kannyama, the president of Idamalakudy, Kerala's first tribal *panchayat*, says she wants to make her community entirely self-sufficient in food. She wants Sangha Krishi produce to feed every school and *anganwadi* (child care centres) in her *panchayat* - to ensure that children get local, chemical-free food. Elsewhere, Kudumbashree farmers plan to protest the commercialisation of land. Even in the tough terrain of Idukki's Vathikudy *panchayat*, women were taking a census of fallow land in the area that they could cultivate. Some 100,000 women practise organic farming and more wish to. Kudumbashree farmers speak passionately about preventing ecological devastation through alternative farming methods.

In the world of Sangha Krishi, food is a reflection of social relations. And only new social relations of food can combat the twin violence of hunger and injustice.

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