

The Kudumbashree Story



Critique on Kudumbashree

Within the discourse on Kudumbashree, the feminist critique has been the most well-documented; and naturally so as academics have published refereed papers in journals of repute. However, debates on other issues have also been published, mostly in Malayalam media.

The Feminist Critique

"When one 'sees' the world like a feminist though, with the gaze of a feminist, it's rather like activating the 'Reveal Formatting' function in Microsoft Word. It reveals the strenuous, complex formatting that goes on below the surface of what looked smooth and complete".

- Nivedita Menon, 'Seeing Like a Feminist'

Renowned feminist academics have studied Kudumbashree; some have published papers on Kudumbashree. While the 'feminist gaze' has put Kudumbashree as a women's agency on the defensive on many fronts, it has been revealing to note that some of these academics were the strongest defenders of Kudumbashree when it faced attacks from certain other quarters. Put in other words, some of the staunchest critics of Kudumbashree have been its defenders too when it came to steps that affected the larger interests of Kudumbashree as a movement.

"Kudumbashree has to move further forward towards creating democratic citizen spaces. It has to work towards reducing dependence on government. It has to find new ways of addressing vulnerabilities. It's a continuing journey".

- Sarada Muraleedharan

1. The self-help groups of Kudumbashree reinforced family ties rather than provide the recourse to critique them.

The line of argument here has been based on family as patriarchal structure characterised by women's subordinate status. The subordinate status, according to some of the feminist writers, continue within the 'gendered spaces' outside families that women occupy as a result of their organisational action.

'The single largest change for women was that the state became 'local and intimate'. This new-found space, however, was not claimed as citizen's rightful space, but as an extension of the patriarchal family – with all the implications of women's subordinate status, masked by the 'moral economy' of gender and sentimental ties'.

There are papers which argue that while women's ability to contribute to her family income and well-being leads to her gaining power over other family members and social respectability, however, these were available only so long as she stayed within the accepted gender norms.

It has been argued that in the absence of serious intervention against the gendered nature of power as an integral part of the programme itself, the woman may get tied to what Hannah Papanek (1979) had called 'family status production'. This has been cited as particularly relevant to Kerala where social mobility aspirations are high and consumerist aspirations abound among all sections of the people, and not just the propertied middle class.

2. Self-help groups, and so also the neighbourhood groups of Kudumbashree are vehicles of a new political philosophy where the state has transferred its developmental responsibilities to local communities

It has been argued that the emerging regime of empowerment sought to be achieved through women's collectives of the self-help genre, is part of a regime characterised by a state that is structurally incapable of meeting its welfare commitments (because it has clear commitments to private capital) and is unable to find enough resources to meet them.

Second, political society is increasingly forced to abandon militant forms of struggles to enlarge entitlements and submit to established structures, committees, procedures, rules, and timetables. Third, as far as welfare is concerned, the bureaucracy is becoming important as facilitators of the new self-help-centred philosophy of welfare.

Fourth, political claims in the new regime are pegged less on collective rights, and more on group interests. It has been argued that in Kerala's context, group rights are translated as the rights of local communities, which have also begun to expand into the spaces emptied or created by the transformation of political society. It has also been pointed out that groups rights translated as rights of local communities is often used as a convenient means of watering down the politics of the new social movements.

It has been argued that Kudumbashree is rooted in the new emergent regime (in which the state withdraws from its development role), with its emphasis on self-help, heavy dependence on innovative bureaucracy, its state-oriented conception of civil society, and its notion of group interests as basically a collection of individual (familial) interests.

Researchers have pointed out two risks associated with the new regime where SHGs are expected to be the agents of change. First, a contraction of women's space for raising welfare claims, from raising the claims on public sphere to raising them in village assemblies, which are only representative of a particular group within the community. Here the debate on what may constitute 'women's interests' may get confined to a rather narrow circle, and runs the risk of stultification. The second risk is that of bureaucratisation. A researcher has argued that the new CBO structure itself now threatens to turn into a new bureaucracy.

'A declining spirit of volunteerism is already evident. As the programme expanded to the entire state, the Kudumbashree CBOs see this as a government programme, and therefore, feel entitled to remuneration. Many volunteers in Alleppey and Kollam complained about the work and lack of monetary compensation. Interestingly, they were not willing to give up their position after a two-year term'.

Suneeta Kadiyala 2004, as quoted by Devika and Binita

This criticism on the lost spirit of volunteerism has been made by certain academics on the pre-Kudumbashree CDS model itself.

3. There were instances of disempowering use of the social capital formed out of women's organisation under Kudumbashree

Three competing authorities, according to a study, sought to utilise the newly formed social capital – the political parties, the panchayat, and the Kudumbashree Mission officials.

According to the study, in this *responsibilised* welfare, the CDS chairperson is an important conduit of governmental power. She connects officialdom to the local domestic world, encourages the generation of social capital, and ensures that it is made useful to the above-mentioned authorities. The usage '*responsibilisation*' of welfare here means placing the burden of the welfare on people; or put in another way, only the *responsible* ones would be entitled to welfare.

On the one hand these women were important to all the three authorities at the local level; on the other hand, their subjection to 'gendered norms of femininity' was accentuated. The newly found space, according to the study, has also been a precarious one – for only as far as the CDS chairperson worked to shape governable subjects out of underprivileged women can she retain 'friendly relations' with the panchayat, and the local political party leaders.

This, however, was no entry ticket to the higher echelons of politics where elite status, education, and familiarity with political public co ↑ heavily. Kudumbashree women participated in the process by which the state shifted welfare obligations on to the local community. This work dt the women's gendered sense of moral duty and often very heavily on their time and energy. Panchayats tended to utilise the labour of Kudumbashree women for free or for a pittance.

Women were enthusiastic about Ashraya as it brought in 'gendered moral credit', useful when one sought to gain space within the 'hyper-moralised space' of the local community fundamental to the new regime of local governance – which was distinct from the male space of local politics.

Women were all too aware that the friendly relations that they had with the panchayat rested up on their willingness and ability to mobilise social capital through bringing underprivileged women's SHGs and in making it available to the panchayat to extract low-cost development labour.

There was the case of social capital serving the state. Some of the Kudumbashree Mission officials, during the interviews for a study, expressed their opinion that Kudumbashree women were not only useful to the local government. They were useful to the state in a larger sense, to extend the 'eye of the state'. In this case, the study argues, the social capital served the state, and paradoxically, might break up local solidarities.

4. The self-help groupis based upon a liberal understanding of common interests and hence does not structurally allow for the articulation of collective demands.

This is more of a criticism of the concept of self-help groups (SHGs) in general than of Kudumbashree CBO in particular. A study argues that women join the SHGs to further their individual interests through micro credit or micro enterprises and also for accessing social welfare schemes.

Therefore, fundamentally, a SHG is not suitable for collective action for common objectives. This is one of the structural parameters that determines the effectiveness of Kudumbashree as a women's agency.

5. The structural positioning and ideological orientation of Kudumbashree mission works against the transformation of underprivileged women into full-fledged economic agents

A study argues that reiteration of established gender norms still worked as basic condition for entry. The below-poverty-line women had been released not into public, but into a highly governmentalized space bounded on four sides by the panchayat, the Kudumbashree Mission, the community, and the political parties.

It may be noted that the authors of the study referred here have interpreted 'community' as an apolitical and hyper-moralised notion. Panchayats and Kudumbashree mission have been considered as the twin-bureaucracy that the CBOs have to work with; neither of them having been subjected to any serious change in their gender composition or orientation as developmental bureaucracies.

The study argues that the fact that the women have been caught up in the highly governmentalized space bounded by four more powerful if patriarchal agencies stood in the way of the 'avowed purpose of Kudumbashree Mission', to transform underprivileged women into full-fledged and responsible economic agents.

6. The structure and culture of the development bureaucracy lingers on strongly in the new development initiatives; both within Kudumbashree and outside

A study points out the male domination and cultural orientation of the developmental bureaucracy; there had not been any significant change in the composition and orientation through the years of political decentralisation. Even the district mission coordinators of Kudumbashree interviewed for the study were all men.

Gendering governance in Kerala had not involved the gendering of the development bureaucracy. Charge officer, a functionary of panchayat designated to hold the responsibility, wielded considerable power especially when the CDS CP's accounting skills are poor (before the new byelaw was adopted in 2008).

One reason why the bureaucracy's control appeared manageable was because there were two different bureaucracies dealing with the CDS – that of the district mission, and of the panchayat – which could be alternatively reported to, used as protection against the other.

7. CBO leaders did not possess any understanding of the patriarchal control that they were subjected to in public space and work place

Women's support for conservative gender ideology revealed the extent to which the reiteration of patriarchal values, which were routinely deployed against deviant women, was achieved, ironically, through empowered women.

The CDS chairpersons' understanding of patriarchy, according to the study, has largely been family-centred, and there was hardly any mention of gender inequality as a phenomenon marking public spaces or the workplace. They did not perceive patriarchal control as a pervasive presence; rather it was recognised as a breach in the 'moral economy' of gender hierarchy – when men who were bound to be protective as (superior) guardians and good providers to (inferior) women and children neglected these duties and turned negligent and violent.

8. Limitations of the mission's perspective

The study points out that Kudumbashree's memorandum lists discrimination by gender and caste not as issues of power, but as 'social evils'. In the State Mission's perception of their agency, the women were not politicised subjects but consumers who were engaged in self-help through micro credit and micro enterprise.

The study says that it needs to be recognised that the agency granted to women as consumers, both in the Kudumbashree and elsewhere, has been firmly located within domestic space and concerns.

9. Limitations as development agency

Kudumbashree members' participation in gram sabha has been passive. Their active participation is about individualised welfare distribution, and not about the creation of collective assets or discussion of collective issues and interests.

Argument of Limited Inclusion

It has been argued that the Kerala development experience has two outliers – tribal communities and fishing communities. Kudumbashree has been criticised for its failures in taking adequate care for including these outlier communities.

There had been initiatives by the mission from early on to include tribal communities; tribal special projects addressed this issue, comments T.K. Jose, former executive director of Kudumbashree. However, consistent monitoring and regular capacity building are necessary to sustain activities in tribal sector.

There has also been a problem of multiple memberships, both among tribal people and coastal fishing communities. SHGs were organised by multiple agencies and under different schemes. This had led to a situation where women took loans from different sources and circulated the money across sources. This eventually led to weakening of community structures.

Coastal panchayats typically have non-fishing communities as the majority, pointed out Kesavan Nair, who had been a programme officer with the mission for ten years. According to him, coastal ADSs and CDS would be always dominated by women from non-fishing communities; this put limitations on addressing the issues that the fishing communities faced.

It has also been pointed out that the very design of SHGs as thrift and credit collectives that makes regular savings compulsory, has led to exclusion of the poorest sections, who were unable to save on a regular basis. Other excluded communities have been migrant workers and certain tribal communities with nomadic lifestyles.

The Argument on Neo-Liberal Agenda

This strand of criticism has been rooted on the premises that the very concept of self-help has been promoted in the context of the state's intention to withdraw from its basic responsibilities in development and welfare. Therefore, it has been argued, that Kudumbashree and its community structures are ways in which the neo-liberal state pushes the responsibility of development and welfare back to the people, and more so to the poor.

An argument close to this position can be seen in certain observations of the feminist critique as well. Feminist academic had, for instance, argued that Kudumbashree's SHGs were different from those engaged in a feminist-interventionist micro finance programme that addressed some of the basic tenets of the neo-liberal capitalist society. The feminist-interventionist micro finance programme bases itself on the feminist critique of capitalism.

Thus, the argument has been that the state, as part of its systematic withdrawal from the basic responsibilities, had placed the onus of poverty eradication and welfare on the poor itself by promoting self-help among poor women. However, there had also been arguments that Kudumbashree NHGs were different and that they did work as empowered pressure groups demanding development and welfare from the state as well as intervening in the developmental processes.

Poverty vs Empowerment Argument

Outside the feminist strands of critique, some of the first arguments on the need to empower the women through special programme had come up from Dr T.M. Thomas Isaac, who was a member of the committee that proposed the setting up of Kudumbashree mission. Dr Isaac had also been among the architects of the programme.

The issue of transforming the women NHGs into genuine instruments of women empowerment must be addressed. Neither micro credit nor micro enterprise by themselves will necessarily lead to the empowerment of women. Empowerment requires a conscious intervention for which the economic activities play a facilitative role. The challenge is to design and implement a gender awareness programme for women and men that linked to their daily life experiences.

Isaac et al. 2002:15

It has been pointed out that Kudumbashree mission's journey since 2008 has been marked by a shift from poverty eradication to women empowerment. Among the architects of Kudumbashree, S.M. Vijayanand and T.K. Jose argue that the focus should remain on poverty eradication.

In the changing state of poverty, there should be mechanism to transfer those women who have come out of poverty and improved their status to a new forum, which could then support the CBO network in uplifting more women out of poverty, argues T.K. Jose.

According to S.M. Vijayanand, it was important to keep the focus of the mission on poverty; he also believes that empowerment without ↑ ial resources would not help the women in moving ahead.

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Analysis

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Kudumbashree
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