The 'Kudumbashree Woman' and the Kerala Model Woman: Women and Politics in Contemporary Kerala.

ABSTRACT

This paper reflects on women's presence in politics in Kerala where neoliberalised welfare now targets a very large number of women and inducts them into local governance. Offering a brief sketch of the shifts in women's roles and responsibilities from the pre-liberalisation period to the 1990s and after in the region, the paper draws upon two spells of fieldwork to probe the unintended consequences that neoliberalised welfare has generated, the possibilities thrown up by institutional change in women's self-help groups. I also attempt to think about the sharing and the departures between the figure of the 'Kerala Model Woman', shaped in the laudatory literature on the 'Kerala Model' of development, and the emerging, apparently more troublesome, figure of the 'KS woman'.

KEYWORDS

Kudumbashree; Kerala Model; Empowerment; Feminism; Women's Self-help Groups.

INTRODUCTION

Long celebrated as a 'Model' of alternate development in the South, society in Kerala has often been identified as one which that accords greater worth to women[1]. However, the exclusion of women from powerful positions in politics has been noted as an unmistakable feature of Kerala's historical record (Jeffrey 2003; Erwer 2003)[2]. Nevertheless, contemporary public life here is marked by the notable presence of women in local government, made possible through the women's quota of 50 per cent[3], and state-wide network of women's self-help groups (SHGs) under state aegis, the Kudumbashree (henceforth, KS) (literally, ' prosperity of the family')[4]. KS women leaders seem to be able to enter the panchayats more readily and thus form an important section of lower level leaders of political parties in the state[5].

Nevertheless, many left-leaning and other commentators seem to worry about KS women. For example, in October 2012, large numbers of KS women protested in the capital city of Thiruvananthapuram under the leadership of the Communist Party of India (Marxist)'s (henceforth, CPM) women's front. They changed the CPM women's front's 'respectable' style of agitation by introducing public singing and dancing.[6] Commentators sympathetic to CPM chose to ignore this obvious element of 'trouble', interpreting the agitation as an expression of 'class feminism' (by which they meant the reinstatement of the class question at the heart of

feminism) and distinguishing between proper and improper feminisms (Biju and Kumar 2013). Others who did not ignore this transgression, however, condemned it as 'spicy' (Jacob 2012). Summarising their common concern, one could ask: what is the KS doing to the Kerala Model Woman? The 'Kerala Model Woman' refers to Robin Jeffrey's (2003) thesis that egalitarian developmentalist public politics and active female domestic agents emancipated from tradition together caused high social development in Kerala. This remains persuasive today in many circles despite strong critiques (Mukhopadhyay 2007).

I take up the question of women's presence in politics in contemporary Kerala for discussion in this paper. Feminist literature on this period indicates heightening struggles over gender questions, intersectional struggles, and the continuing marginality of women to politics despite increased visibility (Devika and Thampi 2012; EPW 2014). Is the above misgiving about the perversion of the Kerala Model Woman indicative of major change in gendered spatial demarcations? Are KS women, visible now, finally overcoming political marginality? What are the implications of 'responsibilised'[7] women's empowerment for women's access to politics Kerala?

In the following section, I offer a brief account of the transformation of women's domestic and public roles from the mid-twentieth to the late-twentieth-early twenty-first century Kerala. The emergence of responsibilised welfare targeting women is an important event in the latter period. I then draw upon two spells of largely qualitative fieldwork to reflect on the effects of the KS on women's presence politics. The first spell was in 2006-2008 covering seven districts,[8] and the second, in 2013-14, focused on two sites of extreme disadvantage in the state. [9] The aim is not a simple comparison, but drawing specific insights from the second spell that

extend or qualify the insights from the first. Moreover, since KS has been hailed often as an accessible gateway for the poorest women into public life, it is worthwhile to examine its efficacy in precisely such contexts.

This paper shares the concerns of the feminist critiques of masculinist notions of citizenship, gender mainstreaming, self-help, and 'invited spaces', and quotas for women in India and elsewhere (Mouffe 1995; Manicom 2001; Hassim 2010; Batliwala and Dhanraj 2004; von Bulow 1995; Cornwall and Goetz 2005). These critiques do apply to the KS in large measure (Devika and Thampi 2007). However, in this paper, I hope to add to the conversation by emphasizing that (a) given that the targets of the KS are active subjects with specific histories and life-experiences, 'unintended consequences' are likely; and (b) these produce different impacts in different places, and initial conditions are vital in determining what they may be.

THE RISE OF THE KUDUMBASHREE WOMAN

Kerala state in the 1950s was formed at a moment in which pre-modern patriarchies had faded, and patriarchal formations which naturalised gender in and through the various social/community reform movements were triumphant. The decline of the pre-modern caste-order meant that women of most social groups experienced individuation to some degree. Nevertheless hegemonic modern domestic ideologies in social/community reformisms and the state worked as powerful countervailing factors (Devika 2007). The individuating effects of the massive expansion of women's access to higher education in the mid-twentieth century

were counterbalanced by sacrificial domestic ideologies[10]. Largely-lower-caste women workers moved from less-gendered working lives into highly gendered domestic lives (Lindberg 2001); domestic ideologies and restrictive notions of feminine respectability now thrived among the literate poor women (den Uyl 1995). Women were largely excluded from political power even when they formed majorities in trade union membership and participated actively in militant working class action (Lindberg 2001; Devika and Thampi 2012). These developments ran parallel to decreasing fertility, popularity of the two-child norm, and declining joint family, which changed the nature of domestic labour of childcare (Devika 2008). The gradual decay of agriculture and traditional industries in this period affected women workers the worst (Arun 1999; Lindberg 2001); women's land ownership declined and even the vestiges of matriliny ended (Arun 1999). High dowry demands came to characterise marriage negotiations of an increasing number of communities (Kodoth and Eapen 2005). Nevertheless, this unfolded in a period in which state investment in health and education was substantial and access was secured for the poor through militant public action (Jeffrey 2003).

Late-twentieth century politico-economic conditions were considerably altered but idea that women need 'balance' between individuation and domestic orientation stayed hegemonic. Research on Kerala's 'remittance economy' (Planning Commission 2008; Raman 2010) shows that skilled labour has been, since late-twentieth century, Kerala's major 'export'. The making of globally-marketable human-power requires closer disciplining of the 'raw material', the child, and the female caregiver's affective labour of managing emotions (Weeks 2007) is necessary for this. Added to this, the general fall in public service provisioning in health and education in the post-liberalisation years (Oommen 2010), the rise in the number of female-

headed households (Lini 2013, 9), and the dismal prospects of employment and income for women in Kerala (Christabell 2012, 92-3; 96), indicate that material aspects of women's domestic burdens have also risen in comparison to the pre-migration, pre-liberalisation period. It is also possible that rising costs of education and job search for men indirectly pushed up dowry rates even in poor communities (Devika 2013).

Decline of state welfare was accompanied by responsibilised welfare targeting women, cutting for them a path through which they could move between domestic and market spheres. Women's domestic duty seemed to have been extended to include the larger measure of household provisioning in and through programmes such as the Urban Basic Services Programme (UBSP), and later, in the KS. Women were now regarded as economic agents and had access to credit, but KS emphasized income-generation, not wage labour, and did not violate dominant norms of gender segregation. But a new, higher, level of balance between individuation and domesticity seemed now possible, and no wonder that studies of KS women revealed that they were upbeat despite poor economic returns (Eapen and Thomas 2005). These developments signalled the emergence of a new 'regime of empowerment', that displaced the older one, central to Kerala's many social development achievements. The latter understood 'empowerment' as: claiming of welfare entitlements as 'people's rights', militant mass mobilisation, and constant challenge to bureaucratic power. Its major instrumental form was the national-developmentalist state; its institutional forms, the political parties and trade unions in formal politics. In contrast, the new regime of empowerment of the 1990s interpreted 'empowerment' as flexibility within the existing social hierarchy and self-help; its instrumental form was local government, viewed as representing local community-interests, and its

institutional form is the self-help group. Civil society, understood as descriptive, non-critical, and state-centric, and feminised, was taken to be at its core. Most importantly, this 'regime of empowerment' consecrated the Below-Poverty-Line Woman as its principal subject.

Women in this regime could access 'invited spaces' of governmentalised welfare (including KS) where they could, potentially, learn the ropes of local government. The risk, obviously, was that these women would be trapped at the lowest level of the highly gender-iniquitous development bureaucracy as underpaid voluntary workers. But given that familiarity with the bureaucratic procedures and norms were by now inevitable for elected members in the local government and that the women's quota (of thirty-three per cent initially, and now, fifty per cent) had to be fulfilled, KS women leaders found themselves in great demand, actively wooed and organised by political parties, especially the CPM, through women's wings (CDS 2008).

Certainly, the KS woman was not automatically open to feminist mobilisation. Worse, given women's century-long exclusion from power in public politics, KS women leaders were at risk of being captured individually by local party structures, and collectively by political parties, none of which showed sustained interest in gender equality (Erwer 2003; Devika and Thampi 2012).

ENTER THE SUBJECT OF *AANUKOOLYAM*

The first spell of fieldwork[11], in 2006-8 with village panchayat-level KS leaders seemed to confirm the above fears. If working class women were 'effeminised' in the mid-twentieth century, it appeared now that the lower middle-class woman[12] who carried out domestic and affective labour at home was being interpellated into socially-oriented hyper-femininity.

Three kinds of political authorities were competing to utilise the services of KS leaders – political parties, the panchayat, and the KS Mission itself. It was apparent that most of our interviewees were closely affiliated to particular political parties – out of commitment or necessity – and that even when they were impartial in welfare distribution they used their connection with the poor to build ground support in and for their respective parties. They felt that it was risky to antagonise local political leaders and the panchayat; but crucially, they believed that the KS was 'under' the panchayat and hence had to take orders from elected representatives. This perception has an interesting history.[13] The second authority, the panchayat, seemed to be reproducing exploitative domestic power relations in community-space, and even denying women's political citizenship. Interviewees' perception of the Women's Component Plan (WCP), a mandatory component of the panchayat's plan in Kerala was that it was a *dole*, and not their collective *right* as citizens. Besides, KS women were often caught between different bureaucracies, some sympathetic, some not. A feared figure was the 'Charge Officer', a local-level official assigned to assist the Chairperson of village-level federation of KS groups, the Community Development Society (henceforth, CDS CP) in accounts-keeping, report-writing and other such routine tasks. Most CDS CPs we interviewed had no clear idea of this officer's responsibilities and he/she was treated as higher authority. The KS Mission district-level office was widely perceived to be far more friendly, flexible, and

gender-sensitive. Most district coordinators interviewed were critical of the panchayats' and local politicians' use of KS women and the domestic patriarchy that prevented them from accessing training and other microenterprise opportunities. But this more 'humanised' bureaucracy (as perceived by our interviewees) could not always resist the temptation to deploy KS women tasks that could potentially disempower them in the community, such as data collection bordering on surveillance. Nor could their disdain of KS leaders' political ambitions be missed. As for anti-patriarchal politics, most CDS CPs interviewed felt that it was necessary to intervene only in cases in which the patriarchal moral economy was violated. It was also striking that they seemed to perceive themselves primary as members of the lowers tiers of the development bureaucracy and not local leaders. So their most frequently voiced complaint was about honoraria and the denial of bureaucratic status to their authority.

However, there were already signs of 'unintended consequences', in the rank-and-file of the KS. KS leaders were critical of who they called *aanukoolyam*-seekers – the seekers of the welfare-handout. The *aanukoolyam-seekers* observed market discipline in repayments, which was relatively easy given the low interest-rate, but apparently dodged 'governance labour' – the many subsidiary tasks that SHG members are expected to perform, such as dissemination of information, attendance at government functions and labour related to preparing the venue etc., health-related work, destitute care and other social service promoted by the panchayat, and keeping records and accounts. This was either unpaid or very poorly paid but panchayats often claimed that the rank-and-file were obliged to perform it, being welfare beneficiaries. Despite the best efforts of KS leaders, they resisted such labour and demanded more benefits in lieu of participation. KS leaders felt that they were dealing with people who resembled

ungovernable consumers, who contrasted with the older-generation party supporters, unfailingly loyal to the party even when it could not meet their demands immediately. The rank-and-file apparently indulged in 'unhealthy' financial practices, migrating between credit networks. Clearly, these women, felt their leaders, were not moving from domesticity to income-generation along the disciplined path of responsibilised welfare. Certainly, they did not seem to meekly accept the semi-pedagogic, semi-bureaucratic authority of the CDS CP. Indeed, it appeared that sheer proximity to the leaders within the space of the panchayat made it possible for these women to threaten them to exile back in individual domesticity through gossip and slander. The KS leaders' grip on their constituencies seemed, thus, a very shaky one.

However, these welfare-seekers cannot to be dismissed as a greedy horde as they may appear in the view from above. Indeed, they seemed to indicate a new mode of gaining vital consumption resources from the state by the poor in a context in which responsibilised welfare was being thrust on them. The rank-and-file of the KS, originally planned as a state-centric civil society, seems to function now as a 'civil-political society', overwhelmingly of women. The new welfarism of the 1990s did not usher the poor into civil society; neither did it foster the political society-formation that Partha Chatterjee (2008) points to. Rather, a hybrid, the 'civil–political society', seems to be taking shape .The 'civil-political society' also gathers in the space in which the legal and bureaucratic apparatus of development interacts with populations, like in Chatterjee's description of political society. But if the groups that manoeuvre in political society are often illegal entities that advance demands through projecting on to population groups the moral attributes of a community, the 'civil-political

society' is composed of legal entities with which the state can negotiate with directly. SHGs operate within a framework of clearly-laid-down rules; they are formally shaped and controlled by government agencies. But it was clear from our interviews that the CDS CPs were forced by the rank-and-file to engage in paralegal negotiations quite similar to negotiators of Chatterjean political society. Nevertheless, this hybrid grouping was hardly amenable to collective action because it was difficult to project the moral attributes of a community on the SHG women who resembled more a group of individual rational agents. This is no coincidence because the liberal logic of SHGs treats collective interest as the sum of individual preferences. Hence its reliability as a political constituency is decidedly low.[14] And the poorest were often left out, as in Chatterjean political society (John and Deshpande 2008; Williams et al 2011).

In short, the 2006-8 fieldwork produced a mixed picture. KS woman leaders seemed to confirm feminist critiques of self-help-centred 'women's empowerment' (Batliwala and Dhanraj 2004). However, there were undeniable 'unintended consequences'. Even critques preceding demands for women's full citizenship[15] were absent. Nevertheless, by 2008, the KS itself seemed to be entering a new phase with the adoption of a new by-law that clarified several key aspects of the KS-Panchayat relation, as well as the relation between the three tiers at the village level.

NEW POSSIBILITIES?

The adoption of the new bye-law in 2008 was itself an unpredictable event, made possible by the conjunction of a number of external, contingent factors: For the presence of a strong femocrat leading the programme; the CPM's attempt to consolidate the 'base' built through its absorption of CDS CPs; the tussle between the Departments of Local Self-Government and Rural Development.

It is important to note that many elements of the bye-law are not new (http://www.kudumbashree.org/?q=bylaw Accessed, 2 Sept. 2015). For example, the CDS's relative autonomy from the panchayat and restrictions on APL members (Kadiyala 2004). What was new was the importance granted to internal elections, which enabled a reinterpretation of the KS's position in relation to the panchayat as 'partnership' rather than 'sub-system'. This also held the potential for the exercise of agency by the KS leaders vis-à-vis all the three authorities mentioned earlier. Asserting the autonomy of the CDS vis-à-vis the panchayat, the possibility of the KS federation serving as a vehicle for articulating women's interests and elected by women comes to the fore. Stressing the formation of evaluation committees and the CDS action plan, the bye-law establishes the CDS as *the* agency enabling community participation in the determination of local development needs and demands. The bye-law also specifies the designation of the Charge Officer as 'Member Secretary' to the CDS, placing this officer unquestionably below the CDS CP. The provision to appoint an accountant in each CDS may reduce the power of rural development officials over KS leaders. Through internal elections, the new bye-law prevents direct appointment of the CDS CP by the local political party controlling the panchayat. The KS leaders potentially gain the valuable experience of election campaigning. Also, the bye-law allows entry to all women beyond the below/above-

poverty-line divide (subject to certain restrictions about availability of welfare grants and subsidies etc.) and this makes KS a potential platform for 'Women', and not merely female recipients of targeted welfare, even more. Simultaneously, the provision for appropriate proportional reservation for underprivileged women in all general and governing bodies could complicate the category of 'Women'. Thus on the one hand, it potentially moves away from the reduction of 'Women' to 'below-poverty-line women' in Kerala's gender mainstreaming, and on the other, to acknowledging the inequalities within the category 'Women'. This could potentially counter the deeply individualising effects of the liberal structure of the SHG, in which each woman represents her family's interests and not the collective interests of Women.

However, as was pointed to us by Kudumbashree officials, the bye-law's provisions took long to be evenly implemented all over the State. Also, the inclusion of the APL women cannot be expected to lead to significant shifts in membership and activism precisely because of social divides characteristic of contemporary Kerala in which the separation of spaces shared by the better-off and the poor is a key feature of heightening inequalities.[16] Some aspects have been implemented evenly everywhere due to insistence of because higher authorities, especially the appointment of an accountant. Finally, I also wish to emphasize strongly that the bye-law offers not *opportunities* but *possibilities* – which may or may not materialise into opportunities depending on specific socio-political 'initial conditions'.

Below, I reflect on the impact of the institutional change in the KS in two physically comparable sites of extreme disadvantage in Kerala, an urban slum and a fishing hamlet in the southern district of Thiruvananthapuram. The choice of two disadvantaged sites makes it

obvious that my aim is not to arrive at fully generalisable conclusions. My limited aim is to examine briefly the specific configurations of circumstances that allow for some possibilities to develop, but not all. Some elements of the new bye-law are not really relevant for these sites – for example, the provision to add APL women – and some have evenly positive effects, mainly the appointment of the accountant. However, other elements seem to have definitely made an impact in one site, but not in the other.

The City Slum: Kulamnagar

Situated close to Thiruvananthapuram's main market, Kulamnagar (name changed) is one of the oldest city slums, going back to the 1940s. It was settled by lower-caste city-sanitation workers, people in the so-called 'unclean' occupations, and women trying to escape abusive marriages and relationships. Kulamnagar is a community of people denied the chance to become 'agents of livability' (Evans 220: 15, in Auyero and Swistun 2009: 137). Populated by assetless workers, and abjected from the social mainstream, marriage alliances here are largely between members of the slum community, often between members of different castes/faiths. Women bear the stigma of being 'slum women' which pushes down their opportunities and bargaining power in marriage and labour markets. Besides women here are relatively disadvantaged in education and skills in comparison to Kerala – in our own sample of 356 women, only 45.5 per cent had reached middle-school; those who reached higher secondary were just 16.1 per cent (Abraham 2014). Notably, marriages are relatively fragile and often violent. In our survey of 167 households there, 70 were female-headed (Abraham 2014).

Dowry and domestic ideologies are widely prevalent, as interviews showed. Women end up shouldering most family burdens though their work prospects were decidedly bleak (Abraham and Devika 2014).

It has a long history of public welfare provisioning (and so KS is not perceived there as radically new), but is one of the city's poorest areas; it has also a longer history of young women's participation in self-help, right from the UBSP of the early-mid 1990s, to KS, with the same set of women leading both. Young women embraced the UBSP, it seems, in an effort to restore 'respectability' to an area notorious for illicit liquor-brewing and sale of drugs. Senior women were deeply into this trade, but younger, more educated women felt deeply insecure. The UBSP effectively ended it, but also cut off a key source of women's income. This was clearly made against other possible choices – legalisation and regulation of country-liquor production and sale. It divided senior country-liquor-brewer-women and the young women-activists; older women activists not used to bureaucratic procedures, and the younger women completely in them, and the rancour still prevents effective collective action. The KS rank-and-file functions as a 'civil-political' society, identified by KS leaders as their constituency, but a difficult one that placed them under constant criticism and even threat (Williams et al 2015). The SHGs in the slum are under the second-tier Area Development Society (ADS) and all five members of its committee are from the slum. However, the CDS it belongs to is led by upper-caste, solidly middle-class women (apparent from their ability to consume) whose patronising of 'slum women' was only too apparent (Williams et al 2015).

KS is treated as part of the longer flow of welfare secured for the slum by CPM 'big-boss' male mediators and KS leaders are picked by them. Some of them have indeed built up a

constituency among women, but the fickleness of the 'civil-political society' is evident (Williams et all 2015). The post-bye-law ratification scenario has had little positive effect. It appears that elements of the bye-law that were not threatening to entrenched official interests were accepted while others were watered down. Going by the bye-law would have separated the KS bank account from the Urban Planning Cell of the City Corporation; the Project Officer would have to be re-designated Member-Secretary of the KS. However, though the Minister for Local Self Government in the subsequent Congress-led UDF government issued an order to this effect, the City Corporation, still under the CPM, took very long to heed it[17]. Until recently, women leaders of the KS ADSs were just below City Corporation officials (with clear links with the dominant political party), a legacy that the new KS bye-law sought to dismantle.

Thus, except for the gains in experience, knowledge, and networks made by individual women leaders, KS as a body seemed to largely contribute 'governance labour', mainly in implementing the City Corporation's high-prestige housing project. It is accorded high value by the political parties and City Corporation official, unlike support for women's livelihoods though women bear the primary responsibility of household provisioning there. The UBSP anti-arrack actions affected women's livelihoods, but KS had offered no compensatory sufficiently alternative – while men's work opportunities have not been seriously affected. The overweening power of officials and political parties makes women's collective politicisation almost impossible, while ensuring their governmental mobilisation.

The Fisher Hamlet: Adimalathura

In sharp contrast, the KS leaders of the coastal hamlet Adimalathura, some 33 kilometers away from the state capital, seem to have realised the potential of the bye-law much better. The fisher-folk in Kerala have been identified as an 'outlier' of the Kerala Model (Kurien 2000). This village has a history of extremely exploitative labour relations and isolation from mid-twentieth century militant-left mobilisation. However, it also had the history of enthusiastic participation in the fish-workers' movement in Kerala of the 1980s (Dietrich and Nayak 2002). The community here is of the descendants of sixteenth-century Mukkuva fisher-folk converts to Latin Catholicism. Their historical experience has been of multiple governmentalities – of the Catholic Church and the secular state, both of which turned towards decentralisation and self-help in the 1990s, providing local young women with new opportunities. Gender relations in the fishing community did accord to women the role of domestic finance managers; researchers have noted the strength of sexual complementarity in family life (Busby 2000). This also reflects in the dowry practices. While dowry payments are huge, marriage remains uxorilocal, and only a specific share of the dowry is handed over to the bridegroom's parents as *valarthukooli* ('child-rearing fee').

The larger context has also been one in which women seek newer income-generation opportunities, with male incomes falling drastically as fish resources depleted over the twentieth century (Kurien and Paul 2009). Political parties too have made strong inroads, but in sharp contrast to Kulamnagar, the community here has recently gained distance and manoeuvring space in relation to political parties (Ignatius 2008). Welfare provision has been

through both state and Church; the latter has its own welfare network and local governance through parish council.

Unlike in Kulamnagar, in Adimalathura, the democratisation attained through the fish workers' movement, the opening up of parish councils to women, panchayati raj and women's reservation, and the formation of KS seem to have increased women's clout in the community and poorer fish-vendor women's access to the parish.[18] KS women leaders interviewed remarked that the parish was now highly dependent on them especially for the conduct of the annual pilgrimage to the nearby Siluva Hill, during which the village hosts around 9000 pilgrims. They are now regularly consulted by the parish priest about local arrangements, especially the communal feast. While this may appear to be an extension of domestic responsibilities, it is indisputable that the income from the pilgrimage forms a good chunk of the parish's annual income, and the women's services are perceived as labour. They are rewarded by Church through greater support to them in correcting domestic power imbalances. In the parish council, poor and less-educated women are also active members, their work is appreciated, and their ambitions, often forgiven. While there is simmering conflict between the parish and the panchayat over development and considerable rivalry between the woman panchayat member and KS leaders, these do not always create destructively divisive scenarios as in Kulamnagar. This is perhaps not surprising because both sides, though belonging to different political parties, are veterans of the democratic struggles of the 1980s and present or ex-parish council members. Clearly, in Adimalathura we are seeing something beyond a 'civil-political society' perhaps – women here are welfare recipients and also aspirants to full membership in their community.

It looks evident that the internal elections have brought clear advantages to the women of the coastal wards, especially facilitating their entry into leadership. Their bargaining power vis-a-vis political parties has been strengthened by a host of factors including the panchayats' general willingness to implement the institutional changes implied by the bye-law, the greater experience of coastal women in small enterprise, and their better ability to bargain with political parties. The CDS CP of Kottukal who hailed from one of the coastal wards gave us a detailed account of how the panchayat president (of the rival political front) tried to foil her election, but how she managed to use her party connections to stall his plans. However, she built friendly working relations with him later and gained his support, while, at the same time, struggling to gain autonomy from her own party comrades:

> But now the president is very friendly and encouraging – he's seen that we work very hard ... The members however don't like it, they are always disgruntled. That includes even CPM members – for example there is a woman member here, who we say, is the 'Kudumbashree Minister' in the panchayat committee because she raises all our issues there. Even she was telling me the other day that I ought to realize that she was voted to power by the entire population of a Ward while we were elected by a few stray women and that I ought to be more respectful, letting her know of all our decisions, meetings etc. beforehand! I had to tell her that we were elected by the women here, and we therefore represent them, and it is she who should be a little more respectful! ... With them [members] too, I have to use the by-law. The Bye-

law clearly says, Kudumbashree leaders are not expected to inform the ward members each time they shit, each time they spit.

The KS in Adimalathura, thus identifying itself with 'women's interests' was able to make use of the spaces that it managed, for example, that of the Mahatma Gandhi Rural Employment Guarantee Scheme (notably, absent in urban areas) which women availed largely, to mobilise women around demands, especially for trainings and funds for microenterprise. In the face of falling male incomes, the CDS debated profitable microenterprise options, successfully asserting their own vision of economic activity against the panchayat's less empowering vision. In the CDS CP's words :

> For women, development is not building big roads and things. Life here is quite difficult, with men's fishing work yielding less and less. See, if a fisherman gets a 1000 rupees one day, he's going to keep aside 500 for himself – 300 for his liquor and 200 as a backup, in case the going isn't good the next day. The wife will get just 500. But the wife herself won't do that, she will make sure that the money she makes is spent on her kids and home ... women here are managing everything on their own. Also, women do what they are able to do – they can't kill themselves producing things. They make and sell enough to get a good income, that is it.

KS women leaders are also not subservient to even the KS Mission and the banks. They take pains to ensure the fungibility of resources offered, explicitly rejecting one-size-fits-all approaches. The leading KS woman in Adimalathura reflected on the ethics of such juggling by evoking the earlier history of credit based on trust in the community:

> Look Madam, this isn't right, I know, but it isn't wrong either. Everyone knows we can't have vast banana plantations on the beach sand but the money is there. See, it is like this: you have some cash to spare, but you won't lend it to me, but to another person. So what do I do? I get the other person to approach you and then use the cash for good purposes! … And why shouldn't I do it? These are low interest loans, why let them lapse? Why not let poor people use them, especially when they are scrupulous on repayment? In olden days, people used to lend to each other on trust, without interest[19].

In the last remark of the above quote, we have a clue about what Aparna Sundar calls the 'vernacular civil society' of the coastal communities in south-western India (2010:11). Critiquing the claim that civil society is a concept historically and sociologically proper to Europe, she points out that civil society may exist in non-elite communities in postcolonial societies as spaces of "association, communication, and contestation between diverse interests and identities …defined by the particular regional political –economic and cultural context in which it emerges" (Sundar 2010: 21). Society at Adimalathura is adjacent to and closely resembles the community that Sundar studied. The civil society there is structured both by community norms of reciprocity as well as those that inhere n numerous civic bodies, from Basic Christian Communities to KS SHGs and groups of NREGS workers. In other words, unlike the civil-political society, there are moral frameworks that may be projected on the population here, and women leaders receive support that appears to be far more reliable.

This is however not to deny the heightened burdens of work women in Adimalathura carry, especially in the light of steadily-declining male incomes from fishing. The work that they do is probably rightly termed 'provisioning labour' (Neysmith et al 2012), which involves not just caring labour but the larger task of securing the many different kinds of resources necessary for the well-being of all to who they are bound to with responsibility, and cuts across the domestic/public/market divides. Nor is it to deny the 'feminisation of responsibility and obligation' which increasingly makes women responsible for dealing with poverty (Chant 2008). Nevertheless, it is clear that some of the possibilities of the bye-law have indeed been explored under the specific contexts of the panchayat and translated into some empowering opportunities for women there.

CONCLUSIONS

A striking commonality between the two sites was in the concern voiced by men and elders, that the KS women are too assertive and even arrogant and disobedient. This was despite the open acknowledgment of their work for the community and the collective gains it brought. In other words, the KS woman's achievements were not disputed, but not always approved. However, if KS women in Kulamnagar were perceived to be arrogant because of their political and bureaucratic connections, at Adimalathura, women's lessening economic dependence on men in the family and their growing clout in the parish were found fuelling it. From the above account, it is clear that women's gains differ considerably in the two sites; yet, irrespective of their dimensions, they produce anxiety in male authorities. The scene is one of struggle, clearly: KS leaders persevere at local governance despite heightening material and immaterial domestic

burdens and hostility not for nothing. In other words, the state's eagerness to set up women as agents of welfare seems to have produced ambivalent effects in the field of gender politics, leading up to the present scene of struggle. Nevertheless, the successes of KS leaders depend hugely on the nature of their constituencies – and hence institutional change at higher levels, by itself, can mean little. In the two case-studies, the difference between the civil-political society and the vernacular civil society as support-bases for women leaders is evident.

What then, does this mean for feminism in Kerala? It is true that the essentially-liberal SHG has become the standard form of organising women in Kerala and the civil-political society is not necessarily amenable to feminist goals in an immediate sense. Nevertheless, the importance of initial conditions is evident. KS, dispersed over very diverse sites, is necessarily heterogenous in its effects and feminists need to pay attention to micro-dynamics at specific sites. There is evidence from other research and popular struggle that indicates that KS women are open to other forms of organising, formal and informal (Neethi 2013, *New Indian Express* 2012). That 'Kudumbashree' need not always signify neoconservatism was revealed when interviewees remarked quite subversively that for them, KS did not refer to actual families in Kerala but to a "future family, a very large one, of all women and their children, the only one that can be truly auspicious". There can be little doubt that feminists are interested in non-patriarchal imaginings of community. There can also be little doubt that KS is constituted of women who enjoy "an official, public, recognition of the agency of women workers in national life" and therefore hold the potential to form what Rajeswari Sunder Rajan calls a "voluntary community" (Rajan 2000: 75).

In Kerala on the one hand, mainstream left, invested in the 'underprivileged' unmarked by gender, religion or community, treat the collective noun 'Women' largely as a proxy for this group. On the other, the socially- and economically- right-wing caste-community organisations and political parties seek to control 'their' women through microcredit networks. Given this, it is up to the feminists to espouse a 'voluntary community' of women and engage with KS women democratically. This is not easy; it requires a deep critique of gender training models that implicitly or otherwise set up an unequal pedagogical relation between feminist activists and KS women. Feminist self-reflexivity and questions about the adequacy of familiar forms of feminist mobilisation would be crucial here.

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NOTES

[1] Kerala was formed in 1956 uniting British Malabar and the princely States of Travancore and Cochin. Kerala combined very low levels of economic development with high levels of social development (Ramachandran 1997).

[2] There are just seven women members in the present State Assembly (out of 140). Since the formation of Kerala State (1957), just seven women have made it from Kerala to the Indian Parliament.

[3] Elected women representatives in local bodies in Kerala now exceed the reserved positions: 11,443 positions were reserved and 12,211 women were elected.

[4] KS membership is of some 3.7 million women, covering over 50 per cent of Kerala's households (Christabell 2012, 104). Beginning in the Community-Based Nutrition Programme (1991), it was initiated by the Government of Kerala and UNICEF. Three-tiered structures of neighbourhood groups (NHGs) federated into Ward-level Area Development Societies (ADS), federated into panchayat-level Community Development Societies (CDS), were formed, exclusively of below-poverty-line women identified through a non-income-based index. Success led to its scaling up (1998) as the Kudumbashree, under the State Poverty Eradication Mission, which covered the whole state by 2002.

[5] In 2005, 2240 KS members contested panchayat elections; in 2011, their number went up to 11624. Of these 5404 were successful. Yamuna 2011.

[6] The recent public dancing by members of the CPM women's organization in Kerala, including prominent women leaders, of the traditional, high-Hindu, 'feminine' Thiruvatirakkalli at the 21st State Party Congress at Alappuzha and several district congresses in 2015 is a later event and should not be read as evidence for the pre-existence of a culture of free and pleasurable bodily movement in the party. See http://www.southlive.in/revolutionary-thiruvathira-ahead-cpim-conference/4729 , accessed 20 August, 2015. Rather, this must be a read as part of the CPM's strategy to

keep Kerala's Hindu majority on its side in times of rising Hindu hegemony in the nation.

[7] 'Responsibilised welfare' is an integral part of neoliberal welfarism which holds individuals essentially responsible for their own welfare, with the state's role reduced to that of a mere facilitator, in contrast to earlier welfare states in which the welfare of the population was the state's responsibility, as pointed out in the governmentality literature. Gilbert 2002 Elliott 2008; .

[8] A total of 123 village-level leaders of the Kudumbashree from seven districts in Kerala were interviewed, along 28 middle-level leaders from villages, 18 elected members from panchayat wards, and 13 officials. This research was part of a larger inquiry into women's entry into the public in Kerala since the mid-1990s, the project ''Gendering Governance or Governing Women? Gender, Politics and Patriarchy in Contemporary Kerala' funded by the Gender research unit of the IDRC, Canada. The report is available online: http://idl-bnc.idrc.ca/dspace/handle/10625/42605 , accessed 28 November, 2014.

[9] This is part of ongoing research titled ' Self-help or Social transformation: Women in local governance in Kerala State, India, and South Africa' – conducted in collaboration with NIBR, Oslo, and University of Witwatersrand, South Africa. . The fieldwork involved intensive interviewing, participant observation, and the writing of local

histories in two sites, besides field surveys. A total of 49 semi-structured interviews with women and men of different age groups and communities were conducted at an urban slum, and 54 at the fishing hamlet.

[10] According to Census data on Kerala, in 1962, the share of the total female population with college education was a mere 0.1 per cent compared to 0.3 per cent of the total male population, By 2001, both had increased to 4.5, with the figure for the male population falling marginally from 4.6 to 4.5 between 1991 and 2001. The simple annual growth rate in the college educated population, male and female, shows that the rate of women's entry into college education increased phenomenally between 1961 and 1991, the major spurt being between 1961 and 1971, when it was 55.2 per cent compared with 35.6 for males. I thank Vinoj Abraham for sharing this data.

[11] A more detailed account is to be found in CDS 2008.

[12] From our sample, the typical CDS CP was a lower middle-class woman aged between 30 and 40, usually of the Other Backward Communities (which are higher than the dalits but lower than upper-castes), 'respectably' married (i.e. in a stable marriage), and educated up to high school or higher secondary level.

[13] Kadiyala (2004 : 33) reports that the village panchayats were initially very hostile to these community-based organizations during the initial phase of scaling up Kudumbashree simply because they feared the strengthening of the Grama Sabha. This highlights the points of contact between the two – the idea of embedding the CDS within the panchayat was meant to strengthen local democracy and not set up an alternate power centre. A compromise was arrived by which KS institutions were "subsystems of LBGs, but not subordinate to them." However, this potential remained largely unmentioned till after the institution of internal elections, after which the Kudumbashree officials began to refer to CDS structures as 'partners in governance' with the local body. Muralidharan 2011.

[14] As the last panchayat elections proved.

[15] Feminist thought on citizenship has of course been multiple, ranging from proposals to gain full inclusion in gender-neutral political publics (Phillips 1991), to conceptions of citizenship illumined by care (Bubeck 1995), and radical views that call for re-conceiving citizenship as radical practice that undermines essentialised gender identities (Mouffe 1992) and enables group assertion (Young 1990). Nevertheless, there are common concerns – undermining the false universalism of liberal citizenship and outlining its gendered contours. These are not realized in Kerala through the KS today.

[16] This is evident in the steeply falling use of public schools and health care by the better-off in Kerala today, in which private spaces and services are increasingly utilized by not just the richer sections but even the poorer aspirants to upward mobility.

[17] G.O. (RT) No. 1812/2011/LSGD. Department of Local Self Government, Kerala, 29 July 2011. See http://www.go.lsgkerala.gov.in/files/go20110729_7193.pdf , accessed 24 August 2015.

[18] The parish councils took shape in the village in the mid-1980s replacing older, more hierarchical structures. This process started in the 1970s in the wake of Vatican II, and parish councils and Basic Christian Communities, which now closely resemble the three-tier panchayati raj institutions, began to spread in the Thiruvananthapuram and Kottar dioceses in 1970s and 80s. They provided reservations for weaker sections, especially women. For details, see Sundar (2012). At present, 30 per cent seats in parish councils are reserved for women. See the announcement regarding elections to the parish councils issued by Bishop Soosa Pakiam, 2012. http://www.latinarchdiocesetrivandrum.org/pdf/circular/Pastoral-Council-Election-Circular-October-2012.pdf , accessed 20 August 2015.

[19] These practices are discussed in detail in Platteau and Abraham 1987.

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