

## **Women, work and a winning combination**

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An incredible story of empowerment has been unfolding in the wake of the Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Scheme (MGNREGS) programme in the State of Kerala. This is the story of how a socially engineered convergence of the scheme with panchayati raj institutions and the State sponsored community network of poor women is transforming the lives and capabilities of the poor across the State.

Kerala is unique in the country for the extent of women's participation in the MGNREGS. The proportion of women person days is 93 per cent, which is the highest rate of participation of women in the programme in the country. The highest difference in the average casual wage labour rate for men and women is also to be found in Kerala (Rs.107.3). This difference along with a low female work participation rate of 15.3, speaks volumes about both the socio-economic status and the marginalisation of the woman labourer in the workforce.

Kudumbashree is a vast community network of women sponsored by the State government and located within local self governments of the State. It has over two lakh neighbourhood groups of women federated into ward level Area Development Societies (ADS) and panchayat/municipal level Community Development Societies (CDS). Unlike federated structures of self-help groups (SHG) in the other States, in Kerala, the CDS was embedded in the grama panchayat and expected to work in unison with it in furthering the agenda for development and empowerment. An executive decision was taken by the State government to have all "mates" for the programme from among the ADS of Kudumbashree. Over one lakh women mates were trained, who then proceeded to identify work opportunities, mobilise groups for work, prepare estimates in consultation with the overseer or engineer, supervise work and provide amenities at the worksite, prepare and submit muster rolls, and handle emergencies at work.

### **Most are housewives**

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

Profiling done in one grama panchayat, Aryanad, showed that all the male workers were either senior citizens who had been pushed out of the job market on account of age, or were physically or mentally disabled persons, who were unable to enter the regular job market. An interesting dynamic of intergenerational skill transfer and social security was to be found at the worksite. The workers confided that many of the senior members of the group were unable to complete the eight hours of arduous manual

work, and their shortfall was being compensated by the more able-bodied persons in the group. But the elders had knowledge and skills that were lacking in the younger generation, and were able to guide its members about techniques and traditions. Numerous cases have been documented where earnings were donated to help a fellow worker tide over a health emergency or domestic crisis.

Much of the work taken up under MGNREGS had to do with land and water conservation and watershed management. The works brought the women recognition and visibility. The women learnt how to dig foundations, set up bio-fences, deweed rivers and lakes, and do gully plugging and bunding for soil conservation. They learnt how to build bunds and trenches, work with geo-textiles, dig/construct drinking water wells and rainwater harvesting structures; they also learnt the basics of garden and plantation work. The mates were especially proud of their ability to size projects up, gauge the number of person days required and prepare estimates for the work. All these were new skills, and soon they found themselves being sought after by landowners to work on their properties and being offered wages to the tune of Rs.250 to Rs.350 for private work. This interest in the skilled woman labourer has led to the creation of another instrument — the women's labour collective. Across the State in various panchayats, the workers of MGNREGS have been coming together to form labour groups that take on agricultural work and work on homesteads and plantations. The inexperienced housewife has been transmuting into skilled labour of high value in the market.

### **Women and agriculture**

One of the most outstanding contributions of MGNREGS is the role the programme has played in bringing women into agriculture in the State. The Kudumbashree mission had just begun to aggressively promote collective farming by women when the MGNREGS programme took off in the State. Panchayats had to take the lead in identifying fallow land and convince landowners to allow women groups to take up cultivation on their lands. The sheer effort of convergence made this intervention get off the block very slowly, until one panchayat in Kozhikode, Perambra, took it upon itself to clear a clogged public canal running through the heart of a lifeless padasekharam that had not seen cultivation in over 25 years, and organised Kudumbashree workers to undertake land development of the adjoining fields that were later leased out to the women for paddy cultivation. In one stroke, fallow land — 146 acres — in the panchayat was brought under paddy cultivation. All the cultivators were first-timers; all women. Today the State boasts of collective farming groups in nearly all the panchayats. With control over means of production and support from the krishi bhavan and the panchayat, for these women, the transition from MGNREGS labourer to farmer cultivator has been a natural evolution.

An impact that has implications for SHG federations under the National Rural Livelihoods Mission (NRLM) everywhere, has been the consequences of the structural integration of the community organisation with the MGNREGS programme. Providing the ADS with a seminal role in the implementation of MGNREGS has led to a strengthening of the intermediate tier of the three-tier federation, which has in turn increased the reach and access of poor women to the community leadership. By locating the mate within the ADS, the MGNREGS programme immediately infused energy into the system, and the community leadership quotient went up overnight.

from a few thousands to a few lakhs. Repeated drumming of the programme's rights perspective has sensitised the CDS leadership to questions of citizenship and women's agency. It has empowered them to negotiate local power spaces. The new peoples' and technical skills have served the women well in their quest for political significance, as their showing in the recent panchayat polls indicate.

This is not to say that challenges do not exist. Questions raised over the nature of assets generated, and over the underutilisation of labour, continue to be valid. Incidents of wrongdoing by the mate have been noticed, and many a time mates have had to be replaced. Inclusion of the most marginalised sections in many places remains unresolved. Very often an inquiry into causes of corruption points to extraneous influences forcing the hand of the mate and the worker. There have been quite a few cases where the CDS itself took suo moto cognisance of malpractice on the part of the mate and forced her to repay money that had been wrongfully obtained.

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