

6 BENEFICIARY AS AGENCY

ROLE OF WOMEN'S AGENCY AND THE PANCHAYAT IN IMPLEMENTING NREGA — A STUDY IN KERALA

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The emergence of *Kudumbasree* (roughly translated as blessed family),—as a powerful organization of women from poorer households in Kerala—offers a promising *modus operandi* and *modus vivendi* to state-initiated schemes for poverty alleviation and social security. It had a modest beginning which over time grew into a significant socio-economic movement. Little wonder that the Kerala Government decided in the year of grace, 1998, to implement all its poverty alleviation schemes and programmes through Kudumbasree. Given the fact that Kudumbasree represents half the households in the State, it can safely be reckoned that it would comprise of the officially recognized poor (through the holding of a BPL card)¹ and those who consider themselves poor enough to join this organization, even without official recognition. In a recent exercise it was found that the percentage of 'poor and vulnerable' households in Kerala in 2010 was close to 48 per cent, which seemed to vindicate the membership ratio in Kudumbasree.² Accordingly, when the National Rural Employment Guarantee Act (NREGA) was implemented in the State in 2005–6, Kudumbasree emerged as a major player in the implementation process within the framework of the panchayati raj, whereby village panchayats assumed responsibility for local level planning and decisions relating to implementation. This study is therefore an attempt to understand the new implementation process through the study of a village panchayat located in the Trivandrum (also known as Thiruvananthapuram) district.

Thanks to the contiguous habitat pattern in much of Kerala, villages are not geographically separate clusters of settlements, as in most



FIGURE 6.1 Location of Aryanad

Note: Map not drawn to scale.

other parts of India. Currently, the Aryanad panchayat has 18 wards (Figure 6.1), which may be approximately referred to as villages. The panchayat got into the public limelight when it was shortlisted as one of the 15 best-performing panchayats in a television presentation called 'Green Kerala Express', a social reality show, wherein panchayats and

municipalities were invited to present their developmental activities and achievements, and submit themselves to an interrogation by a jury.³ The first author, who chaired the jury, came into contact with the panchayat and its elected Sarpanch in 2010 and visited the area in June 2010. During this time, he held discussions with the panchayat council, activists from the different developmental institutions sponsored by the panchayat, the Kudumbasree members, and a few local people, especially those associated with schools, child care centres, and farmer's organizations. In the course of the study, a few more visits were made with the second author, with a view to seeing the ongoing works under the National Rural Employment Guarantee Scheme (NREGS) and meeting with the Kudumbasree workers, panchayat officials, and households. The second author, who had known the Sarpanch—Mr Viju Mohan—since 2001, organized a team of investigators who assisted in collection of the required data and conducted several meetings and interviews with the members of Kudumbasree. Mr Viju Mohan, who was re-elected for another term of five years in 2006, thus completing a 10-year tenure, had indeed played the role of a catalyst in the transformation of the panchayat administration, thus positioning it at the forefront of local-level development initiatives in the area. In the process, he also demonstrated the potential of democratic decentralization as a powerful instrument in ensuring people's participation in governance and development, giving them a new status as stakeholders. The new Sarpanch, Mr Radhakrishnan, who assumed office in 2011 when this study was initiated, thus inherited a rich and favourable legacy. What we therefore want to emphasize here is the close interaction the authors had during the course of the entire study, arising out of their earlier familiarity with the main office bearers and the panchayat.

THE NEW PANCHAYATI RAJ

Before we dwell on the issues relating to the implementation of the NREGS in the panchayat, it is important to have an overview of the emerging panchayati raj in Kerala following the Constitutional amendment in 1992 (which came into force in 1993) at the national level, and the Kerala-specific legislation in 1994. While the former can be rightly characterized as a watershed in the recent history of democratic decentralization in India, the latter ensured its implementation

through the creation of active local level-self governments. In the case of Kerala, it was the Left Democratic Front (LDF) led government that played a crucial role in the realization of such democratic decentralization in governance within the parameters set by the amendment. Its political opposition, the United Democratic Front (UDF), led by the Indian National Congress, was also bound to swear by it given the fact that it was its national leadership that brought in the Constitutional amendment. However, the LDF did gain considerable edge over the UDF since democratic decentralization had been core to its agenda since early 1980s. While a State-level legislation was brought in by the UDF government in 1994 two years after the Constitutional amendment was passed by the Centre, it was left to the LDF that came to power in 1996 to launch what was called, a 'People's Plan Campaign' (PPC) with a view to involving the citizens in the making of the new panchayati raj.

Much has been written on the PPC, but what is important from the point of this study is the involvement of the people in terms of consultation and deliberation in identifying developmental problems and solutions at the local level, and the preparation of a plan document for each panchayat with the involvement of knowledgeable persons invited by the panchayat. Simultaneously, the state government announced a financial devolution package under which nearly 40 per cent of plan expenditure was devolved to the panchayat bodies.⁴ This gave an immediate push to the decentralization process because the panchayat bodies had to prepare a plan for spending the amount. They were also encouraged to enhance collection of own revenue, which had been an important source of income for panchayats in Kerala even before the decentralization process. Despite several problems of omission and commission during the first 3–4 years, and the political fallout, a political euphoria was created all over the State over the PPC with the devolution of financial resources, preceded by the devolution of functions; demand for deployment of government employees to panchayats; involvement of State-wide developmental movements such as the Kerala Sastra Sahitya Parishad (KSSP), along with a large number of other local level organizations; the media focus on critically monitoring the PPC; and last but not the least, a watchful but often a highly critical opposition (UDF). All these created a social and political ambience, drawing vast public attention on the panchayati raj. Several youths, already accustomed to work in various social, cultural

and political organizations, were attracted to work for, and participate in, the panchayat; some of them were also opted to contest in elections and thus assume political office in the emerging panchayati raj.⁵ The Sarpanch of the Aryanad panchayat, Mr Viju Mohan, was one such young political worker. When he was elected, he was only 36 years old and was working as an employee in a State-owned public sector company in Trivandrum city. His tenure of 10 years witnessed the release of a lot of youth energy in his native panchayat, backed by a large number of people from different walks of life.

But one should not overestimate the role of personality here; Kerala as a State had borne witness to the prior existence of a political and social history of mobilization and organization of the labouring poor as well as the peasantry, the high density emergence of civil society organizations that often had either explicit or implicit affiliations to political parties or their ideologies, the emergence of Kudumbasree as an organization of women from poorer households, the existence of a number of public service institutions of the state and, above all, the existence of not just literate, but a reasonably educated population, as is the case in most parts of Kerala. But personalities do matter when they are charged with a high degree of social commitment because they then become the much-needed 'catalysts' of socio-economic change.

THE SELECTED PANCHAYAT AND ITS GEOGRAPHY AND DEMOGRAPHY

Aryanad panchayat (Figure 6.2), formed in 1953, is located around 40 kms from Trivandrum city, the capital of Kerala. It's a large panchayat with an area close to 105 sq km, and a population of 32,500 as of 2010, thus showing a population density of 310. The average is, however, quite misleading given the fact that 78 per cent of the area is under forests, vested with the government and managed by the Forest Department, with only limited access to the people to share its produce. So, the effective population density is 1,407 (as compared to 1,130 excluding the forest area and 859 including the forest area for the State as a whole), which is quite visible with its bustling market centres, rows of buildings and constant flow of people. In many respects, Aryanad is 'capsuled' Kerala. Being close to the mountains, its geography is undulating, separating Kerala with Tamil Nadu at the eastern end. A major river and several small canals

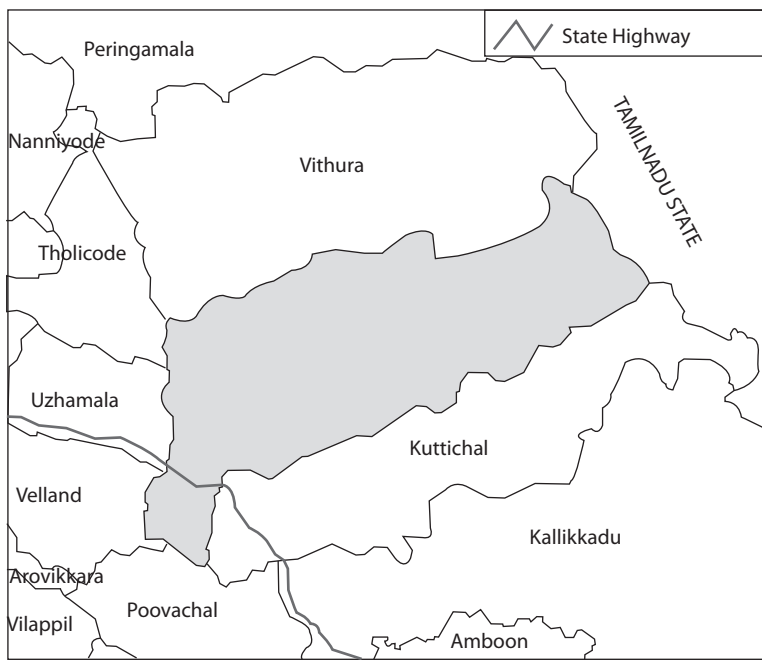


FIGURE 6.2 Aryanad Panchayat

Source: Based on focus group discussion.

make the area quite water abundant, almost through the year. The favourable female sex ratio of Kerala is also reflected in Aryanad. For every 1,000 males, there are 1079 females as against the State average of 1084. Hindus (including the SCs and STs) constitute around 70 per cent of the population, followed by 20 per cent Christians and around 10 per cent Muslims, as against the State average of 57, 19 and 24 per cent respectively. The SC population is around 20 per cent and the ST, around 1.8 per cent, as against the State average of 9 and 1 per cent respectively.

ECONOMY AND SOCIETY AND ITS ORGANIZATIONAL DENSITY

Though only a little more than one-fifth of the area is available for habitation and socio-economic activities, the people have made the

best use of the favourable agro-climatic conditions by growing a number of crops that form the backbone of the local economy. It has also given rise to a number of non-farm activities. Topping this is the spread of education and a continuing process of acquiring higher educational qualifications by the younger generation, seeking secure employment and livelihood outside agriculture and also outside the local economy.

Rubber is the leading crop because it of suitable cultivation conditions on the slopes and also because commercially it is highly attractive, giving rise to a continuous income (at least on a weekly basis) when trees are ready for tapping after the initial gestation of around seven years. Of the nearly 2000 hectare of land under cultivation, rubber cultivation accounts for around 45 per cent of the area largely covered by medium-size plantations owned by a few households outside the panchayat. A number of small and marginal farmers have also planted rubber in their small plots of land, thanks to its commercial attraction. The second major crop is coconut, accounting for 38 per cent of area, followed by banana cultivation in around 200 hectares or 10 per cent of the area. A number of other crops with areas ranging from 10 to 50 hectares account for the remaining crops, with rice cultivation gradually declining to just around 30 hectares due to its low profitability and, as the farmers say, lack of economic viability.

Other crops include tapioca, pepper, vegetables, roots, medicinal plants, and decorate flower plants. Animal husbandry such as cattle rearing, poultry and dairying, agro and food processing, some micro-and small-industries, and repair workshops represent other economic activities. Since a few individuals/households own large areas under rubber, land distribution is quite skewed. On an average, the 4150 registered farmers have 0.30 hectare of cultivated land per household. Nearly one-third of the labour force may be counted as 'farmers'. Most of them are either the Forward Castes or the Other Backward Castes among Hindus and Christians. Some Muslim families may also be small and marginal farmers, but they generally tend to focus on non-agricultural operations such as trading, and other forms of self employment. Most SC households do not have any cultivated land, although ST households traditionally owned/had access to land. Hence the potential labour force for the NREG is largely from this pool of small and marginal farmers, and self employed and rural labour households. Significantly, there is a visibly large service sector

TABLE 6.1 Public Service/Developmental Institutions in Aryanad Panchayat

Within the Supervisory Control of the Panchayat	
Krishi Bhavan (Agricultural Office)	1
Primary Health Centre (PHC)	1
Sub-centres under the PHC	7
Homeo Health Centre	1
Ayurveda Health Centre	1
Veterinary Hospital	1
Office of the ICDS	1
Anganawadis under the ICDS	33
Village Extension Office	1
Office of the Assistant Engineer	1
Government Primary School	7
Public Libraries	3
Autonomous Institutions Sponsored by the Panchayat	
Socio-economic Development Centre	1
Human Resource Development Centre	1
Recreation Club for the Elderly	1
Children's Knowledge Centre	1
Jagrata Samiti (to report crimes against women)	1
People's Food Processing Unit	1
Processing and Marketing Centre for Agricultural Produce	1

Source: Enumeration of institutions carried out by the authors.

because of the demand for education, health care and other services (Table 6.1).

The panchayat is responsible for the management and functioning of a number of public service delivery institutions following the devolution of powers/functions by the State Government. These include an agricultural office called Krishi Bhavan, veterinary hospital, primary health centres, village extension office, office of the assistant engineer (roads), 33 child care centres called *anganawadis* under the National Integrated Child Development Scheme, and seven primary and four upper primary schools. In addition, as shown in Table 6.2, there are a number of educational, health and other public service institutions, mostly in the public domain. The panchayat had taken

TABLE 6.2 Other Public Service Institutions Outside the Control of the Panchayat, including Privately Owned Ones

Higher Secondary School (1 General, 1 Vocational) (G)	2
Upper Primary School (PA)	2
English Medium School (P)	2
Industrial Training Institute (G)	1
Information Technology Service (Akshaya Centre)	1
Pharmacy College (P)	1
Post Office	3
Banks (Co-op 3, Public Sector 1, Private Sector 2)	6
Non-Banking Financial Institutions	5
Ration (PDS) Shops (G)	33
Government Fair Price Shop (Maveli)	2
Medical Store (G)	1
Office of the Rubber Board	1
Village Office (Revenue Dept)	1
Police Stations	2
Excise Office	1
Telephone Exchange	1
Road Transport Corporation Office	1
Electricity Board Office	1
Water Authority Office (Drinking Water)	1
Public Works Department Office	2
Office of the Sub-Registrar	1
Integrated Cattle Development Project Office	1
Soil Conservation Department Office	1
Liquor Retail Shop (G)	1
Financial Enterprise Office (Chit Fund)	1
NBFI (Gold Loan & Chit Fund)	2
Integrated Cattle Development Project Office	1

Source: Enumeration of institutions carried out by the authors.

Note: G Indicated Govt Dept/Public institution. P indicates Private sector. PA means private but funded by Govt.

initiative in sponsoring a number of developmental institutions at the time of the PPC. We will share more on this subsequently.

Traditional and modern institutions co-exist as well as co-habit vigorously in this village panchayat, as in the rest of Kerala, not to

speak of the country in general. However, the Kerala scenario is noted for its greater density of socio-cultural as well as political and economic institutions that often cooperate as well as combat on ideological grounds. In the present day Kerala, the most vigorous institutions at all levels are the political parties and Aryanad is no exception. The two main political parties that have powerful local presence are the Communist Party of India (Marxist), which leads the LDF and the Indian National Congress, which leads the UDF; next is the Communist Party of India (CPI). Although other smaller parties do make their presence felt, no one has an elected member in the panchayat council. Youth organizations of these political parties also have a presence and they do participate, sometimes cutting along party lines, in the developmental activities within the village panchayat.

Local level units of major trade unions are also quite active, but confined to their areas of work such as wage bargaining (or even wage-setting), worker's welfare and social security. There are local units of the three women's organizations, loyal to the CPM, Congress and the BJP. In addition to these, there is what may be called politically-secular institutions, where ideology is not the basis of membership (Table 6.3). These are the village libraries, a common sight in all villages in Kerala. There are nine libraries in Aryanad with abundance of books, as well as facilities for reading. Three of them, the bigger ones, are directly under the supervision of the panchayat, while others are run on a voluntary basis. In addition, we counted 33 sports and arts clubs providing facilities and opportunities to the youth for sports as well as artistic performance. While membership is open to both young men and women, as is generally the case in Kerala, they are largely managed by young men who visit on a daily basis and participate in its activities. Young women are often members of the library and sometimes participate in special events organized by these clubs. In that sense, the intermingling of young men and women are along 'socially expected lines', that is, limited informal interaction. Clusters of households are also being organized into residents associations, a phenomenon that was, till recently, confined to towns and cities. Aryanad has seven such residents' associations.

Co-existing with them are the organizations of religions and communities. There are local level units of the Nairs (classified officially as a Hindu Forward community) called the Nair Service Society; of the Sree Narayana Dharma Paripalana Sangham (SNDP) of the

TABLE 6.3 Civil Society Organizations in Aryanad

Secular Organizations	
Youth Organizations	6
Trade Unions	5
Women's Organizations	3
Kudumbasree Units	18
Co-operative Societies (Milk and Credit)	13
Farmer's Committees	18
Microfinance agencies	5
Men's Self-Help Groups	2
Village Libraries	9
Sports and Arts Clubs	33
Residents' Associations	7
Associations of Communities (caste/religion)	8
Charitable Institutions (including one Old Age Home and one Orphanage)	4
Religions Community and Caste Organizations	
Organizations of Communities	9
Hindu Temples	8
Christian Churches	6
Muslim Mosques	4

Source: Enumeration of institutions carried out by the authors.

Ezhava community (classified as Other Backward Community or OBC); Vellala Sabha (an FC); Vishwakarma Sabha (Other Backward Community of carpenters); Nadar Sabha (who may be found in both Hindus and Christians); Pulayar Sabha (SC group), a Muslim Sabha and a *Jama-et* (both Muslim groups). Christian communities are organized according to their groups, represented by the church. Reflecting the religious composition of the population, we counted eight Hindu temples, six Christian churches, and 4 Muslim mosques within a 22 sq km area where most people live.

DEVELOPMENT-ORIENTED INSTITUTIONS

It is also important for us to deal briefly with the specific initiatives of the new panchayat in giving shape to developmental organizations and social welfare activities that have a direct bearing on the local

level development including the ability to plan and execute NREG works by Kudumbasree.

One of the first initiatives of the panchayat in early 2000 was the setting up of a Socio-Economic Development Centre. Our enquiries revealed that the motivation for such an initiative was the Karakulam panchayat, which is 30 kms away and had earned a reputation during the PPC as one of the leading model panchayats. With the help of the elected members of the panchayat, youth organizations and farmers in the area, the then panchayat Sarpanch mooted this idea and gave leadership to its formation assisted by social activists, drawn from school teachers, retired officials and members of youth and political organizations. The main objective is to provide guidance and expert services in tackling problems in agriculture and rural development. It invited experts from both within, and outside, the panchayat to formulate a number of schemes and projects. Many issues and problems, and ideas to solve them emanated from the monthly meetings convened by the farmer's committees wherein panchayat council members and agricultural and other developmental officials participated. Shortage of labour for manual work in agriculture, low yields, lack of modern agricultural equipments, and absence of serious cooperation among farmers which resulted in low prices being received were some of the issues that needed to be dealt with. Ideas that were discussed in the larger debates across Kerala, on its development problems and solutions, found a positive chord in these meetings.

Many interesting initiatives came out of such interactions between farmers, elected representatives, government officials and the youth activists. For instance, a land bank was created to identify fallow lands as well as lands left uncultivated by farmers. On the basis of an agreement between the bank and owners of such lands, these were then leased to farmer's groups as well as Kudumbasree groups in exchange for payment of an annual fee. Similarly, a labour bank was created for those willing to work not only in farms, but also in other kinds of development work schemes, who could then register with the labour banks. The bank would, in turn, deploy workers in groups on the basis of demand for work in the area. Initially such a bank worked well, but over time the problem of retaining workers became a problem since many would migrate to other areas and occupations as and when they found employment that they considered better. The SEDC also started a seed bank for distributing high quality seeds

and planting material to the farmers by giving a brand name. Using grants and other sources of income, the SEDC also started renting out modern agricultural machinery at reasonable rates.

We visited a marketing outlet created by the SEDC in the panchayat, which enabled many farmers to bring their produce to a specific centre in the market area. Buyers from outside, including Trivandrum city, visited the centre and procured good quality agricultural produce, which also enabled farmers to receive better prices than before since they no longer had to go to the selling point and sell the produce individually. Aggregation of their output and single point selling has proved to be economically more attractive. The SEDC has also promoted a couple of agro-processing units of tapioca, banana, coconut and paddy.

Another major initiative is the establishment of a Human Resource Development Centre (HRDC). Consequent on the PPC, issues relating to the capacity of the people in the area, for local level development planning, became a major topic. They were acutely aware of their dependence on outside expert knowledge, although there were a few persons within the panchayat with a level of education that could contribute to various initiatives of the panchayat. We were told that many discussions took place at Kudumbasree meetings, Gram Sabhas, as well as workshops organized for plan preparations. The ideas and suggestions from these meetings were given a concrete shape in the form of the HRDC. The panchayat assisted in the construction of a building for the HRDC; a management committee with bye-laws and working manuals was setup. An advisory committee, an academic committee, a facilitator's team consisting of teachers and other educated persons in the area, and theme-based subject committees were formed. The facilities included a reference library with a couple of thousand books, internet facility, reading room, language laboratory, children's corner, computer lab, science lab, information centre, and a conference hall. The library is open to all, but visited mostly by students and a few young men and women, as a centre to gain knowledge without travelling outside their residential area. A lot of youth use the library as a centre for career guidance by collecting relevant information. Often classes are organized for them to write competitive examinations. Counselling sessions are sometimes organized as well, to give guidance in studies and choice of employment. Some skill-oriented training programmes

covering agricultural workers, construction workers, and health care workers had been undertaken. The HRDC often acts as a platform for the initial formulation of projects for the panchayat, including those under the NREG. The conference hall was the venue for many meetings and events, besides being let out to the residents for social functions. During one of our visits, a large meeting was organized in the conference hall in which Kudumbasree workers, ASHA workers, Anganawadi teachers, and various other functionaries and the public at large were invited. The discussions were alert and articulate, and the people did not shy away from pointing out drawbacks. Delays in the payment of wages for NREG workers and difficulties experienced by certain elderly persons in securing their social pensions were frequently aired. Our visit to the library turned out to be an enjoyable one when we saw young girls sitting and reading in the reading rooms; the shelves contained books by Amartya Sen and Noam Chomsky. The HRDC published 'Village Newspaper' is known by the same name in Malayalam, *Grama Patthram*.

Given the restricted scope of this study, we are not dealing with a whole lot of otherwise interesting initiatives, especially in the areas of health care and educational facilities and activities. But a mention of a few instances are important, to give an idea of the formal structure and office facility that has come up over a period of the last 15 years in the Aryanad village panchayat. We shall then discuss the emergence of Kudumbasree as a critical women's agency, which is currently involved in a number of activities with the support of the panchayat.

NEW PANCHAYAT AND ITS ORGANIZATION

Following the devolution of functions, finance and functionaries, beginning from 1996, village panchayats in Kerala have emerged as active local government institutions euphemistically referred to as 'local self government institutions.' Euphemistic because they are mainly confined to providing basic civic services, and a number of developmental activities, but not maintenance of local law and order, revenue record keeping and registration, revenue collection (except some specified items) and related governance functions. Aryanad had a total revenue of Rs 386 lakh in 2009–10, out of which 61 per cent was 'own revenue,' that is, taxes and other fees collected by the panchayat. The elected panchayat council consists of 18 members; this includes

nine women. Six women representatives worked earlier as Kudumbasree members. There are four standing committees, according to areas of work, chaired by a member to oversee the various activities. The secretariat consists of a panchayat secretary and 13 other officials. Besides, the panchayat has recruited two persons on a contract basis for data entry and accounting work.⁶ With the assistance and guidance of the Information Kerala Mission (IKM), an autonomous body set up by the state government to provide information technology services to local government institutions, Aryanad panchayat has computerized many services. Using the software(s) developed by the IKM, the panchayat prepares the Plan accounts, payment of social security pensions, registration of birth, death, marriage, and relates certificates to the citizens. It maintains a website (www.lsgkerala.in/aryanadpanchayat) where detailed information and guidelines are given about the various services and procedures.⁷

When we visited the panchayat, what struck us was the spacious front office that should be the envy of many of the state government offices. We saw a number of facilities such as chairs, a television, a notice board listing the various types of services, dates of meetings of various committees, a table for filling up applications, days when elected members were available for meetings with the public, attendance details of office staff, special facilities for women breast-feeding children, separate toilets for men and women, a complaint box, waste box, drinking water, counters for receiving and enquiring about applications. The office facilities included separate cubicles for staff and a records section for keeping records. Monthly meetings of office staff, chaired by the Sarpanch, to discuss pending issues and other office matters were also held.

One of the highlights of the new panchayati raj in Kerala is the preparation of a Comprehensive Development Document in 1996. Aryanad has one such document. Besides, it has produced its Development Documents for the 10th and 11th Plans. We were also given a copy of the 'citizen's charter' published in 2010 by the Aryanad panchayat on its own initiative, which contains information on, among other things, various services and responsibilities of the panchayat.

The panchayat also supports the functioning of Kudumbasree. Attached to the panchayat office, there is a furnished office room for the use of the CDS and its chair person. Office facilities have also been provided to the ADS in every ward. Every neighbourhood group

(NHG) has been provided with two registers, one for membership details and another for recording their economic activities. A gender centre has also been allotted which is managed by Kudumbasree.

ROLE OF KUDUMBASREE AND ITS ROLE IN IMPLEMENTING NREG

Kudumbasree has been functioning in the panchayat since 2001, well before the launch of NREG. By 2008, the Kudumbasree had made its presence felt in all the wards (17 in 2008, which expanded to 18 subsequently). It had 330 NHGs, with a membership of 5,475 women representing 84 per cent of total households. All the NHGs with a membership not exceeding 20 members in a given ward constituted an Area Development Society (ADS) with an elected chairperson and other office bearers. The total number of ADS, being equivalent to the total number of wards, constituted the Community Development Society (CDS), with an elected chairperson and executive committee members. The CDS chairperson is the crucial link between Kudumbasree and the panchayat council.

The CDS basically acts as a conduit for disseminating information, facilitating registration and helping the ADS with the identification and planning of activities. As part of these activities, the CDS in Aryanad takes the initiative to convene special meetings of Gram Sabhas, as well as of ADSs at the ward level, and of the NHGs. It also arranges for facilities such as taking photographs and distributing job cards. Working through the ADS, the CDS also selects the number of Mates and arranges training through the Kudumbasree Mission. It also convenes the meetings of Mates once a month. In addition, it monitors the working of Mates as well as the ADS of its area, to ensure that there are no lapses in discharging their duties. Whenever workers come up with problems, complaints and suggestions, those are taken up with the panchayat from time to time.

The ADS acts as a link between the CDS and NHGs at the ward level by disseminating information, making available official application etc. At this level, ward campaigns and meetings are organized with the active involvement of the ADS. It has been given the responsibility to monitor the functioning of Mates and take remedial action as and when required. The ADS helps individual workers fill up their application forms for job cards, take photographs and demand

Box 6.1 Activities of the Kudumbasree in Aryanad

Efforts to initiate *Kudumbasree* activities in Aryanad were started in 2001 with the formation of NHGs, enlisting a membership of not more than 20 members per unit. As of 2010, 330 NHGs had been formed and they were brought under ADS in each ward/village. These included 13 per cent NHGs of SC households and 2 per cent of ST households. At the panchayat level, these ADSs were brought under a CDS. At the State level, a Poverty Alleviation Mission sponsored by the Government of Kerala provided guidance, training and financial assistance for selected activities to the members through the CDS.

The activities of Kudumbasree at the panchayat level may be divided into (a) organizing and implementing thrift and loan schemes, (b) self/group employment activities, and (c) acting as agency for delivery of poverty alleviation/social welfare schemes implemented by, and through, the village panchayat.

In Aryanad, the thrift fund of Kudumbasree was Rs 162 lakh in 2010, which was used to advance loans to needy members. In addition, they had also raised Rs 140 lakh as bank loans for various group activities. The district mission of Kudumbasree extended a grant of Rs 8.8 lakh for various activities. By using these amounts as investment, the various NHGs started 118 micro-enterprises by groups of women, besides 574 individual micro-enterprises. These ranged from cattle rearing, bee-keeping, horticulture, to various food-processing as well as some service sector activities such as diagnostic labs.

As part of its role as an agency in poverty alleviation schemes, Kudumbasree is responsible for carrying out NREG works, ensuring care to the destitute in the panchayat under the *Ashraya* scheme of the State Government, and supplying personnel for waste collection and other specific civic work. Kudumbasree runs the 'Gender Centre' sponsored by the panchayat.

With the support of the panchayat and the Kudumbasree Mission, the CDS in the panchayat has initiated a number of activities for and among the children. So far, 137 Child Forums (*Bala Sabhas*) have been formed. They are organized on a ward/village basis. A *Bala Panchayat* is organized by electing a girl and a boy from each *Bala Sabha* and they in turn elect a seven member body with a president, vice president and secretary. This *Bala Panchayat* meets every month and plans its activities. A Children's Knowledge Centre has been formed with assistance from the panchayat. In addition, the panchayat was persuaded to fund the purchase and distribution of a kit consisting of a dictionary, chess board, shuttle-badminton set and a notebook for writing minutes of meetings to all the *Bala Sabhas*. Vacation camps are organized and in these camps children are given the opportunity to interact with the panchayat and its various institutions, taken on

study tours and conduct environmental activities. To help the children in their various activities, the CDS has appointed a member as a convener.

In all these activities, the district-level officials of Kudumbasree Mission provide guidance, training and arrange for financial assistance wherever available.

work. Usually it ensures that the applicants are responded to by the panchayat within seven to ten days. It also helps the workers link up with the bank for opening of new accounts. It identifies works at the ward level. It also helps in preparing estimates and prioritizes the works by preparing the work schedule.

Once sanction is accorded it convenes the meetings of the workers, and briefs them on the details of the work undertaken. As soon as a given work is completed, it prepares a muster roll and informs the Assistant Engineer, and undertakes the measurement of the work. The ADS is also responsible for ensuring basic facilities in the worksite, distribution of implements, and maintaining the work diary and the muster roll. This apart, it prepares the display board for installation at the work site giving the salient features of the work.

The ADS being in charge of the work undertaken monitors any accidents at the work site and ensures timely medical help. By collaborating with the Primary Health Centre in the panchayat, it also arranges for first aid and preventive health care facilities. The social audit is conducted with the help of the ADS by bringing together experts in the field, social workers, health workers as well as the NREG workers and ward member of the panchayat. At the panchayat's request, the ADS actively participate in the preparation of a watershed development plan in Aryanad. It organizes groups, in all four, consisting of seven members each, which includes some of their own NHG members, and collects information about water sources, soil and its quality as well as other bio-resources in their ward.

The primary unit of NHG has a secretary elected by the members. The information and notifications received from ADS and CDS are disseminated to the members. All their individual requirements are aggregated at this level, and transmitted through the ADS and CDS to the panchayat. The meeting of the NHGs also discusses beneficiary-oriented schemes of the Government such as the health insurance

scheme and the housing schemes. The functioning of the three-tier organization of Kudumbasree at the panchayat level is supported and assisted by the State-sponsored Kudumbasree Mission through its district-level team of officials.

IMPLEMENTING NREG

The NREG was introduced in the year 2008–9 as part of the Phase III of the national programme. At the initial stages, the panchayat officials did not have a clear idea on how to start the employment scheme by eliciting registration of people, based on their need for such employment. Only around 30 people in a panchayat consisting of roughly 12,000 to 13,000 workers came forward for registration. This led to a serious debate and discussion within the working groups in the panchayat, and finally it was decided to disseminate information through a campaign across the 18 wards/villages of the panchayat. It was at this point of time that the panchayat sought the involvement of Kudumbasree, not only for the campaign but also to implement the scheme, starting with distribution of job cards to demanding households.

Once it became its 'agenda' as well as a 'project', the Kudumbasree launched a campaign with the help of the panchayat. As part of the campaign, workshops were organized with the active participation of elected ward members and voluntary organizations within the panchayat. The Kudumbasree members were briefed through NHG meetings in which panchayat ward members interacted with them about the NREG and its implementation. Following this the Kudumbasree members visited each and every household in their respective ward and gave them notices detailing the NREG Scheme, and notified them of the decision to convene a special meeting of the Gram Sabhas. They also undertook a poster campaign as a matter of 'high visibility' publicity. Consequent to such a high profile campaign, meetings of the Gram Sabhas were convened under the chairmanship of the ward member in which the Sarpanch and panchayat members, resource persons and representatives of Kudumbasree participated and interacted with the members of Gram Sabha.

It must be pointed out here that such close interactions and deliberations were part of the PPC throughout Kerala, arising out of a political decision implemented through the government machinery. Despite understandable drawbacks and partisan politics that

were subject to criticism even by some of the members of the LDE, let alone the political opposition (the UDF), the PPC did create a sense of euphoria among social and development activists. That the highly organized trade unions, especially the white collar unions of government employees, hardly shared this euphoria and even became an obstacle in the Government's decision to deploy staff to the local government institutions is, however, another story.

ISSUE OF JOB CARDS AND IDENTIFICATION OF WORKS

Following this campaign, the panchayat council noticed a rather dramatic increase in the demand for job cards, which led to a decision that job cards would be distributed through Kudumbasree. Distribution of application forms, and helping the applicants for filling up the forms were all undertaken by Kudumbasree as a matter of voluntary service. On its part, the village panchayat offered to take care of the cost of taking photographs and also setting up the facilities for it in every ward. It also took the initiative in contacting the local branch of Canara Bank, a large public sector national commercial bank, for opening individual accounts for the NREG workers but without success.⁸ However, the Sarpanch took initiative in negotiating with the local co-operative bank (Aryanad Service Co-operative Bank), which agreed to open the required accounts for the NREG workers that, in our view, made a point about the importance of local-level institutions with a stake in the local economy and society.

IDENTIFYING WORKS, THEIR IMPLEMENTATION AND EVALUATION

What exactly is the process adopted for identifying specific projects under the NREGA? We were told that the potential work sites were identified jointly by the elected panchayat member and the ADS on a ward basis. These works mainly consisted of rehabilitation of derelict ponds and tanks, cleaning of canals, water harvesting sites, road repairs and construction, and later identification of lands belonging to small and marginal farmers, to carry out land preparation work for facilitating cultivation. Once they were identified, the information was passed on to the NREG Cell within the panchayat office, which consisted of an Assistant Engineer, an Overseer, and two data entry operators. The NREG Cell prepared the estimates, which were then discussed in 'project meetings' attended by the panchayat council.

Once sanctions were given for the estimates, the Kudumbasree and ADS were asked to implement the same.

Kudumbasree also convenes meetings of the members in which Mates are selected from among the relatively better educated members, who in turn prepare the muster rolls. The ADS and the Mate together are responsible for ensuring basic facilities for workers in the proposed work site. Once the work is over, intimations are given to the Assistant Engineer who undertakes the measurement of such work and prepares the wage bill and other formalities.

We were, however, told that out of the three years, not much progress was made in the implementation of NREG in the first, 2008–9. As the data entry system had not been established, we could secure reliable data only for the second and third year, that is, 2009–10 and 2010–11. What we found (Table 6.4) was that a number of works had been undertaken during the second year such as cleaning of drains, canals and roads, rehabilitation of water bodies, digging of water harvesting dredges, reclaiming fallow lands and some land preparation works in privately owned agricultural lands. However, in the third year much of the works undertaken were in the nature of land preparation in privately-owned agricultural lands (93 per cent of total works and 84 per cent of expenditure). We were not able to secure a credible explanation for this, except the absence of adequate and feasible projects of a common nature. This could be partly due to the stringent conditions set by the State Government, that non-wage expenditure under the NREG should be discouraged resulting, in 93 per cent expenditure in the form of wage payments in the State as a whole.

However, the panchayat had recently initiated an Integrated Watershed Development Master Plan which is still in the making. Such a plan is expected to help prepare a shelf of projects for the next three to five years, the officials pointed out.

The panchayat has instituted a Vigilance and Monitoring Committee that includes, apart from the elected members and the chairperson of Kudumbasree, an Assistant Engineer, Overseer, and retired but knowledgeable officials who are not formally part of the panchayat or NREG Scheme. This committee gives guidance right from the identification stage of the work undertaken. There is a social audit mandated under the NREGS, and such a system functions through an annual meeting in which the elected panchayat member

TABLE 6.4 Work Status of Aryanad Panchayat—Completed

S. No	Type of Work	Number of Works		Expenditure (Rs in lakh)	
		2009-10	2010-11	2009-10	2010-11
1.	Rural connectivity	18 (6)	0 (0)	6.82 (7)	0.07 (0)
2.	Flood control	126 (42)	3 (1)	53.02 (55)	5.74 (3)
3.	Water conservation and water harvesting	15 (5)	0 (0)	4.50 (5)	0.35 (0)
4.	Drought proofing	17 (6)	0 (0)	1.8326 (2)	0 (0)
5.	Micro irrigation	0 (0)	1 (0)	0 (0)	0.60 (0)
7.	Renovation of traditional water bodies	107 (36)	11 (5)	27.41 (28)	20.74 (12)
8.	Land development	15 (5)	204 (93)	3.55 (4)	144.31 (84)
9.	Rajiv Gandhi Seva Kendra	0 (0)	0 (0)	0 (0)	0 (0)
	Total	298 (100)	219 (100)	97.14 (100)	171.81 (100)

Source: Aryanad Panchayat Office.

Note: Figures in brackets are percentage to the total.

of the ward, local level social workers, ADS Committee, members of Kudumbasree are members. The statement of accounts, including wages paid, are presented and discussed in this meeting. However, on the basis of our interaction with Kudumbasree members, we felt that a more effective method of informing the workers of the scheme has been the meetings where the Mate of a team reads the muster roll once a week at the work site, which includes details such as number of participating workers, wages paid etc. During this time, workers also get an opportunity to check whether their individual details, such as number of days worked, are correctly entered in the muster roll. Each work under the NREG is subjected to a labour budgeting so as to decide in advance the wage bill. Such a labour budgeting is prepared by taking into account the number of person days required to complete a given project. During the two years for which data are available, we give below (Table 6.5) the details of employment demanded and the number of days of employment made available.

As can be seen from Table 6.5, although job cards were issued to all those who demanded, only 56 to 60 per cent of households were given employment. This worked out to 39 to 42 per cent of the total households. All those who demanded were given employment, although one should keep in mind that in practice, demand synchronized with preparation of project proposals that would indicate the man-days required (labour budget) for the works proposed to be undertaken. During 2009–10, a total of 95, 022 days of employment were generated, which increased to 121, 713 in 2010–11. It worked out to an average of 35 days and 48 days per household during 2009–10 and 2010–11 respectively.

We did pursue the question of low employment along with a set of other important ones. Our enquiry covered 30 NHGs consisting of 513 households. Our first question was the source of information about the NREGS, and the possibility of getting work on demand. 58 per cent reported Kudumbasree as the source of primary information either through the Mates/ADS, or through the NHG meetings, or through the CDS chairperson. Interestingly, 22 per cent reported the NREG Cell/Assistant Engineer as the source of information, while another 11 per cent reported media (mainly newspapers) and 6 per cent as elected ward member.

As for the low employment, majority of the NHGs reported personal and family constraints as the single most important factor

TABLE 6.5 Participation in NREG

Category	Individuals		Households	
	2009–10	2010–11	2009–10	2010–11
1. Registered Members	8,295	8,386	4,557	4,607
2. Job Cards received	–	–	4,556	4,599
3. Those demanded work	3,772	2,945	2,746	2,567
4. (3) as % of (2)	–	–	60.3	55.8
5. Those who secured work	3,750	2,935	2,739	2,558
6. (5) as % of Labour Force (at 40% of Population)	29	23	–	–
7. Those who secured 100 days of work	–	–	32	34

Source: Aryanad Panchayat Office.

in accessing 100 days of work. Most of the women, being married, having young children and/or older parents to look after, found themselves unable to report for duty at the prescribed time of 8 a.m. after completing their household duties in the morning (Table 6.6). They all reported that household duties such as sending the children to school, preparing food, taking care of domestic animals in a number of cases, and similar types of responsibilities were just unavoidable.

Given the fact that most of these women belong to the poorer families, they found the opportunity to work in the NREGS quite attractive, if only some flexibility in the timing is possible. This brings us to the inherent lack of flexibility in such matters, as well as the absence of decision-making powers on these matters at the level of panchayat. This often results in straight-jacketing an otherwise highly beneficial scheme for the poor. This was not confined to a few panchayats, but was a common complaint that emanated from almost all panchayats, articulated through the members of Kudumbasree in various meetings. As a result of such a chorus of complaints, and backed by the State-level mission of Kudumbasree, the Government of Kerala changed, a few months ago, the NREG work timing from 8 a.m.–4 p.m. to 9 a.m.–5 p.m. Notwithstanding such a positive but marginal gesture, it is our view that it would be far more desirable to delegate to the village panchayats the power to fix the time schedule for such works. After all, the entire labour budget prepared by the

TABLE 6.6 Reasons for Not Getting Hundred Days of Work

<i>Reasons Reported</i>	<i>Number of NHG Responses</i>
Personal and family constraints especially the household and child care work in the morning	17
Inability of the Panchayat to plan in advance or undue delay in taking decisions	6
Lack of adequate and appropriate work within the Ward/Village that are listed in the NREG scheme	3
Too many workers demanding work or inadequate cooperation among workers	2
Officials do not show interest in planning for 100 days of work per household	2

Source: Based on focus group discussion.

NREG cell would have already fixed the total number of days of employment in a given work scheme, and hence it is far more desirable to allow flexibility in timings.

The second most important factor related to the inability of the panchayat to plan in advance, or the reluctance of officials in planning for 100 days of work, or inadequate work opportunities within the village.

Our expectation that the demand for work will be concentrated in a few months, showing some sharp seasonality, was belied, presumably due to the fact that it was women who demanded such employment. Although there was a greater degree of demand during the months from December to March as well as from July to August, there was a core demand that was fairly spread over the year (Figure 6.3).

There is very little seasonality in agricultural occupations in the panchayat because a major proportion of cultivation, such as rubber, coconut and banana, is under perennial or annual crops.

Another major complaint that came up in our interaction was the delay in the payment of wages. 30 per cent of women reported that it took them around 60 to 90 days to receive the wages after completion of work, whereas 8 per cent reported a delay of 30 to 60 days, and another 32 per cent reported a delay of upto 30 days. For reasons that could not be found out, 4 per cent reported a delay exceeding 90 days. Given such long delays, which would defeat the very objective

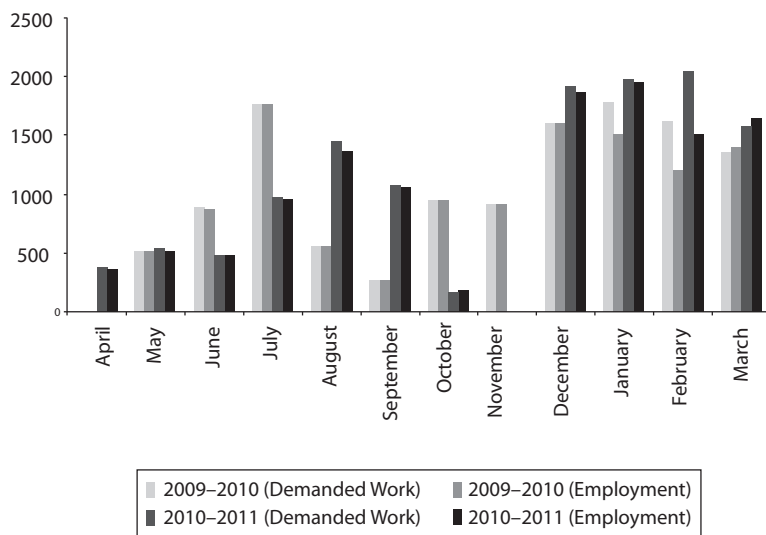


FIGURE 6.3 Month-wise Demand for Work

Source: Aryanad Panchayat Office.

of the NREGA (that is, income generating employment to the poorer households), it would only be appropriate if half the wages are paid immediately after completion of a given work (Figure 6.4).

With regard to the provision of basic facilities at the worksite, all our respondents reported that drinking water was available at all work sites, whereas 80 per cent reported availability of first-aid at the work site (Table 6.7). Only a little more than one-third reported some facility for resting in the form of a shed.⁹ Distribution of implements for manual work was much less as also facilities for taking preventive injections while engaging in hazardous work such as cleaning and rehabilitating tanks, ponds and canals. Often infested with dense weeds, broken bottles, unhygienic wastes, not to speak of snakes and similar but dangerous living beings, the women leaders also admitted that many women workers were agnostic or plainly indifferent to taking injections before embarking on such work. Our own visits to the work sites convinced us that in such cases the ban on use of machinery was not a well thought out response. Many labour intensive works require some expenditure on materials such as granite, sand and cement, etc., or eco-friendly alternatives such as geo-textile or

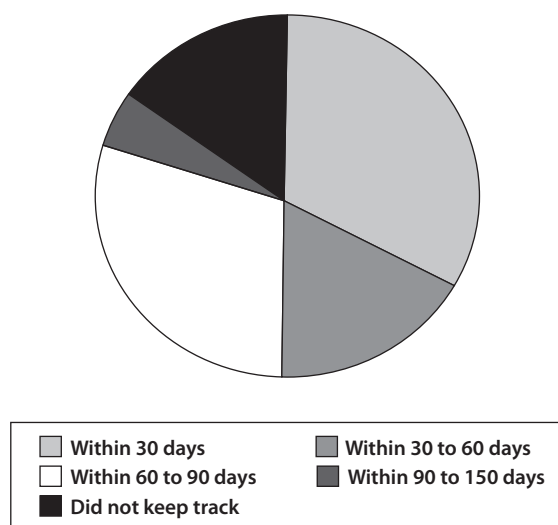


FIGURE 6.4 Periodicity of Payment

Source: Based on focus group discussion.

selected plants, which could act as binding material to the rehabilitated tanks and ponds, canals, as well as in various land development works. While 40 per cent of the expenditure had been earmarked for non-labour costs in the NREGS, the Government of Kerala did not allow such expenditure for fear of creating opportunities for leakages and various rent-seeking activities, such as corruption at the lower levels. We do realize that there is a dilemma here, but it can certainly be resolved through imaginative planning and supervision, facilitating

TABLE 6.7 Response to Basic Facilities in Work-sites

S. No.	Facilities	Number of Positive Responses	Percentage
1.	Drinking water	513	100
2.	First-aid	408	80
3.	Shed	182	35
4.	Preventive injection	20	4
5.	Implements for work	92	18

Source: Based on focus group discussion.

TABLE 6.8 Age, Status, and Employment in NREG, 2010–11

<i>Status</i>	<i>Registered Persons</i>	<i>Employed Persons</i>	<i>Employed as % of Registered</i>	<i>Percentage Share in Total Employed</i>
18–30	1100	232	38	8
30–40	2192	827	38	28
40–50	2312	888	36	30
50–60	1918	688	32	24
60 above	946	300	35	10
Total	8468	2935	35	100

Source: Aryanad Panchayat Office.

non-labour expenditure as required, especially in contexts where the social auditing process is vigilant and effective.

What is the age profile of the NREG workers? Of the total workers who participated in 2010–11, we found that 92 per cent were above 30 years of age, of which 58 per cent were between 30 to 50 years and the remaining 34 per cent above 50 years (Table 6.8). 10 per cent of the total workers were found to be above 60 years, which seemed to reflect that elderly women did seek public employment in rural contexts. Given the fact that women in this age group constituted around 15 per cent in Kerala, such a rate of participation either suggested the absolute nature of poverty in those households, or the attractiveness of public works as a means of some additional income arising out of relative deprivation of the elderly women in rural areas. Our respondents also pointed out that adoption of flexible time schedule for work would attract more women to demand for NREG work.

THE IMPACT OF NREG ON THE LOCAL ECONOMY AND THE WORKER HOUSEHOLDS

Has the NREG made any impact on the local economy? What about its impact, if any, on the worker households in general and the women in particular. It goes without saying that a public employment scheme such as the NREG could have made some impact, in one way or another, on the local economy as well as the local households. On the basis of the number of workers who participated, we found that it roughly worked out to 23 to 28 per cent of the estimated labour force in the panchayat. The total number of days of employment

generated was between 95,000 and 1,22,000 per year. However, only appallingly few workers—less than 40—could get employment upto 100 days per year. We had already mentioned that the type of works undertaken by most of them was in the nature of land and water resource management, and development as well as land preparation in the lands of small and marginal farmers.

As far as the worker households are concerned, their average income worked out to Rs 4,336 and Rs 5,233 per annum in 2009–10 and 2010–11 respectively. While this was only an additional source of income to the households, it entirely came into the hands of the women members of the households. Most workers used such incomes for subsistence expenditure for their families. In households where the women did not work earlier, and depended entirely on their husband's income from casual work, reported that they utilized this income for their children's education, health, clothing and school accessories such as umbrellas, footwear, bags and stationery. As members of the NHGs of the Kudumbasree, they used part of this income to increasing their thrift fund. Some women workers said that they could leverage such thrift funds for getting higher amount of loan through Kudumbasree for starting micro-enterprises, house repairs and so on.

From our detailed interaction, we could elicit that participation in NREG along with their Kudumbasree activities led to perceptible changes in the form of (i) self awareness, (ii) self dignity, and (iii) enhancing self capability. Together they also brought a slow but steady change in the social profile and social status of these women workers. As for self awareness, it is indeed difficult to separate the role of these women from their participation in the NREG. There seemed to be a mutually reinforcing process of engaging in various Kudumbasree activities along with wage makers in the NREG scheme. The women said that in the initial stages, they were not sure of their ability to undertake responsibility for implementing specific works entrusted to them by the panchayat. They had to familiarize themselves with skills such as preparing work estimates, muster rolls, and also carrying out the work in trust. Many of them did not have much skill in works such as cleaning and rehabilitation of tanks and ponds and canals, as well as land levelling, shaping and related work. The few elder male workers working with them taught them such specific skills, which spawned a new relationship. The elderly men were in need of wage work offered by the scheme because their labour power no longer had a market due to age. In return, the women took care of

these elderly men by giving them less tenuous work and more time for resting. While the older men imparted skills, the younger women reciprocated with care and empathy, leading to a mutually respectful relationship. Our interaction with the 30 NHGs revealed that as a result of such acquisition of skills, women started taking up works in groups whenever they were not employed in the NREG Scheme. We also realized that there was nothing like unskilled work and that every kind of work required a process of acquiring skills. It would be far more productive, in our view, if the NREG scheme provided for training programmes that imparted specific skills and thus, helped the labouring poor to enhance their productivity.

Another instance of capability acquisition related to their dealings with banks, in view of them having bank accounts. Many of them already had such an account through the micro-credit scheme of Kudumbasree. The organizational membership as well as the platform of Kudumbasree exposed these women workers to meetings and collective discussions and deliberations. Often they had to speak at such meetings, prepare short notes, and also interact with officials from the panchayat and other agencies. This gave them a sense of confidence in dealing with people with whom they had not had the opportunity to interact before.

All these instances and experiences did not mean that they had not faced any constraints and obstacles. Most of the women reported that apart from the constraints imposed by household responsibilities, other family members were not enthusiastic about their participation in the NREG, especially for those women who had not worked as casual manual labourers before. In the case of some women belonging to the Ezhava caste (officially classified as OBC), their households were engaged, till recently, in the manufacture of illicit liquor as a means to overcome their economic difficulties. In this they had to collaborate with their husbands, often becoming subjects of social ridicule, criticism and, sometimes, exclusion. The activities of Kudumbasree, reinforced by the support of the NREG, enabled many of them to leave such illegal activities and lead a life with work of dignity.

WOMEN'S PERCEPTION OF PARTICIPATION IN NREG

Women's participation in the NREGS in the Aryanad panchayat, like elsewhere in the state, accounted for 91 to 94 per cent. That could lead

to a view that public employment as a felt need in Kerala is confined to women only. In our view this is not due to the unemployment prevailing among men, but because of the nature of unemployment, as well as the emerging labour market dynamics for manual labour in Kerala. The market wage rate for casual workers engaged in manual work has been steadily on the rise in Kerala and it is nearly double that of the daily wage under the NREG when it was introduced, that is, Rs 250 per day. The gap seems to have widened across the State by as much as 2 to 3 times. In Aryanad panchayat, the market wage rate for men varied from 2.5 to 3 times for male workers and 1.5 to 2 times for the women workers during 2008–10 (Table 6.9). During December 2011 when the study was completed, the market wage rate for casual manual work for men varied from Rs 350 to Rs 550, depending on age and skill while it was between Rs 300 to Rs 350 for women. The significant difference between the wages of

TABLE 6.9 Wage Rates for Men and Women Engaged in Casual Manual Work in Aryanad, 2010 (Rs per day)

<i>Activity</i>	<i>Men</i>	<i>Women</i>
Rubber tree tapping (skilled)	400 (Re 1/tree)	Not usually engaged
Latex collection from rubber tree	Not usually engaged	Rs100 (Re 0.25/tree)
Coconut tree climbing (skilled)	400–450 (Rs 10/tree)	Not done/engaged
Construction work like masons, carpenters, plumbers, concreting, etc. (skilled)	500	Not usually engaged
Forest dept plantations	375–400	250
Plant nursery assistants (unskilled)	300	150
General agricultural work (unskilled)	300	175–200
NREG scheme*	125	125

Source: District Kudumbasree Mission, Thiruvananthapuram.

Note: * In 2011–12 this was raised and is currently reported to be Rs 167 per day.

men and women is also due to the high mobility of male workers. Given the connectivity to Trivandrum city and other places, many men work outside the panchayat as construction workers, auto rickshaw and taxi drivers, shop assistants, in hotels and so on. On the other hand, except a few educated women who work in the government and other establishments, most women are confined to their homes due to household responsibilities and the caring of young children and/or aged parents. It is therefore not surprising that male workers of working age are not attracted to work in the NREG scheme, even when they are unemployed, because they would simply not accept a wage rate lower than what they get while at other work.

Second, the emerging scenario of unemployment, especially among the younger age group of 18 to 35, is one of educated unemployment because most of them have acquired at least 10 years of schooling. Both among young boys and girls, there is a high premium attached for regular employment even at a lower wage (which they prefer to receive as monthly salary) because of the security and status such employment affords. The situation in Aryanad is no different. Women workers from rural labour households engaged in manual work have hardly any alternative sources of income except working as casual manual workers. For the educated youth, the NREGS is not an attractive option because of its low quantum of work-days as well as the irregular and delayed wage payment. Around one-third of the women workers engaged in the NREG work in Aryanad panchayat were found to be from households where women were not compelled to go out and work out of sheer poverty. Instead, they are from relatively poorer households characterized as vulnerable and hence an additional source of income is greatly valued. We tried to probe this further and found that 45 per cent of them came into the NREG scheme as a result of the group dynamics arising out of their membership in Kudumbasree. Another 38 per cent women we interviewed reported economic necessity, while 14 per cent reported the public character of the employment scheme as the motivation for demanding work under the NREG. It would appear that the role of the NREG in Kerala, going by the insights of this case study as well as the State-level statistics, has been instrumental in bringing out 'the hidden saving potential' of surplus rural labours, *a la* Ragnar Nurkse, that would not be easy to mobilize through the rural labour market.

We also probed as to why all women members of Kudumbasree demanded work under the NREG. 35 per cent confessed their

inability to demand work due to ill health, something that points to the extremely crucial role the health factor plays in one's individual and family welfare. Another 20 per cent reported that they were engaged in traditional occupations such as pottery and bamboo products making, from which it was not attractive to switch over to the once-in-a-while works under the NREG, even when their traditional occupation wasn't attractive enough from a wage/income point of view. Another 10 per cent reported that they were responsible for taking care of animal husbandry in the household, even though the income from such activities did not always accrue to them directly. Only 5 per cent attributed lower wage rate in the NREG as well as the delay in securing it through the bank channels as a factor for not demanding work. Only 10 per cent responded by saying that they were simply not interested in the NREG, presumably due to their relatively better household economic status. The remaining 20 per cent reported that the main reason for not participating in NREG was the objection from their family members, like mothers-in-law or elder brothers or their husbands.

One of the unintended consequences of women's participation in the NREG in Aryanad has been the new sense of confidence in undertaking manual work as projects for implementation by groups of women. This in turn helped them acquire new capabilities like working on land with which many of them were not familiar, skills in particular type of operations such as land shaping, construction of retailing walls, maintaining and entering registers, measurement of work, dealing with officials and so on. Since the average days of work under the NREG had been quite minimal, a number of women felt the need to continue to work for taking care of economic security of themselves and their families. Since they had already been working as groups, it occurred to them to form groups of like-minded women and canvas for different types of work that they could execute. They realized that there was demand for manual work in the private plots of farmers in the panchayat. This gave rise to formation of what may be called 'labour teams' and we found that 20 per cent of the women workers out of the 53 with whom we interacted were members in such labour teams, whose average membership was mostly between 5 and 7. This was indeed a novel idea that the women workers came up with, arising out of their participation in the NREGS as Kudumbasree workers, and the consequent group dynamic that was set in motion including a sense of solidarity.

One of the authors of this study, who was also a Programme Officer at the State-level Kudumbasree Mission, realized the potential of the 'labour teams' and discussed the matter with the Executive Director and other colleagues in the Kudumbasree Mission. The idea was quickly converted in the form of a proposal for replication in all the panchayats of the State. A guideline in the form of a booklet was also prepared, published and distributed throughout the Kudumbasree network in the State. The suggestion was positively received by many district-level Kudumbasree workers, and discussions are now on as to how best it can be implemented in their respective villages and panchayats. For our assessment of the economic impact of NREG on women workers, we tried to compile their responses in their own words, which are provided in Table 6.10.

Many of them gave multiple answers and what has been presented is a compilation of these into a manageable indicator. Either taken one by one, or in combination, these responses underline the distinct changes in their personal profile and capabilities.

TABLE 6.10 Description by Women, in their Own Words, of the Changes in their Personality

<i>Type of Changes</i>	<i>Number of Responses</i>
'Learned work/improved skills'	153
'Improved health status'	217
'Reduced financial problems in the family'	157
'Become self reliant/independent'	202
'Learned Banking procedures'	43
'Got courage to interact with people'	148
'Self Confidence'	93
'Developed urge to work and earn money'	118
'Gained better interpersonal relationships'	86
'Started participating in social activities'	34
'Learnt to value mutual help'	30
Total responses	1281(100)

Source: Based on focus group discussion.

Note: Responses from 513 women from 30 NHGs. Many gave more than one response.

What it conveys is the fact that a majority of them reported a lesser reliance on money lenders. For some others, they contributed to the expenditure on repair of their houses or buying household articles. The remaining people reported some personal gain in terms of their ability to meet their personal expenses, to buy some jewellery or to save some money for future. However, a more significant impact seems to have happened in their personalities and attitudes towards the larger society. The women workers were of the opinion that their participation in Kudumbasree activities in general, and NREG in particular, exposed them to an understanding of natural resources and its utilization in their local economy. They talked of the contribution they made in converting fallow lands into cultivable land. An overwhelming majority pointed to the improvement in public hygiene and sanitation. They realized their potential in contributing to the welfare of the community, which in turn helped them improve their economic status and social profile. There seems to be a greater degree of social awareness and positive outlook. They were earlier largely confined to the household affairs, with contact extending to their extended family members and a few friends. This has now changed, the women said, to a greater sense of understanding and mutual help through their participation in Kudumbasree. Now, they claim to have acquired a greater degree of hygiene, better awareness of environmental issues, and the ability to tackle these problems.

WEAKER SECTIONS AND THE NREG

The Aryanad panchayat is fairly large going by its geographical area (105 sq km) as well as its population (32, 500 in 2010). The SCs account for 20 per cent of the population, which is close to double their share in the State as a whole (9 per cent). As for STs, their share is around 1.7 per cent, as against the State average of just 1 per cent. While a good part of the area is mountainous, the ST population is located in the upper reaches of the mountains and largely confined to one ward spread over 8 hamlets. Educationally, their achievement is much lower than that of others and public service facilities are relatively limited in the areas they inhabit. Their livelihood is dependant primarily on forest resources, such as making products out of bamboo, animal husbandry, collection of fire wood and medicinal plants, and related activities.

As against this scenario, people belonging to the SC are spread over five wards/villages, extending across 14 colonies. Traditionally, they have been agricultural labourers, though some have some land of their own. Over time they experienced some occupational diversification but largely, if not wholly, have remained confined to the primary sector. While they are more connected to the other sections of the population compared to the STs, they also constitute the least economically and socially secured sections in the local economy and society.

According to the information collected by us and presented in Table 6.11, the share of SCs in the total number of workers in the NREGS worked out to 11 per cent in 2009–10, and 14 per cent in 2010–11. The share of STs was 2.3 and 3 per cent respectively. However, the average days of employment received was only 25 to 28 days for the SC and 30 to 32 days for the ST. This is considerably less than the average days of employment received by the other categories of the population, which is suggestive of some form of discrimination.

The lower number of days of employment has, naturally, affected the average income received from the NREG by the SC/ST households. Most SC workers have to walk 3 to 4 kms to the work sites. The women workers are often constrained to report to work at 8 a.m., having to take care of household duties, and at times other economic activity in and around the house. While many ST households owned land which made them eligible to carry out NREG work, they were not so successful, leading to their lack of enthusiasm in participating in the NREGS.

TABLE 6.11 SC and ST Participation in NREG

<i>Year</i>	<i>Number of Workers</i>	<i>% Share in Total Workers</i>	<i>Population Share</i>	<i>Average Days of Employment per Household</i>	<i>Average Wage Income (Rs)</i>
Scheduled Caste					
2009–10	417	11.1	20.0	25	3,099
2010–11	418	14.2	20.0	28	3,462
Schedule Tribe					
2009–10	87	2.7	1.8	32	3,941
2010–11	87	2.7	1.8	30	3,741

Source: Aryanad Panchayat Office.

While the formation of NHGs ensures some community homogeneity, the fact that these groups work together in worksites has created opportunities for social interaction between SC/ST workers and others. This has been pointed out to us as a refreshing experience. In addition, their interaction with banks, visits to health care centres, overcoming their fear about tetanus and other injections have imparted them a small but desirable changes in personal confidence, and the ability to interact with the people and institutions in their local milieu. Those who were confined to carrying out only their traditional occupations seemed to have realized the expanding, though limited, set of opportunities that the NREG has opened up to them. Those who were reluctant to interact with public institutions such as banks now talk of their capability for such transactions, as well as decisions making when children and family members need health care. Attending meetings of NHGs, Gram Sabhas, and those convened by ward members is said to have equipped them to go to panchayat and other government offices whenever required. As part of their collective deliberations and decisions taken, many women from the ST households led campaigns against illicit liquor manufacturing activities in their hamlets.

SOCIAL SECURITY PENSIONS

While this study's main focus has been the implementation of the NREGA, we have also tried to find out about the delivery of social security pensions in the panchayat. The computerization and digitization of the panchayat records (along with other local bodies) by the IKM has indeed imparted the much-needed transparency in such public services. The IKM maintains a dedicated website for information relating to social security pensions, which gives details for all local bodies from the ward level onwards, according to type of pension, gender, SC/ST, criteria for eligibility, amount entitled, and the date of delivery of the pension. This system was started in 2009–10. On the basis of information collected, we have also checked the data with the panchayat office. The details of the social pensions funded entirely by the State Government are given in Table 6.12. Many elderly workers in the unorganized sector, who are eligible for pensions through their respective Worker's Welfare Board (for which they make a contribution during the working years), are not included here.

TABLE 6.12 Persons Receiving Social Pension in Aryanad Panchayat (2011)

Type	Total	Women	SC	ST	% of Women in Total	Amount per Month (Rs)
Pension for Agriculture Labourer	792	341	NA	NA	43	400
Indira Gandhi National Old Age pension	595	273	NA	NA	46	400
Pension for mentally challenged	NIL	NIL	NA	NA	-	400
Pension for physically challenged	280	127	NA	NA	45	400
Pension for the unmarried women above 50 years	55	55	NA	NA	100	400
Pension for widow	1199	1199	NA	NA	100	400
Total	2921	1995	82	6	68	-

Source: www.lsgkerala.in/aryanadpanchayat/

Note: The monthly pension till March 2011 was a measly Rs 250 and even the enhanced amount works out to around 52 per cent of the abysmally low but revised official poverty line for rural Kerala in 2010.

By the end of 2011, the total number under the two old-age pensions (for agricultural labourers and other old aged poor) works out to 1, 387, which is roughly equivalent to one-third of the population above 60 years of age. However, there would be a segment of pensioners under other categories, especially among widow pensioners, who should be counted as old-age pensioners. If one takes, roughly speaking, one-third of the widows and unmarried women to be above 60 years,¹⁰ the old age pensioners will work out to 41 per cent of the total estimated old population. Given the active interaction of the people with their representatives and the presence of Kudumbasree in disseminating information as well as the existence of various organizations of the farmers and workers, it is not surprising that there is fairly high coverage. While all of them may not be qualified by the severely restrictive criteria for entitlement, there is no doubt that they all belong to a broader group of poor and vulnerable households.

However, what is surprising are the unbelievably low shares of persons belonging to the SC and ST communities. We found that pensioners of all types in the SC category were just 82, accounting for a mere 3 per cent, while their population share is 20 per cent. The pensioners in the ST category were just 6 in number, accounting for a mere 0.2 per cent. Further enquiries did confirm that the number given is indeed as per the records. If this is the situation, then there is no doubt about the subtle exclusion that cannot but be social in our view. While overt social exclusion is difficult in the present-day socio-political milieu in Kerala, covert exclusions of the type that we have found here should indeed be a matter of concern to the Government. Earlier, we had mentioned about the low coverage of the NREG among these communities, but that has been largely, if not only, been due to high wage rate in the labour market as well as the availability of work for most part of the year.

SOME REFLECTIONS

Our study on the implementation of the NREGA in Aryanad panchayat threw up several lessons and issues for further reflection. First, we realized the critical importance of the larger socio-economic environment that makes it possible, or less difficult, to implement pro-poor schemes such as the NREG. The highly favourable initial condition in Aryanad is not an isolated one, but a larger phenomenon throughout Kerala. However that alone is not going to make

a programme successful because, if that were the case, Kerala would have been in the forefront of the implementation of this scheme. The fact that it is not points to the specific local factors such as the quality of leadership and its ability to carry large sections of the local community of citizens, cutting across political and social categories. Further, the labour market dynamics in Kerala has changed so drastically that there is a shortage of labour for manual work especially among men, leading to an inflow of migrant labour from outside, largely from eastern India. However, there is the 'hidden saving potential' in the form of unutilized labour of women, whose participation in the labour market for manual work is contingent on several economic and sociological factors. But the emergence of Kudumbasree as a collective of women from poorer households has enabled the mobilization of their labour within the framework of public employment. We have noted that the implementation of NREG is only one of the activities of Kudumbasree, and that they have many other 'mutual help' programmes, which include caring for the elderly—known as Ashraya¹¹—and young children, besides participating in women-specific social issues. All these have been made possible by a process of gendering by social mobilization, which was not the hallmark of earlier social and political mobilizations. The purely economic benefits of such a mobilization seem to be quite limited, but its unintended social and economic consequences have been, in our view, quite significant and will have a bearing on the socio-economic transformation from the point of women in the villages.

That Kerala's civil society has undergone significant transformations, which also worked as a favourable initial condition for these women, should also be kept in mind. We had noted the high density of political, social and cultural organizations in Aryanad that shows the highly organized nature of civil society, something that is also a Kerala-wide phenomenon. This evolving civil society has not only created an active and deliberative 'public space' for many initiatives of the new panchayat system, but has also given rise to public action of a developmental kind, which is rooted in an earlier era of asserting rights, bargaining for entitlements and working for socio-economic change. A distinguishing characteristic of this civil society is its 'home grown' nature, being organically rooted in local economy, society and culture. In a way, what we are witnessing, not just in Aryanad but in most villages in Kerala, is the role of organic intellectuals and their contributions in local socio-economic change. Such a picture of civil

society is a far cry from the externally-sponsored 'NGO phenomenon' that has gained much currency in international development circles.

Having said that, we have noted with concern that the socially weaker sections of SCs and STs continue to experience subtle forms of exclusion, as revealed in the coverage under social security pensions and declining rate of participation in the NREGS. At the time of finalizing this manuscript, we could get the statistics on NREG employment for the year 2011–12. While it shows an overall improvement in average days of employment (56 as against 48 the previous year); however in the number of persons who received 100 days of work, there has been a drastic decline in SC and ST participation—a mere eight households in the former and just one household in the latter category. This was explained away by the officials in terms of much higher market wage rate as well as regular demand for their labour; but it is difficult to deduce from that that there are not many women in SC households who might be in need of NREG work, but are not able to access it due to household or other responsibilities. Some ST households did complain that works on their land are not being undertaken, while several works are carried out in lands belonging to non-SC/ST community. We have also noted earlier that the share of SC and ST communities in the entitlement to social pension is far below their share in the total population. Despite the progress made by the SC and ST communities in Aryanad in the matter of access to schooling, health care, public assistance for housing and so on, the distance between them and the other communities is perhaps increasing given the faster pace of progress registered among the non-SC/ST communities, whose initial conditions were much better than the former. Such an increasing gap has been noted in the incidence of poverty and vulnerability in Kerala as a whole, despite its impressive performance in the overall rate of reduction (Kannan 2011).

We think that the relatively low inclusion of SC/ST in public welfare schemes calls for a detailed investigative study by sociologists in a rural setting, which is otherwise active in social mobilization and public action.

Aryanad, as we mentioned in the very beginning, was judged as one of the well performing village panchayats in Kerala, and hence the findings cannot be generalized beyond a point. However, given our close association with the functioning of the panchayati raj, we have no hesitation in saying that it belongs to the 10 to 12 per cent

of the similarly well performing panchayats in Kerala. In the context of this particular study, if we were asked to point out a striking feature we would, without hesitation, point to the changing profile of rural women who now occupy a visible public space, with new sense of identity and dignity along with a sense of quiet confidence for their own socio-economic upliftment. They seemed to be discovering the wider world as members of a larger collective organization, which has now made a mark in Kerala's public life.

Notes

¹ The definition of 'poor and vulnerable' in this exercise follows the threshold adopted by the National Commission for Enterprises in the Unorganized Sector, that is double the official poverty line as on 2005 that comes marginally above the international poverty line of two PPP dollars per capita per day. For details, see NCEUS (2007), and Kannan and Raveendran (2011), for the incidence of poor and vulnerable in Kerala and other states.

² In a short questionnaire survey among 617 Kudumbasree members in December 2010, who were attending a state-level conference in their capacity as chairpersons of Community Development Societies, we found that half of them possessed a BPL Card for their households.

³ The jury consisting of public personalities, experts and reputed social activists. 140 village Panchayats and 12 Municipalities participated in this television social reality show broadcast in 78 episodes by the Doordarshan Malayalam Channel from March 1 to June 21, 2010.

⁴ However, the actual disbursal was below this rate due to the limited absorptive of the panchayats.

⁵ For a detailed account of the People's Plan written from the political perspective of the leading party in the LDF that is, the CPI(M), see Issac and Franke (2002). Given the absence of preparation, the first few years of the PPC elicited a lot of criticism (Kannan 2000).

⁶ Recognizing the importance of maintaining accounts in a professional manner, the state government has appointed, in 2011–12, professional accountants in all village panchayats in the state.

⁷ All the local government institutions in Kerala (Panchayats and Municipalities) have their own websites, maintained and serviced by the IKM.

⁸ The bank did not take much interest under the pretext that they did not have adequate staff. While the shortage of staff could be a factor, our understanding is that reluctance is due to more additional work involved in dealing with so many accounts with nominal amount, and hence the lack of profit from such activity.

⁹ It is the general practice in Kerala that pre-school children in the age group of 3 to 5 years from poorer and lower-middle class families are sent to

the *anganawadis* and hardly taken to the worksite. Young children below 3 years are taken care of in their families and that acts as a constraint for their mothers from participating in the labour force, even if they need to. Moreover, pre-school children in the *anganawadis* return home by 3 p.m.

¹⁰ Currently women's life expectancy in Kerala is 76 years; that is at least 12 years higher than for India as a whole.

¹¹ Ashraya is a scheme of the state government where the old, aged and destitute are taken care of by provision of essential food items, medicines for the sick, housing for the homeless, along with home visits by designated Kudumbasree volunteers.

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