

MGNREGS and Kerala - The untold story

A compelling story of empowerment has been unfolding in the wake of the MGNREGS programme in the state of Kerala. This is the story of how a socially engineered convergence of the scheme with the panchayati raj institutions of the state and the state sponsored community network of poor women is affecting the lives and capabilities of the poor across the state. While the transformative potential of the NREGS programme has been time and again brought out through studies that have looked at its impact on poverty, labour markets and the environment surrounding the poor, the aspect of capability enhancement of the social organisations and of the women who are primary stakeholders in the scheme has not been comprehensively discussed.

There are lessons to be learnt from the Kudumbashree experience of the MGNREGS programme, lessons that are missed perhaps because the focus of enquiry has been the programme and not the community structures associated with it. But understanding capability enhancement in all its socio economic dimensions is crucial for a full understanding of the impact of MGNREGS and for developing models of integration of people's institutions with the programme. The Sameeksha compilation hints at some of these experiences, but there is a lot more waiting to be discovered.

Women participation in the labour force

Kerala is unique in the country for the extent of women participation in the MGNREGS. Women person days as a percentage of the total person days for the year 2011-12 for Kerala is 93% (as per the official website of MGNREGA). Not only is this the highest rate of participation of women in the programme in the country, the rate is much higher than that of the 4 other states which have crossed 50 % in women participation – Tamil Nadu (74%), Rajasthan (69%), Himachal Pradesh (60%) and Andhra Pradesh (58%). The following table shows the progress of women participation over the years since the inception of MGNREGS in these 4 states.

State	06-07	07-08	08-09	09- 10	10-11	11-12
Kerala	66	71	85	88	90	93
Andhra Pradesh	55	58	58	58	57	58
Himachal Pradesh	12	30	39	46	48	60
Rajasthan	67	69	67	67	68	69
Tamil Nadu	81	82	80	83	83	74
All India	40	43	48	48	48	47

(Source: Ministry of Rural Development, Government of India, *MGNREGA Sameeksha 2012*)

The Sameeksha report of MoRD suggests the following reasons for the greater participation of women in these states

- Cultural acceptance of female participation in the labour force
- Influence of Self-Help Groups (SHGs)
- Effective institutions at the State and local government level that are committed to promoting female participation in MGNREGA
- Wage differentials between private sector and MGNREGA

It is pointed out in the report that high rationing in poorer states could be due to a lack of awareness

or due to a high demand and limited supply of work opportunities wherein women are forced to compete with men for employment, and the latter are usually favoured for manual labour, and that in places where the market wages are higher than MGNREGA, men undertake jobs in the market and women seek employment under the Scheme. The influence of the wage differential on the extent of participation of women seems to be borne out in a comparison of the wage rates in these states. The following table compares the MGNREGS wage rates with the wage rates for casual labour in these 4 states -

State	MGNREGS wage rate	Male casual labour rate	Female casual labour rate	Difference
Andhra Pradesh	91.9	115.4	75.7	39.7
Himachal Pradesh	109.5	141.4	110.2	31.2
Kerala	120.6	226.6	119.3	107.3
Rajasthan	87.4	132.3	94.3	38
Tamil Nadu	71.6	132.1	72.6	59.5
All India	90.2	101.5	68.9	32.6

(Source : Ministry of Rural Development, Government of India, *MGNREGA Sameeksha 2012*)

In all these states except Andhra Pradesh, the female wage rate is seen to be very near the MGNREGS rate. Kerala and Tamil Nadu have a significant difference in the male and female labour rates, and in both these states as well as in Rajasthan, the male labour rate is much higher than the MGNREGS rate, making the scheme unattractive to the male labourer. This could explain the reason for the higher proportion of women in the scheme. However it is important to look at another important indicator of the participation of women in the work force. The statistical profile on women labour for the year 2005-06 shows the percentage of participation of women labour (as proportion of total female population) (WPR) in these states -

State	Women WPR (rural)
Andhra Pradesh	43.28
Himachal Pradesh	46.42
Rajasthan	40.63
Tamil Nadu	41.40
Kerala	15.99
All India	30.79

(source – labourbureau.nic.in)

Andhra Pradesh, Tamil Nadu, Rajasthan and Himachal Pradesh have WPRs that are much higher than the all India average, whereas Kerala has the lowest WPR for women among major states. Other major states with female WPR lower than 25 are Bihar, Assam, Uttar Pradesh and Punjab. In all of these states excepting Punjab, the participation of women in the MGNREGS is below 30%. (in Punjab it is 43%, which is still below the All India average of 47%). Jammu and Kashmir, the only other state with extremely low women participation in MGNREGS (18%) has a female WPR of 26.2. There appears to be a direct correspondence of low WPR with low women participation in the MGNREGS – *except in the state of Kerala.*

A state with such low levels of women participation in the work force can hardly be said to provide a cultural climate conducive to acceptance of women participation in the work force. It stands to reason therefore that a good proportion of the women in the MGNREGS have not been mobilised from the existing female workforce. That would make their participation in such large proportion

even more intriguing, and it is important to figure out who or what were those catalysts that shaped MGNREGS implementation in Kerala.

Panchayati Raj and Kudumbashree

With the wage rate on offer in the scheme unattractive to male labour and the work force participation of women being abysmally low, it was widely feared that the scheme would have hardly any off take in Kerala. MGNREGS had a very sluggish start in Kerala. It was the synergy that was built between the panchayats and the community organisations of women that turned the programme around in the state. The grama panchayats in Kerala are powerful institutions, with both personnel and financial resources at their command and the power and authority for decision making including administrative sanctions. The annual plan formulation exercise has also brought them into regular contact with a variety of institutions and individuals involved in community development and welfare. One of the offshoots of panchayati raj in Kerala has been the nurture and support of community institutions by panchayats and their mutual collaboration for attaining specific development goals.

One such institution that has been supported by Government at both state and panchayat levels has been the Community Development Societies (CDS) of Kudumbashree. Kudumbashree is the State Poverty Eradication Mission of the Government of Kerala, which has been federating neighbourhood groups (NHGs) of poor women into ward level and panchayat level citizen bodies that work in tandem with the local self governments for poverty reduction and local governance. The ward level federation is called Area Development Society (ADS) and the panchayat level federation is the Community development Society (CDS), which is registered under the Charitable Societies Act. Unlike federated structures of Self Help Groups in the other states, in Kerala the Kudumbashree CDS is embedded in the grama panchayat – the Panchayat President is the patron of the CDS, and the ward member, the patron of the ADS. The Member Secretary of the CDS is an officer of the panchayat and 5 women members of the panchayat are ex officio members of the CDS. An Evaluation Committee headed by the Panchayat President oversees the integration of the activities of the CDS with those of the panchayat. The CDS plays an important role in ensuring the participation of women in the grama sabhas and in articulating community demand in development projects in the panchayat level working groups set up for project formulation. Dissemination of information on schemes and mobilisation of poor women to access entitlements is also an important function of the CDS. The core SHG function of thrift and credit is limited to the NHG level, with the CDS playing a facilitative role for bank linkage.

The average grama panchayat of Kerala has over 30000 population. Due to the large size, it is the panchayat ward that functions as the grama sabha in Kerala. It is pertinent to note in this context that **98%** of all panchayat wards in the state have ward level ADS structures. The extent of structural synchronisation of the panchayat and the CDS structures made dissemination of schemes spearheaded by the panchayat a fairly easy task. An ¹evaluative study of MGNREGS in a panchayat by the Centre for Development Studies, undertaken to examine the dynamics of community participation and panchayat facilitation in the scheme, follows the processes by which the scheme was carried forward in Aryanad panchayat, Thiruvananthapuram district; the gist of which is reproduced below.

During the first phase of registration in Aryanad panchayat in the year 2008, only 30 people had registered, against a population of 32481. The panchayat was very worried by the lacklustre response to the programme and discussed the matter in the panchayat working groups. It was decided to conduct awareness and publicity campaigns. All Panchayat members were given training on the programme and Kudumbashree was roped in for awareness building, job card registration and

1

implementation. A workshop was held by the panchayat with participation from the general body of CDS, Panchayat members, and representatives of voluntary organisations. Following this, ADS (ward level) conventions of the NHGs were held led by the concerned panchayat member. ADS members then did house to house visits with notices on NREGS and information on special grama sabha for NREGS. The ADS organised visits of NHGs to work sites. Special grama sabhas to discuss MGNREGS were held in all wards – The Panchayat President, Resource Persons of the panchayat, and CDS members explained the scheme in the grama sabha. Kudumbashree was also involved in facilitating registration of workers. Job card applications were made available through NHGs. The ADS and the CDS took the lead to fill, collect and submit applications to the panchayat. The ADS was also involved in distributing job cards. How the ward became a functional unit for both dissemination and mobilisation through combining the legitimacy of the panchayat member and the reach of the community based women's organisation is well brought out through this example.

When the local branch of the Public sector bank indicated they were unwilling to open accounts for NREGS citing shortage of staff, the Panchayat President made arrangements with the Aryanad Service Cooperative Bank for opening the accounts. With the extensive involvement of the CDS that was actively canvassed by the panchayat, it was not surprising that women of neighbourhood groups started getting interested in the scheme.

The details of MGNREGS workers of the panchayat for the year 2010 -11 (the year of the evaluation) are given below:

Registered families	4607
Job card holders	4599
Families demanded work	2567
Families received work	2558

In Aryanad panchayat, 90 % of the workers are members of the Kudumbashree network. This pattern of representation of women of Kudumbashree in MGNREGS is seen all across the state. The engagement of the network in dissemination and mobilisation evidently helped in bringing women into MGNREGS, despite an unfavourable work climate. But while mobilisation would help registration, it would not necessarily generate demand for work. This is where a small but significant decision of the state Government comes into play.

An executive decision was taken by the Government to have all 'mates' (work supervisors) for the programme from among the ADS of Kudumbashree. Kerala became the only state in the country with 100% women 'mates' in the programme. The 1.2 lakh women mates (selected from the general body of the ADS) who were jointly trained by Rural Development Department and Kudumbashree Mission, then proceeded to identify work opportunities, mobilise groups for work, prepare estimates in consultation with the overseer or engineer, supervise work and provide amenities and work implements at the worksite, prepare and submit muster rolls, and handle emergencies at work.

There are 11.6 lakh women workers in MGNREGS in Kerala. A good proportion of the women who sought work under MGNREGS were not agricultural labour or casual labourers but housewives who were not in the labour market to begin with. In many cases their presence in MGNREGS was only grudgingly permitted by their families. What prompted these women to come out and undertake work that they did not know, which involved a level of physical exertion that they were unfamiliar with and which ran the risk of disapprobation from their families? A commonly heard refrain was that this was work 'for the government', which gave it an aura of respectability that private manual work did not carry. Second was the power of the collective. The involvement of the network in nearly every activity of MGNREGS from awareness on its rights dimensions to the conduct of social audit, the pressure from the panchayat, the presence of a mate who was identified as 'one of us'

and who mobilised women from their immediate neighbourhood, the opportunity to move into collective farming, the positioning of CDS and ADS convenors for MGNREGS, all of these were part and parcel of the effect that the collective brought to bear on women. Here is what ²Sonia, a mate from Mulavukad had to say – ‘I was made ADS chairperson in 2008, following which I became NREGS mate. In the beginning there were only 13 women to do work. One month later the number had become 40 regular workers. Last year only my ward had managed 100 person days of work - 13 chechis managed a 100 days. On the CDS anniversary, the NREGS chechis and myself were given set and mundu as token of respect. That experience motivated me to work harder this year. 20 people (including me) completed 100 days by November this year.’

Protection of the marginalised – the Social Security dimension

Even more so than the neighbourhood group, the worksite became a place for bonding and mutual reinforcement. A profiling done in Aryanad panchayat, showed that all the male workers were either senior citizens who had been pushed out of the job market on account of age, or were physically or mentally disabled persons, who were unable to enter the regular job market. 34% of the women who came into MGNREGS were also above 50 years of age. The age wise break up of the MGNREGS worker profile of Aryanad panchayat is given below.

age	Regd	worked	%
18- 30	1100	232	8%
30-40	2192	827	28%
40-50	2312	888	30%
50- 60	1918	688	24%
>60	946	300	10%
<i>total</i>	8468	2935	100%

5 lakh of the 12.55 lakh workers in MGNREGS in Kerala are over the age of 50 years.

An interesting dynamic of intergenerational skill transfer and social security was to be found at the worksite. The workers confided that many of the senior members of the group were unable to complete the 8 hours of arduous manual work, and their shortfall was being compensated by the more able bodied persons in the group. But they all were insistent on retaining the elders – they had knowledge, and skills that were lacking in the younger generation, and were able to guide them about techniques and traditions.

Numerous cases have been documented where the women donate their earnings to help a fellow worker to tide over a health emergency or domestic crisis. A mate who is also a CDS member of SN Puram panchayat narrated thus –‘One of our worker's husband fell sick and was bedridden. All the workers put in Rs 25 each as support from our side. Another worker's husband died of a heart attack. The workers have been supporting the family with provisions.’ There have been moments of ridicule and allegations as well – the transition from house wife to labourer has not been easy, and if it were not for the cushion provided by the sense of solidarity that evolved, many vulnerable women would have dropped out of the programme. Lalitha Prasad of an NHG in Kadapra, Pathanamthitta district puts it succinctly : ‘I have been working for 2 years now in NREGS. When we go out to work, there a lot of people who make fun of us – saying that we are waste collectors, drainage cleaners – but we know exactly what to tell the likes of them. Whatever we do we are not going to beg in front of anybody for money. People who are ailing, people who can barely read and write, all of these people are with us as of one mind, working with dignity.’

²All narratives and quotes have been taken from either the kudumbashree experience sharing workshops organised across the state in August 2011, or the narratives received as part of the training for newly elected CDS Chairpersons in March 2012.

During an episode in Kummil panchayat involving the cleaning up of a canal, where the workers came into contact with a ritual object, and were dissuaded from continuing the work but went ahead nonetheless, Vijayakumari, a worker, was bitten by a cobra and had to be hospitalised. The news spread like wildfire. People said that Kudumbashree had got its comeuppance and should answer for the life of that woman. The panchayat helped with financial assistance. After winning the battle for her life, Vijayakumari returned to NREGS. An unexpected take away from MGNREGS for the CDS of Kummil was thus a new found capability to resist voodoo and superstition.

The Skills dimension and labour collectives

Much of the works taken up under MGNREGS had to do with land and water conservation and watershed management. The process of implementation of works is described in the Aryanad Study. In the panchayat, works and sites for MGNREGS were identified by the panchayat member and the ADS together, following which the AE and overseer prepared estimates. After approval, project meetings were held and work taken up as per muster roll. Mates for the programme were selected from the ADS general body. The ADS and the mate took responsibility for providing facilities at the site. After completion of the work, the engineer or overseer took measurement, prepared the bill and arranged for release of wages. Works were undertaken in 2 phases. The Phase I works included cleaning of drains, clearing road sides, clearing undergrowth, renovation of water sources, mazha kuzhis etc. Phase II works were more elaborate, and were largely soil water conservation works as per the Watershed Masterplan. The Masterplan was prepared by the panchayat committee with the help of Kudumbashree members and NREGS officials, and the works identified included protection of river banks, conversion of fallow land, providing thadams to coconut trees, building rubber platforms, preparation of land for banana cultivation and planting saplings.

The women were immensely proud of their work – in some cases the works had earlier been sidestepped because they were found to be too difficult or risky, but with their enthusiasm, the women managed to pull them off. Also, the public good that accrued from the works brought them recognition and visibility. The experience shared by the Kummil chairperson is a case in point. “There is a pond near the panchayat office which was overgrown with weeds and had become a dense thicket. The block panchayat had been requested many times to clear the pond, but for various reasons nothing happened. Actually there was no one brave enough to take on the task – here was a pond which had been the site of 3 suicides, and which was infested with poisonous snakes. It was against this backdrop that the panchayat prepared the estimate for restoring the 1.5 acre pond under the NREGS programme. The first couple of times, the workers went back on taking up the work. But third time round, 75 workers from 2 wards got ready to take it on. No one was prepared to venture into the pond until Satyabhama chechi, all of 62 years of age, widowed and deserted by her only son, houseless and with nothing to lose, took the plunge. The panchayat authorities, and people from the neighbourhood gathered around to witness the cleaning up of the pond. A short while into the work a cobra accosted us, hood up and angry. We beat it up with a stick. The entire pond was cleaned. Today the water from this pond is being taken up for cultivation. The fact that we were successful in restoring a pond that no one had dared to touch increased our self confidence no end. We could now fearlessly take on any work the panchayat entrusted us with.”

Special skills sets had to be developed for the works. For the uninitiated women it was their seniors who helped in acquiring the requisite skills. The women thus learnt how to dig foundations, set up biofences, deweed rivers and lakes, and do gully plugging and bunding for soil conservation. They learnt how to build bunds and trenches, work with geo textiles, construct drinking water wells and rainwater harvesting structures; they also learnt the basics of garden and plantation work. A glimpse of the newly acquired skills sets is provided in the narrative of Jayanthi Baiju of Panancheri, Thrissur. How the panchayat has been able to integrate the MGNREGS schemes with other CSS and state schemes to enable the entitlements of the poor through asset generation is also indicated -

'The drinking water scarcity in the Asaricode area of our ward was acute. Jananidhi had not reached our area. We had to walk a kilometre to get our water. We had put in an application in the grama sabha - to no avail. There are 112 SC families in Asaricode. The panchayat and Kudumbashree jointly decided to give Rs 2000. This was inadequate for building a well. So 12 women from NREGS worked for 23 days and dug the well 10 'kol' deep and 3 metres wide. We are proud of having achieved a feat that only men have done till now. The panchayat have set aside Rs 2 crore for next year to handle the water crisis. 4 acre vegetable cultivation is being undertaken in Tamara vella chal which is a tribal settlement. We laid the foundations, constructed toilets and dug compost pits for 400 houses being constructed under the IAY and EMS housing schemes. We planted plantains through the Mannuthi research station and constructed a pond to water the plants. We have also built mazha kuzhis and coconut tree thadams and undertaken planting of shade trees. Next year we will solve our water problem for good. We have been able to bring SC and ST women to the fore through Kudumbashree. We have received sanction from the block for the construction of 15 wells next April and May.'

The mates were particularly proud of their ability to size projects up, gauge the number of person days required and prepare estimates for the work. All these were new skills, and in the time that they improved and honed these skills, they found themselves being sought after by landowners to work on their properties and being offered wages to the tune of Rs 250 to Rs 350 for private work. This interest in the skilled woman labourer has led to the creation of another instrument –the women's labour collective. The estimation and accounting skills of the mate have also come in handy in the labour collective. Across the state in various panchayats the workers of MGNREGS have been coming together to form labour groups that take on agricultural work and work on homesteads and plantations. Over a thousand of these collectives have begun working and CDS after CDS is taking the initiative to further consolidate women NREGS workers. Even while taking on outside work at rates roughly double of what MGNREGS offers, the women have not stopped seeking work through the programme. They are unfazed by the delays and the deductions in payments – the space opened out by MGNREGS is for them so much more valuable than the money it brings. They have found emotional solace, camaraderie, a shared sense of relevance and pride, and most importantly they have found recognition and legitimacy. The inexperienced housewife has been transmuting into skilled labour of high value in the market.

Convergence for agriculture

The role the programme has played in bringing women into agriculture in the state has not been sufficiently documented. There had been a steady decline in cropped area in the state over decades of out migration and conversion of paddy lands for housing or commercial crop cultivation. High costs of production, fragmented holdings and absentee landlordism had led to a practice of leaving cultivable lands fallow for years together. Efforts by the state and by local governments to arrest the trend and revive agriculture had not yielded much result. The Kudumbashree mission had just begun to aggressively promote collective farming by women under the leadership of panchayats when the MGNREGS programme took off in the state. The possibilities of converging the opportunities under MGNREGS for land development with the RKVY and ATMA programmes of the Agriculture department and integrating the flow of farming incentives from the Kudumbashree mission with the input subsidies and market support to be gleaned out of the panchayat's annual development plan were enormous. This also required the panchayats to take the lead to identify fallow land and convince land owners to allow the women groups to take up cultivation on their lands. The sheer effort of convergence made this intervention very slow off the blocks, until one panchayat in Kozhikode, Perambra, took it upon itself to clear a clogged public canal running through the heart of a lifeless padasekharam that had not seen cultivation in over 25 years, and organised kudumbashree workers to undertake land development of the adjoining fields that were later leased out to the

women for paddy cultivation. 146 acres of fallow land in the panchayat was brought under paddy cultivation at one stroke. All the cultivators were first timers, they were all women.

Not all experiences of collective farming are large scale operations led by the panchayat. Most of them are efforts taken by small groups struggling to find cultivable land to take on farming. Geetha is a member of a collective farming group in Konni, Pathanamthitta. She narrates her experience – “We were four of us who got together and prepared the one and a half acre fallow land. We took the help of the NREGS to make it cultivable. This was land that had been levelled from rocks and earth from a rock quarry. It was so difficult to prepare that land. We had to use pickaxes. Since it was the first time we were handling a pick axe, our bodies ached so much, we couldn't continue the work. But we didn't give up. There were 31 of us who worked to make the land cultivable under NREGS. When it was time to harvest, officers from the block and panchayat turned up. They all praised us. We were the first to take up paddy cultivation on garden land in the area.”

Narrating her experiences as a member of a Kudumbashree Joint Liability Group for farming, Bindu Satyan of Mullasserri, Thrissur pointed out how her panchayat arranged MGNREGS works to help cultivate ginger, turmeric, banana, yam, pineapple in all the 15 wards of the panchayat. From their collective farming, the group was able to buy land both individually and as a group. She said that each member now had assets worth Rs 3.5 lakh, and that 16 more groups had been inspired by their example to come into collective farming.

Today the state boasts of collective farming groups in nearly all the panchayats and even in some municipalities. The farming groups have been reorganised as joint liability groups to facilitate access to agricultural credit. With control over means of production and support from the krishi bhavan and the panchayat, for these women the transition from MGNREGS labourer to farmer cultivator has been a natural evolution.

Empowerment and the organisation

It was not only MGNREGS that benefited from the engagement with the Panchayati raj institutions and Kudumbashree. An important impact, and one that has implications for SHG federations under NRLM everywhere, has been the consequences of the structural integration of the community organisation with the MGNREGS programme on the Kudumbashree programme. Providing the ADS with a seminal role in the implementation of MGNREGS has led to a strengthening of the intermediate tier of the 3 tier federation, which has in turn increased the reach and access of poor women to the community leadership. Ramlath of Edavanna, a predominantly Muslim area of Malappuram district, narrates how her experience of MGNREGS transformed her engagement with Kudumbashree – ‘When kudumbashree started, the ADS was formed. I was secretary. Those days there wasn't much to do in the ADS. It was when NREGS happened that the ADS really became active. I had to become mate to help people get job cards, open bank accounts, and help people. My husband was opposed to this. All the time I had to listen to my husband's complaints that there was no one to look after the house. I wanted my ward to perform the best in NREGS and was able to bring a lot of people into the programme. We started with 12 workers – now there are 75 people who work regularly in NREGS. Actually, with NREGS, people have become more affectionate towards me. What with the NHG and NREGS, these days my husband asks me – don't you have work today? Aren't you going out today?’

The Kudumbashree Mission did a bit of riding piggy back on MGNREGS for pushing rights based perspectives into the NHG discussions. This was done through a new programme for ‘Gender Self Learning’. The programme was an attempt to get women to discuss gender issues impacting their lives through discussion of modules on various aspects of a particular theme. The first module that

was prepared was on women and work, which discussed the gender dimensions of the MGNREGS programme in the form of stories, poems, news articles, and conversations. It touched on the question of entitlement to equal wages, the double burden of work, the dimensions of safety and health and hygiene at the work place. Geetha Suni of Nadathara Thrissur says – ‘When the book women and work was discussed in all NHGs, we were able to get across the message of right to equal wages.’

The volume of transactions through the network impacting the poor has also grown. The sheer magnitude of interventions under MGNREGS has enhanced the CDS – official interface as well as the interface with the public as is borne out by the experience of Sunitha Suresh, SN Puram, Thrissur – ‘I am a CDS member from ward 12. The NREGS programme came to our panchayat on July 18, 2008. Although I was selected as mate, I worked as a worker for 85 days. In the year 2010 -11, the panchayat spent on Rs 1.38 Cr under NREGS. 2000 Acacia trees were planted, and a well constructed to water them. 2760 people registered, of whom 1250 persons worked. The number of men was less than 100. 933 women got together to clean up an important canal. The workers came with their work implements and children before 8 am in tempos. We finished the work in 6 days. A lot of people turned up just to see so many women at work together. We managed to arrange work at Rs 200 per day for those workers who completed 100 days. It is to this ward that people across the panchayat are coming to demand work. We also do work as service in the panchayat. Last year on October 2nd, we cleared up the high school road. This year at the start of the school year we cleaned up the road again.’

The Scheme has brought innumerable women into direct contact with banks – the personal accounts is one step further in their ladder to financial empowerment. Repeated drumming of the rights perspective of the programme is sensitising the CDS leadership to questions of citizenship and women’s agency. It has empowered them to negotiate local power spaces. Obstructions at the work site have been pursued all the way to the police station, and the women say they are no longer prepared to take things lying down. Sarojini Thankappan, Vice Chairperson of Koovappady CDS, Ernakulam narrates one such encounter –

‘Under the NREGS programme, we set out to restore and clean either side of a 1200 m long water canal running through a neighbouring field. The landowners on either side were very co operative. One person however was hostile, and would not let us broaden the canal. He threatened to take us to the police station if we touched his plot. We tried reasoning with him, but he was unrelenting. The panchayat member turned up and tried to resolve the matter, to no avail. The man had built a wall encroaching into the canal. After the member left, he hit one of our women workers. We took the help of the member and went to the police station. The man was called and made to apologise. We were able to finish the work in peace.

If this incident had happened 6 years ago, we would only have hushed it up, and suffered his abuse. But today if somebody starts ogling us, we have the guts to go up to them and ask them what their problem is. The people on either side of the canal compliment us for having resolved the issue so well. If we are denied justice, we know how to claim it through our organisational strength.’

A similar experience of a CDS member of Kaladi, Malappuram, of having to take on an angry crowd of people shows the strength that women have been able to discover in themselves on account of their engagement with the issues and opportunities for social interaction that the telescoping of Kudumbashree with MGNREGS have made possible – ‘In one of the works I had taken up as mate, we had to construct a drain running on the side of the road. At one point it went very close to a house’s wall. My measurements were right, so there wasn’t anything I could do about it. 2 days after the work, the house owner came to my house with some people and asked for me. When my

husband enquired what the matter was about, they said how dare she be so irresponsible and scheming – else why would she cut into the boundary of a house and convert it into a road when no one was at home?! They said they would take matters into their own hands if I didn't rectify the mistake within 2 days. I was frozen from the shock and couldn't speak or cry. People gathered around from nearby and a lot of muttering went on. But I had done no wrong – why should I be scared for my work? They had given me two days – I said I didn't need it – I wanted things to be corrected then and there. So I called the concerned officers and the panchayat member over and proved to the gathering that what I had done was absolutely spot on. It was because I had come to Kudumbashree that I could do this fearlessly. Before that I wouldn't travel alone, I wouldn't speak to people, I wouldn't go to any office or bank alone for my matters – I had to depend on somebody else all the time. And I had to forever explain my expenses. Even after that it was accusations and retribution. I would know of the decisions of the household only at the last minute.

So many things have changed for me. I have my own income, I have learnt to save, there are many opportunities to intervene in other areas, and I have earned position and respect in society. Whatever happens my opinion is sought and advice taken. The chechis of the neighbourhood come to me with their problems and I do my best to resolve them for them. If I hadn't joined Kudumbashree, I would have reached nowhere. It would have been neglect at both home and society. It does not bear thinking about.'

By locating the mate within the ADS, the MGNREGS programme immediately infused energy into the system, and the community leadership quotient went up overnight from a few thousands to a few lakhs, as can be evinced from the above examples. The new peoples skills and technical skills have served the women well in their quest for political significance, as their showing at the recent panchayat polls indicate. Over 11000 women from Kudumbashree contested the panchayat elections and 5404 won. 60% of all women elected representatives in the grama panchayats of Kerala are members of Kudumbashree.

The flip side

The illustration of these experiences is not intended to gloss over the challenges that the MGNREGS programme faces in respect of governance, leakages and quality. Questions raised over the nature of assets generated, over the sometime harmful environmental impact of quick fix projects, over the under utilisation of labour, continue to be valid. Incidents of wrong doing by the mate have been noticed, and many a time mates have had to be replaced. The state government have since broad based the selection of mate to anyone from the workers' group, and empowered the panchayat leadership to nominate mates. There have been struggles and stand offs between the community leadership, the official leadership and the political leadership which have escalated into tussles requiring state intervention. Inclusion of the most marginalised sections in many places remains unresolved. The proportion of SC and ST within the total persons days in MGNREGS in Kerala is 15.24% and 2.85%. This reflects the proportion of these communities in Kudumbashree. The proportion of SC and STs in the general population of the state is 9.8% and 1.1% respectively. ST families were not seen to be entering the scheme as much as expected, on account of the delays in payment. An attempt was made by the state government to introduce a corpus fund to be managed by the ADS to make 3 days part payment to ST workers, to attract more STs into the programme. Yashoda is an ST Kudumbashree member of the community of Mavilan, from ward 15 of Ballal, a panchayat in Kasargod district, who had availed of the Corpus advance payment. This money came in handy for meeting the food and hospital needs of her family. She says it helped her to become regular in putting in her weekly thrift. Surprisingly she also used the money to buy provisions for the ultra poor in her group who were not ST. She later became mate. An exclusive ST ADS was formed in her ward in addition to the regular ADS, and she notes that the participation of STs in the

programme perceptibly improved after the ST ADS became functional. As can be seen from the case of Yashoda, the participation of vulnerable communities would increase with their greater effective representation as mates. The additional procedural burden on mates has made the corpus fund a difficult intervention to carry out in many places. This is where the role of the panchayat level Evaluation committee and Social Audit fora become important – so that the guidelines are strictly complied with, procedural difficulties smoothed out, and transgressions exposed and rectified.

Very often inquiry into causes of corruption points to extraneous influences forcing the hand of the mate and the worker. There is much at stake for the mate, and there are supporting structures that can help her handle or deflect such influences. There have been cases where the CDS itself took suo moto cognisance of malpractice on the part of the mate and forced her to repay money that had been wrongfully obtained. But when the community intervenes in such cases of fudging of muster rolls or overestimation of works, it tends to be more understanding of the circumstances that make the mate err, and the social disapproval that comes along with it carries more sting than a long drawn out official enquiry.

Lessons

It is necessary to evaluate the experiences of the Kudumbashree panchayati raj interface in the programme in the light of the ³objectives of MGNREGS which include:

- Ensuring social protection for the most vulnerable people living in rural India through providing employment opportunities
- Ensuring livelihood security for the poor through creation of durable assets, improved water security, soil conservation and higher land productivity
- Strengthening drought-proofing and flood management in rural India
- Aiding in the empowerment of the marginalised communities, especially women, Scheduled Castes (SCs) and Scheduled Tribes (STs), through the processes of a rights-based legislation
- Strengthening decentralised, participatory planning through convergence of various anti-poverty and livelihoods initiatives
- Deepening democracy at the grass-roots by strengthening the Panchayati Raj Institutions (PRIs)

The impact of MGNREGS on social protection and livelihood security has been deeper than was anticipated at the start of the programme in Kerala. Not only has there been significant effort for enhanced land productivity, the benefits from these efforts have been specifically targeting poor women. While the rights based legislation was very important in laying the foundation of the programme, empowerment of women and extremely vulnerable households has been aided by the micro level processes and convergences that have evolved as part of strategising implementation of the programme. The empowerment that led to extensive participation in the Local Self Government election process of women with administrative experience, also flows partly out of the enabling environment provided by MGNREGS.

The lessons of panchayati raj from Kerala are often dismissed as not being relevant to the rest of the country. But the majority of experiences with regard to developing community interface with the programme in Kerala have not been about supplementing financial resources from the rich plan funds available with the panchayats, but about intermediation with institutions, mobilisation and trouble shooting, initiative for grievance redressal and following up opportunities for convergence.

³ Ministry of Rural Development, Government of India, *MGNREGA Sameeksha, An Anthology of Research Studies on the Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Act, 2005, 2006–2012*, edited and compiled by Mihir Shah, Neelakshi Mann and Varad Pande

The nature of this dynamic has certainly played a central role in the effort to realise the objectives of MGNREGS and is begging to be empirically studied and assimilated.

Where would Kudumbashree be without MGNREGS? It is difficult to say, but that the present social visibility and self confidence of the network owe a great deal to the programme is irrefutable. The interplay of the panchayat, the community network and the programme has led to innovative convergences for food security, livelihood and capability enhancement. There are lessons to be learnt about the opportunities for panchayati raj institutions to bring strategic convergences into the programme, and the opportunities for community organisations to strive for organisational empowerment through participation in governance -lessons that could have far reaching implications for improving the quality of life of the poor, for transforming agriculture and the labour market, and for ushering in a new dialogue of women empowerment that quickens the movement of women from second class citizens to full citizenship.

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