



The power of Kudumbashree

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Highlights

- Kumari a health volunteer and prominent member of the **Kudumbashree Mission** in her panchayat in Ernakulum district died on September 1 after being contracted with leptospirosis while doing relief work in Kerala after the floods, away from her own home which had not been affected.
- Kumari's work and life symbolises the spirit of Kerala reflected in the inspirational way in which the people of the State have faced the worst disaster in a century.

United in relief work

- Among the heroic stories of selfless community service are those of the Kudumbashree women, who have perhaps not got the attention they deserve.
- The attention is necessary not just to accord women relief helpers like Kumari recognition and appreciation, but also to understand how such an enormous, effective and well-planned intervention could be made across the State by women through their own initiatives.
- One got a glimpse of the process at a district-level informal review meeting of around 60 key coordinators of Kudumbashree in Kozhikode, which suffered landslides and heavy rain.
- Women from working class families, women from the lower middle class and middle class, Muslim women and Dalit women were present.
- They were a microcosm of the 2.43 lakh groups functioning across the State.

The Process

- Within a day or two of the deluge, the Kudumbashree members started contacting each other to discuss what they should do.
- They divided themselves into squads of five to six members and started relief work.
- They were helped by the district coordination team of five women, who were on deputation to the Kudumbashree Mission from the government.
- Within a short span of time, there were 7,000 women volunteers engaged in various tasks.
- When the situation in their district improved, some of them set out to neighbouring districts like Thrissur and Wayanad to help.
- Many of these women have family responsibilities, but they convinced their families of the urgency of the work at hand and set off with all the equipment required for cleaning which they themselves had collected through sponsorships.
- Some of them went to relief camps to distribute relief material; others went to tribal areas which had been badly affected by landslides.

Mission Contribution

- The Kudumbashree State Mission estimates that Kudumbashree groups cleaned up 11,300 public places including schools, hospitals, panchayat buildings, and anganwadi centres, and two lakh houses.
- Around 40,000 affected families received counselling and information assistance from Kudumbashree groups.
- To provide shelter to families rendered homeless by the floods, 38,000 Kudumbashree members opened up their own homes.
- Kudumbashree members also donated Rs.7.4 crore to the Chief Minister's Distress Relief Fund. This scale of voluntary relief work by women is quite unprecedented by any standard.

A unique model

- Started in 1998 by the CPI(M)-led government, Kudumbashree Mission was envisioned as a part of the **People's Plan Campaign** and local self-governance, with women at the centre of it.
- In its conceptualisation, it was markedly different from the self-help group (SHG) movements in many parts of India.
- While the commonality with other States was in the thrift and credit activities at the grassroots level through the formations of saving groups, the structures differed.

Structure

- Kudumbashree has a three-tier structure.
- The first is the basic unit — the neighbourhood groups (NGs).
- There could be several such units within a ward and they are networked through the area development societies (ADS).
- All ADSs are federated through the community development societies (CDS).
- There are core committees of elected coordinators at all three levels — at least five in each NG; seven or more at the ADS level, depending on the number of NGs; and around 21 at the CDS level.
- Unlike in other States, all the coordinators are elected in Kerala.
- Each Kudumbashree member has a vote.
- Direct elections for the NG coordinators are held every three years.
- These people, in turn, elect the coordinators of the ADS who elect the members of the CDS.
- A majority of the members of the coordinator groups have to belong to women below the poverty line or from comparatively poorer sections.
- There is reservation for Dalit and Adivasi women. At the district and State levels, employees/officers of the government are appointed on deputation to help the Kudumbashree groups.
- Thus, there is a socially representative leadership.
- This secular composition acts as a facilitator for the secularisation of public spaces.

Community Bonding

- In other States, SHGs came to be dominated by women from better-off families or from powerful castes.

- This led to unhealthy hierarchies in which poorer women and Dalit women were denied decision-making powers.
- Over the years, as women dropped out from these sections for a number of reasons, the social potential of the SHGs to challenge dominant structures of gender bias at the local level weakened.
- The micro-enterprises undertaken by the women NGs in Kerala also strengthen community bonds.
- These include organic vegetable growing, poultry and dairy, catering and tailoring.
- The concepts and practices have expanded over the years.
- Today the community farms run by Kudumbashree groups are acknowledged as a critical avenue for the rejuvenation of agricultural production in Kerala.
- Kudumbashree training courses are quite comprehensive and include women's rights, knowledge of constitutional and legal provisions, training in banking practices, and training in skills to set up micro-enterprises.
- The Kudumbashree groups are therefore often seen as a threat by those who would like women to adhere to socially conformist roles.
- In earlier years, women of the Kudumbashree groups had to organise protests when the Congress-led government drastically cut the budgetary allocation of funds and floated a parallel Janashree project.
- The BJP and RSS have also floated parallel groups, but so far these groups have not been able to make much headway.
- Although conceived, initiated and helped by the Left Front governments and supported by Left-oriented organisations, the Kudumbashree groups are not affiliated to any political party.
- This 'Made in Kerala' model can be implemented across India, if it is done with the same secular and gender-sensitive spirit.

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