

# Collective farming in Kerala and lessons for Maharashtra

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Kudumbashree<sup>1</sup> has been an inspiring story of women's collectivization and empowerment. Stories of both success and critiques have dominated the discussions on Kudumbashree for over a decade or so. All of the debates around it however agree that Kudumbashree made a huge impact on women's lives and brought them out in public space. This story is not about the Kudumbashree programme of Kerala which has been well documented, discussed and debated as well. This story is about the collective farming programme of Kudumbashree which was initiated in 2010 and which has ramifications for rural women's farm based livelihoods and perhaps in the long run for farming itself.

In January 2016, the collective farming programme had covered a total of about 44,000 hectares of land across the 14 districts of the State with Ernakulam topping the list with cultivation in 7847 hectares (<http://thekudumbashreestory.info/index.php/programmes/economic-empowerment/farming-programmes/jlgs>). Paddy has been cultivated in about 12000 ha, banana in 11,000 ha, vegetables and tubers around 9000 ha. The total active groups or Joint Liability groups (JLGs) as they are called in the state are 59,478 and those with active bank linkages are 27,381 with a linkage amount of Rs. 341 crores ([http://kudumbashree.org/sites/all/themes/kudumbashree/uploads/downloads/1166639539\\_Collective%20Farming%20Details.pdf](http://kudumbashree.org/sites/all/themes/kudumbashree/uploads/downloads/1166639539_Collective%20Farming%20Details.pdf))

## Collective farming

In the last few decades Kerala has been seeing a downward trend in the agriculture sector. More and more lands are lying fallow, rice production has been spiraling down and the state's dependence on import of food from other states has been going up. The inevitable effects of this among other things have been male outmigration, diversification into horticulture, reduction in paddy lands. Restricted mobility has meant that women bear the brunt of this by having to stay back and support livelihoods.

The initial efforts of the government at improving paddy cultivation through collective farming did not yield very positive results for various social and legal reasons that included shortage of labour, leasing in land, and availability of low interest credit for example. It was only when Kudumbashree launched a massive programme in collective farming in 2010 with women's groups leasing in land that things started moving. An earlier experience of women's collective farms had also acquainted the government with the constraints regarding land titles, women's poor access to land, credit, skills and markets. Thus the 10<sup>th</sup> plan (2007-2012) onwards the focus of which was on agricultural production, local economic

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<sup>1</sup> Kudumbashree is a flagship programme for women's empowerment of the Government of Kerala. Details can be found on [www.kudumbashree.org](http://www.kudumbashree.org)

development, poverty eradication, and social equity, a systematic effort was made by the government to make sure that these constraints were addressed meaningfully by the Government.

### Notes from the field

Kudumbashree is part of the Local self government department and closely works with the Panchayath Raj Institutions (PRI). It is structured in three tiers with the Neighbourhood groups or the NHGs at the Panchayath level, the Area Development Societies (ADS) at the ward level and the Community Development society (CDS) a registered entity, at the municipal/district level. Each of these tiers works closely with the PRI to develop village development plans with specific involvement of women.

A Joint Liability Group (JLG) is along the lines of the group concept promoted by the National Bank for Agriculture and Rural Development (NABARD). Introduced in 2009 in collective farming, JLGs typically are a group of 5-10 women coming together as a collective for an economic activity and availing a loan for the same. Loans to JLGs are at 7% interest but NABARD's scheme of the interest subsidy reduced the burden of interest and brought it down to 2% which in several cases was reduced further to effectively making the loan an interest free loan.

Typically we were told that the NHGs identify fallow lands along with the Panchayaths. All such lands are listed out and different NHGs then approach the owners of such lands. Negotiations around rent often take place in the presence of the Panchayath president and agreements too are signed in front of them. These are agreements made on a simple piece of paper. If the owners agree, then smaller groups called the JLGs are formed. With some variations this is the process that is followed across the state where groups have come together for collective farming.

We came across several examples of women across the social spectrum coming together to cultivate paddy, fruits and vegetables. Among the many examples we discuss here a few which we were able to visit and which we think broadly represents the spectrum.

**Landless dalit women in the Chathanur Panchayath of Trivandrum district** formed a JLG. Sunitha, the leader of the JLG is convinced that the future is in farming and that too in organic farming. She was so inspired by some of the trainings where she learned about the extent of poison on their plate that she mobilized a group in her village to initiate collective farming. A group of 7 women from among the NHG approached the Panchayath President and with his help identified about 80 cents (0.8 acre) of private fallow land in the village. An informal agreement was signed in front of the Panchayath president and a small rent amount too was decided between the parties. Since the JLG is too small to pull on its own resources to cultivate the fallow land, the Panchayath put up a proposal to provide for the MNREGA support to them. The proposal was accepted and a large team of women joined the JLG in the land preparation activity.



Vegetables and tubers were grown on this plot and a water sharing agreement was developed with the school which was adjacent to the plot.

The same group had also leased in about three acres of paddy land not too far away from the school plot and we walked with them to see the paddy fields too. For the landless dalit women this activity provided them with daily wages as well as organic food for self consumption.



**In the In Aloor GP of Thrissur district** we met a very different group where homemakers came together to form a JLG. There are numerous such examples of homemakers coming together and forming JLGs to do collective farming. Many of these become family enterprises where children and the men of the household participate too. It thus ceases to be just an economic activity and women have said that they



have found a new meaning to their lives. One of them says " I feel happy that we are now eating good food and not chemicals" The plot on which they are doing collective farming is about one acre and 50 cents and they are growing different varieties of pumpkin and gourds. They do have a provision of water lasting until summer. The produce they grow is mostly sold in the local Kudumbashree market. They also have their own vehicle for transporting the produce to the local markets. Since the plot is adjacent to their home, like in most places in Kerala, farming becomes a familial activity. Children come from school and sow seeds, do the weeding and harvesting as well.



In the **Alamkode Panchayath** a school teacher convinced her group of friends, all immediate neighbours and mainly homemakers to lease in land and form a group. She was motivated by the good food movement gaining ground in Kerala. The group leased in a Tarawad<sup>2</sup> land in the vicinity and now grows fruits, flowers, spices and vegetables in that plot of land. The land owner woman from Tarawad family too had joined the group. Their young daughters too support the activity in different ways. One of them is studying to be a journalist and plans to write about this initiative. The main motivating factor for these women is the new found happiness in growing crops and consuming good healthy food grown by them.

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<sup>2</sup> Tarawad is the matrilineal system followed by the Nairs in Kerala. The Tarawad was a family home with property attached to it and which was enjoyed by the female lineage.



**Mary's group in the Aloor Panchayath** is a mixed group of five women from among OBCs, Christians, open category Hindus and tribals. They started out small with a land lease of just 3.5 acres of paddy and for the last five years have about 20 acres under cultivation. This land belongs to seven different farmers so they have a different set of lease arrangements with each of them. Only one among them has been done on a stamp paper of Rs 200/- the rest are all done on plain paper. For different patches of land they pay different amounts towards rent ranging from Rs 2000/acre to about Rs 4000/acre. They are all part of a 20 member NHG formed in 2002. The JLG was formed later and received a loan of Rs 6 lakhs.



They have been extremely happy with this group activity and will continue doing this as long as they get lands on lease and the support to cultivate them.

All of these groups had found some reason to collectivise and promote paddy and vegetable cultivation. The reasons varied from finding gainful employment,

meaningful participation in production to ensuring poison free food for their families and for society at large .

While collectives in farming were growing in numbers there were also other kinds of collectives coming up to support the women farmers. One such group was the **producer company by the name Alamkode Agro Producers Company** in Alamkode Panchayath of Thrissur district. The group started out as an NHG in 2002 as part of the Kudumbashree programme. Most of them are part of the CDS that is the district level tier of the Kudumbashree. While preparing a plan for the Panchayath the members made an assessment of availability of markets for women's collective farms and realized that there was none. They started as a farmers club but then grew into a producers company which buys paddy from the women's collectives, pays them a better price and in a timely manner and sells it to consumers within and outside of the panchayath, thereby supporting almost 350 JLGs. The agro producers company is yet

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to find a bearing in terms of profits, but the unstinted support of the Kudumbashree programme and NABARD has given them the space and time to learn



from their mistakes. They now have the Alamkode brand of rice in packaging of five and ten kgs. They are considering raising financial resources through shares from JLGs. However what keeps them going is the need to contribute to the revival of paddy in Kerala. As chairperson of Community development Society<sup>3</sup> (CDS) Sindhu felt something had to be done. The inspiring moment came when she was part of a delegation of

the state mission visiting Tamil Nadu. She met very educated farmers who shared their experiments. One farmer shared his story of moving to organic paddy for self consumption and continuing with chemical cultivation for the market. She was not convinced that the market should receive the chemical paddy and hence decided to work on this as a CDS chairperson.

### Kudumbashree shops and cafes

One of the unique aspects of the Kudumbashree programme is its local shops and cafes. Although the



local kudumbashree shops are not able to fully absorb all the produce, they are making their presence felt and increasingly people are coming to these shops to buy a variety of products that range from food grains, vegetables, soaps, oil, seeds and saplings to organic manure and pest repellents. The shops are also not yet able to give higher rates for the organic produce. The Kudumbashree shop we visited in the same Panchayath was very interesting. On the

ground floor of the shop was the Kudumbashree café where local Kerala meals were served by the women's groups. The shop was located on the first floor and had a wide range of products from seed, grain, and compost to various other processed products as well. Kudumbashree shops do not have a very good purchasing power yet so many of the JLGs have to sell their produce in the open markets. Some part of the



<sup>3</sup> Community development society is the uppermost tier in the three tiered system of the Kudumbashree.

profits from the shop is reserved for the CDS and some is given towards salaries of women who manage the shops.

## **Making Collective farming successful**

Each of these stories is so unique but what makes it more interesting is the way each pieces together to make a perfect jigsaw. There were unanswered questions with regards to the economics of the initiative and also the nature of decision making processes between and within different departments and the community as well. However the impacts on women were commendable and so was the commitment of the state to combine the goals of women's empowerment with those of revival of paddy and agriculture in general.

Environmental, human rights and dalit and feminist movements have a strong presence in Kerala and through their struggles informed several government policies and programmes. Kudumbashree is one such programme which has continuously reshaped itself by responding to its critics and supporters.

Environmental concerns, concerns of health and human rights were thus important concerns for the Malayali society. Around the same time environmental concerns related to pesticide use, chemical fertilizers and the realization that they were eating poisoned food was growing. This led to the good food movement gaining ground and the choice of organic food was growing as a demand.

While this history did play a critical role in the success of the programme, there were several other factors that contributed to its success.

## **Overcoming the legal constraints**

Reclamation of paddy wetlands and converting them to real estate had started becoming a norm in Kerala and this prompted the LDF government to bring in a law in 2008. This was called the Conservation of paddy and wetlands Act 2008. Conservation of paddy fields thus became legally binding and the government too provided various incentives to paddy farmers to continue paddy cultivation. However, as recently as last year i.e. in 2015 the UDF government made an amendment to the act to allow for regularizing the wetland conversions prior to 2008. Environmental activists have critiqued it saying that many such conversions to real estate done after 2008 too are being regularized since there is no available data base on wetland conversions. Nonetheless it is noteworthy to see various positive impacts of this decision in the period immediately after 2008 until most recently.

The other legal constraint for collective farming was the ban on land leases in Kerala by the 1970 Tenancy law. This made leasing in and out of land for farmers very difficult. Although there is no foolproof legal solution yet, Kudumbashree programme ensured protecting women's rights through the participation of both the local self government as well as the Kudumbashree's three tier structure. Panchayats and the Kudumbashree groups at all the three levels help identify fallow paddy lands, list them out and then also approach groups who can enter into an agreement with the owner for cultivation. This transparent and participatory process has helped secure women's rights over uncultivated lands.

## Green Army: skilled agricultural labour banks

Labour shortage and thus high labour costs, resistance to mechanization by unions, low market prices for paddy led to the decline in paddy lands. However the primary reason cited by farmers was labour



shortage and thus evolved the idea of the Green Army mooted by Anup Kishore the then Panchayath president of Wadakenchery in Thrissur district. He moved ahead with the introduction of machines by employing the farmers trained by the Agricultural University. These were mostly women and they went about performing all the agricultural operations very efficiently. Gradually they developed a large pool of skilled workers both men and women, who

could offer a package of service starting from preparing the seedlings to transplanting, weeding, and harvesting.

The Green army or a labour bank thus managed to green large tracts of land. It was finally registered in 2010 with both men and women as its members, but largely dominated by women.

Anup Kishor told us that the important feature of the Green army was that it did not have a wage differential between women and men. Women are represented very well across the different committees that exist. It provides labourers with social security and other employment benefits. In fact the day we visited Anup Kishore there was a large Annual General Body meeting of the Green Army where they were collectively deciding on the wage rates, the employment benefits etc. There were a large number of women in the meeting.

## Food security Army: Skills and capacities

The Food security Army, a powerful idea developed and implemented by U Jaikumaran at the Agricultural Research Station at Mannuthy in the Agriculture University in Thrissur, contributed so well to the Kudambashree collective farming efforts. It has build a cadre of trained farmers or what they call as the master farmers, most of them women to take on the challenge to revive paddy lands. These master farmers are trained to use machinery for paddy cultivation and harvesting. It is this army of trainees that provides the cadre for revival of paddy and other forms of farming in Kerala. Women are taught to use the machinery and to maintain it. The food security army then operates as a service provider to different farms where all the agricultural operations are required. The army thus moves from one field to the other ensuring food security to thousands.

## Convergence: Pooling in of financial and institutional resources

One of the most important aspects of the programme is the convergence with the PRIs to include both institutional and programmatic convergence as well as sharing of resources.

This is one of the few examples of complementarity between two arms of the local self government department, one which provides autonomy in decision making for women and the other which incorporates the decisions and the plans into its governance. The relationship between Kudumbashree and the PRI is thus one which has contributed significantly to the success of both and especially brought out women into public spaces and political spaces as well. Sarada Muraleedharan who is the most remembered IAS officer in charge of Kudumbashree until 2012 says that the PRI and the CBO are contested spaces and argues using the Kudumbashree example to show how both are needed and can complement each other provided there is transparency and role definition of citizen space and governance space.

Kudumbashree provides the Interest subsidy scheme or the ISS and the area and production incentives given for bringing fallow lands under cultivation and for achieving higher productivity of the crops respectively. A 5% interest subsidy is provided on farm loans borrowed at 7% interest and sometimes over and above that a 2% further subsidy for prompt repayments thereby making the loans effectively interest free. This has contributed significantly to the economic viability of the programme

Kudumbashree along with the Agriculture and rural development departments has made a significant headway in the collective farming programme in Kerala. Support from the two departments has been pooled in by way of MNREGS for employment, skills and capacity building through Mahila sashaktikaran pariyojana (MKSP) and provision of seeds, other inputs and technical guidance through Agricultural department. Kudumbashree's concept of women's labour groups and the NHGs forming labour collectives transformed the implementation of MNREGS in the state. It was significant that Kudumbashree realized that there were wage differentials not only between men and women but also among women of different castes. The SC and ST women especially grouped together to form labour collectives and started effectively using the MNREGS and enjoying their work.

An added pool of resources came by way of the National rural livelihood mission which was launched in 2011. Every state had to implement this programme through a registered state agency. Kudumbashree used this resource for advancing its collective farming programme. The Mahila Kisan Sashaktikaran Pariyojana (MKSP) launched as a subcomponent of NRLM mainly to increase the visibility of women in agriculture has its focus on strengthening of women's groups engaged in farming thereby enhancing productivity, improving the livelihoods of the members, and ensuring food security. Skill development programmes are at its core with several trainings organized for master farmers, exposure visits, financial support for buying equipment and tools, supports in marketing of produce, capacity building in organic cultivation and setting up of farmer facilitation centres.

The agriculture department added its own resources through the crop insurance schemes, technical advice on crops to be grown, water requirements of different crops etc. are provided by the department staff that is also available at the Panchayath level and working in close co-ordination with the Kudumbashree groups. The only Agriculture University in the country to have a gender studies department is at Thrissur and it provided the much needed feminist agenda to the collective farming programme.

## Lessons for Maharashtra

It goes without saying that the strong support of the Kerala Government was necessary to promote the collective farming initiative in Kerala. The unique positioning of Kudumbashree and its ability to draw on different resources across departments has helped in strengthening an institutional and programmatic convergence which is unprecedented. Kerala's social, political and cultural histories are of course to be recognized in this story. The broadly progressive ideology of the left, feminist, environmental and other social movements that have countered the practice of political parties in power, have set the backdrop for the positive outcomes of the programme. The lessons and possibilities for a state like Maharashtra are many and Kudumbashree as the national resource Organisation (NRO) for NRLM already has a presence in the State. Knowing that Maharashtra is rapidly moving to become an urban and capitalist state, it still important to note that about 40% of its population still depends on agriculture. More than 75% of the State is classified as drought prone and only 18% of the cropped area is irrigated. With climate variability and flawed policies around water and agriculture droughts are becoming recurrent with the impacts being most severe on women (<http://scroll.in/article/808302/drought-and-debts-the-plight-of-bharat-mata-in-marathwada>). With little or no ownership or access to land, water, forests women are forced to make ends meet in rural Maharashtra. Many of the central government programmes are also being implemented in Maharashtra, but there seems very little effort towards convergence that is evident at a scale in Kerala. Efforts of Mahila Arthik Vikas Mahamandal (MAVIM) which are commendable in the state, need to be scaled up to cover the entire state and need to be supported by the different departments as seen in Kerala.

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