

Women Engaging with Markets from Positions of Strength: An Exploratory Understanding of Kudumbashree Women's Food Service Enterprises

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Research Unit on Local Self Governments (RULSG)
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Thiruvananthapuram

**WOMEN ENGAGING WITH MARKETS FROM
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AN EXPLORATORY UNDERSTANDING OF
KUDUMBASHREE WOMEN'S FOOD
SERVICE ENTERPRISES**

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ABSTRACT

This paper chronicles the milestones and processes in the evolution of women's large-scale participation in the food service sector in Kerala, promoted under the aegis of the State Poverty Eradication Mission of the Government of Kerala, popularly known as Kudumbashree Mission. It raises questions about how the State actions inadvertently end up undermining the viability of poor women's enterprises by burdening them with social welfare responsibilities. It concludes by looking at the factors that are likely to influence the long-term success or otherwise of these businesses.

Keywords: Kudumbashree, women's livelihoods in Kerala, Cafe Kudumbashree, women's SHGs, women's microenterprises.

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Women Engaging With Markets from Positions of Strength: An Exploratory Understanding of Kudumbashree Women's Food Service Enterprises

India and New Zealand cricket teams played a T-20 International match in the Greenfield Stadium in Thiruvananthapuram, Kerala in November 2017. The newspapers carried many reports of the match, the first of its kind in the new stadium. What also got coverage was about the women from Kudumbashree who ran a food court in the stadium, which the New Indian Express called a “lip smacking success”.

‘Janakeeya Hotels’ served more than 7.3 million meals to people in the State affected by the COVID-19 lockdown across Kerala, at a rate of about 40,000 meals per day. A network of more than 680 such restaurants in the 14 districts, owned by women from the Kudumbashree network, were running this operation.

Jaya K R is a member of the Kudumbashree network in Alappuzha district. After being an ASHA (Accredited Social Health Activist) under the National Health Mission for many years, she set up, along with fellow NHG members, a small enterprise named Five Star Catering Unit in 2011. It was a fairly successful business. Jaya travelled around Kerala, taking part in food festivals and learning more about the restaurant business. The group began running the canteen in the Alappuzha district court. Jaya is now a mentor to women setting up and running small restaurants in other States of India, as part of the support that Kudumbashree Mission is providing under the Deendayal Antyodaya Yojana- National Rural Livelihoods Mission (DAY-NRLM). Aajeevika Didi Cafe in Jharkhand and Didi Ki Rasoi in Bihar are modelled on the work that women like Jaya have successfully carried out in Kerala as owners and operators of Café Kudumbashree.

This paper chronicles the milestones and processes in the evolution of women's large-scale participation in the food service sector in Kerala, promoted under the aegis of the State Poverty Eradication Mission of the Government of Kerala, popularly known as Kudumbashree Mission. It raises questions about how the State actions inadvertently end up undermining the viability of poor women's enterprises by burdening them with social welfare responsibilities. It concludes by looking at the factors that are likely to influence the long-term success or otherwise of these businesses.

From Canteen Units to Café Kudumbashree - The Journey

It began in the form of office canteens and home-based catering units. Initially, these were set up in the urban areas of the State, with financial support provided under the Swarna Jayanti Shahari

Rozgar Yojana (SJSRY), the flagship urban poverty alleviation scheme of the Government of India. In 2009, Kudumbashree Mission took the first steps towards establishing a support system for enterprise units in the canteen and catering sector. By 2012, the Café Kudumbashree brand was established and by 2016 Café Kudumbashree food courts had become popular across Kerala.

Serving food for small and large groups of people attending social functions such as marriages, has been a flourishing business in Kerala for several decades now. There are, as per the All-Kerala Caterers Association, about 5000 large and small catering units in the State. An equal or larger number of catering units operate on their own without affiliation to these industry bodies. This sector has been dominated by men all across the state and across the different types of enterprises.

Setting up of canteens run by members of the Kudumbashree Neighbourhood Groups (NHG) was an initiative of the officials of the Mission. The possibility of women running canteens attached to government offices was explored and found to be viable. Coordination between heads of offices made the initial forays easy. The canteen units, initially in urban areas, were established as micro enterprises, financed under the credit-cum-subsidy scheme component of SJSRY. The space was provided free of cost, at least during the initial days, by the concerned institution. The women, many of them entering a public economic activity for the first time in their lives, worked hard to maintain a certain level of quality in what they served. The first such canteen unit was set up in the headquarters of the State Cooperative Bank in Thiruvananthapuram in 2004.

Kudumbashree Mission's urban poverty alleviation programme had identified opportunities in the food service sector. The office canteens were one part of this. Many women with interest to join the business could not, due to the limited number of canteens that were needed. Several others did not want to commit to work on all days, throughout the day – a demand that running a canteen would have placed on them. The catering units in Kudumbashree came up as a response to these two challenges. Initially, the Kudumbashree catering units began supplying lunch to the meetings organised by the Mission itself. Slowly, they began getting orders from the Municipalities and events organised by political parties and social organisations connected with the local governments. The catering business provided the women with the opportunity to carry out a business without committing full-time to it.

The canteen and catering units operating in government offices provided an assured market to the women, however, they were not able to maximise the scale of their business. Kudumbashree, in its attempt to provide a larger market base to the entrepreneurs started focusing on creating new market opportunities for its women. The Mission focused on developing an umbrella brand called Café Kudumbashree for all its food service enterprises. The Mission started with developing a dedicated human resource pool such as Café training cum management groups to help the Kudumbashree women with improving the outlook and quality of their units.

With the growing demand for home cooked meals, the Mission strategized on organising food festivals to promote food prepared by the women of Kudumbashree network. The first Café Kudumbashree food festival was conducted on a pilot basis, on the occasion of 12th Kudumbashree anniversary in 2012 at Ernakulam. The initial response helped the team in developing acceptance towards the Café Kudumbashree brand among the urban market within the state and outside.

Gradually steps were taken to develop standard operating procedures for the functioning of the canteen and catering units. All the units were periodically graded and the ones fulfilling the stipulated conditions were given the brand name of Café Kudumbashree. These enterprises can be found across Kerala, under various brands – Café Kudumbashree branded restaurants, Café Shree branded mini cafés, Kudumbashree Restaurants, Café Kudumbashree Kiosks, office canteens and catering units.

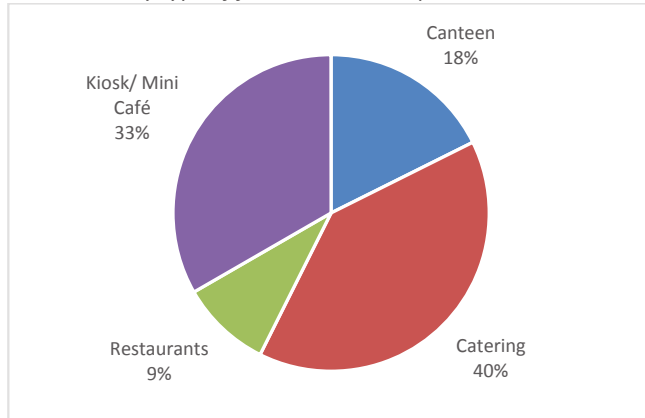
Milestones over the years

Year	Event
2004	First Canteen established in the headquarters of the State Cooperative Bank in Thiruvananthapuram in 2004.
2009	Support system for Kudumbashree canteen and catering units set up in Thrissur district.
2011	Café Kudumbashree brand established.
2012	First Café Kudumbashree food festival conducted on a pilot basis, on the occasion of 12th Kudumbashree anniversary. Performance Improvement Training for the canteen units participating in food fest introduced.
2014	Branded restaurants initiated across the State known as Café Shree.
2015	First Café Kudumbashree India Food Court conducted in collaboration with Malayalam news daily, Mathrubhumi, at Thiruvananthapuram.
2016	AIFRHM sets up the first permanent food court, the Women's Food Court, in Thrissur.
2017-2018	Mentors from the Kudumbashree National Resource Organisation supported setting up of Aajeevika Didi Cafe in Jharkhand and Didi Ki Rasoi in Bihar.
2019	First Aajeevika - Café Kudumbashree India Food Court conducted at national level in collaboration with DAY- NRLM in national SARAS fair at New Delhi.

The Numbers

As of September 2020, the Kudumbashree network has 2425 food service enterprises across Kerala. 9825 women are reported to be owner-operators of these enterprises. Two-thirds of the 2425 food service enterprises in the Kudumbashree network were established during 2016 to 2020. 24% of them came up during 2010 to 2015, while 9% of the food service units were established before 2009.

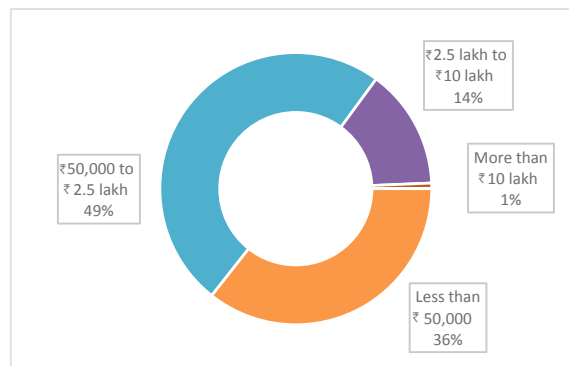
Distribution by type of food service enterprise



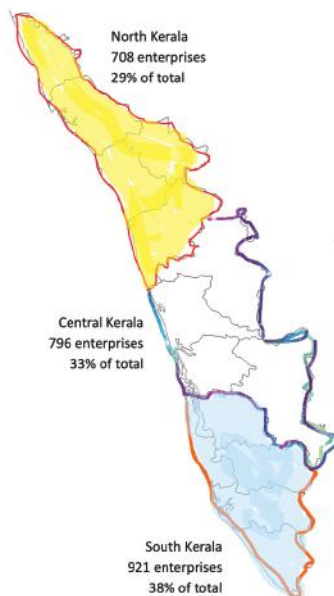
Catering units are the most common type of food service enterprises in the Kudumbashree network, with 40% share. 33% of the enterprises are in the nature of kiosks, tea-shops or mini cafeterias. Only 9% of the enterprises are categorized as full-fledged restaurants. 18% are office canteens.

Distribution by capital investment

Only 15% of the food service units have reported investment in excess of ₹ 2.5 lakh. 36% are very small in size, with capital investment of less than ₹ 50,000. About half of the enterprises report investment between ₹ 50,000 and ₹ 2.5 lakh.



Distribution by location



The five southern districts which account for 34% of the State's population account for 38% of the food service enterprises in the Kudumbashree network. The five northern districts, which have 35% of the population, have a lower proportion of these units (29%).

Support Systems

The Café Kudumbashree model is about building community owned enterprises into professionally run food service units, engaging with the market from a relative position of strength.

In order to develop a holistic ecosystem for the women's enterprise units in the food service sector, the Kudumbashree Mission created technical support agencies for providing regular inputs. The principles of local economic development govern economic empowerment work of Kudumbashree across all its sectors - farm or non-farm. The idea is to build local resources and capabilities to meet the wide range of support services that enterprises and other economic development units need. In line with this principle, the hospitality sector ecosystem was also built with local resources and capabilities. Two key elements of this ecosystem are AIFRHM and the network of Micro Enterprise Consultants.

AIFRHM which is the acronym for *Adithi Devo Bhava Institute of Food Research and Hospitality Management*, was formed in 2009 in Thrissur, under the Yuvashree scheme of Kudumbashree for promoting micro enterprises. Initially, it was built to focus on the food service units in Thrissur Municipality and the scope was later broadened to include the neighbouring rural areas. Over the years, AIFRHM has expanded its support to the Kudumbashree network across the State.

In the early days, AIFRHM team was entrusted to provide training to those women entrepreneurs who were struggling in their business operation and suffering from financial losses. AIFRHM team through regular training and handholding support helped such enterprises to stabilise their business operations. "When women understand the seriousness of running a business, especially a food service one, they tend to take the training very seriously. Their business is a crucial income source for them and AIFRHM stands to improve those businesses", says K P Ajayakumar, Chief Executive Officer of AIFRHM.

While AIFRHM provides technical support to bridge the skill gap of the food service entrepreneurs of the Kudumbashree network, the overall business support provision for the enterprises is made through the network of Micro Enterprise Consultants (MEC). There are 250 MECs currently functional in Kerala.

The MECs help in identifying new entrepreneurs, train them and support in setting up their businesses. They provide market related information to develop business plans for the enterprises. They conduct programmes like General Orientation Training (GOT) and Entrepreneurship Development Programme (EDP). The MECs also support existing enterprises through entrepreneurship development training, backward and forward linkages for improving business performance and facilitating access to credit. They provide training and handholding support for accounting and book-keeping. Once a business is set up, they focus on monitoring regular

operations of the unit, by putting in place systems to track monthly turnover, helping with record keeping, responding to any performance improvement requirements by the entrepreneurs, and extending market support.

To provide financial assistance to the entrepreneurs, the Kudumbashree Mission has developed schemes such as the subsidy fund, revolving fund, Crisis Management Fund and Technology Fund. The MECs also play an important role by linking entrepreneurs to the financial support available from Kudumbashree Mission and banks.

Rathi Sukumaran, owner of Sreelakshmi Café from Kasargod started her entrepreneurship journey in 2004 when her Panchayat Ward member and the then VEO suggested to her NHG members to start a canteen in the District Panchayat Office. After running the canteen successfully for several years, in 2010, the Kasargod District Mission sent Rathi and her group members to Thrissur to attend a training provided by AIFRHM. “Being part of this training was a significant boost for us as we were also taught about branding and marketing,” says Rathi.

The combination of AIFRHM team and MECs has worked as a catalyst to improve involvement of women in entrepreneurship and to develop professionalism among the women entrepreneurs to run their business effectively.

While helping the women to improve their business operations, the approach also focused on developing wider market opportunities for them. The appeal of ‘home-cooked’ food was the key unique proposition for the Kudumbashree food service units. The Café Kudumbashree approach, right from the beginning focussed on building women’s ability to cook and serve food that was ‘local’ and ‘natural’ to them. This meant that each food service unit catered to specific tastes from their social-cultural-geographic specificities. Thus, when aggregated at the State level, the Café Kudumbashree units provided a wide diversity of culinary traditions and products. This was a big market waiting to be explored, the very broad diaspora market - within the State and outside. The Kudumbashree Mission realised that there were big economic gains to be made, by and for the women entrepreneurs, and strategies were developed towards realising this.

There were constraints within which the model had to operate. Women could not leave their homes and responsibilities to go elsewhere and set up an enterprise. The model was also not such that the women could compete with the established restaurant businesses. A solution had to be found.

The Kudumbashree network had, by 2012, built a model of ‘seasonal’ markets. These were in the form of exhibitions and fairs and also festival markets. The Onam, Vishu, Ramzan and Christmas festival markets that Kudumbashree set up and run across Kerala found high acceptance among the population. Between 2006 and 2012, the Mission had also set up Masa Chanta, monthly markets, for entrepreneurs from the NHG network to sell their produce at the Panchayats and

Municipalities. These decentralised, distributed markets provided a low overhead, high intensity sales channel for the farm and non-farm sector entrepreneurs. All these were short-term affairs, lasting one, two or three days, but run regularly every month or every season.

The introduction of the National Rural Livelihoods Mission in 2011 gave fillip to Kudumbashree Mission's enterprise marketing efforts. Resources provided by DAY- NRLM allowed the Mission to set up and run larger exhibitions/fairs of longer duration. Learning from the experiences of the decentralised marketing interventions, the Mission took the next step - of creating a larger sales platform for the food service enterprises.

In 2012, a State level Fair was organised at Ernakulam, as part of the 15th Anniversary celebrations of the Mission. A full covered space was set up at Marine Drive, the heart of the city. Wide publicity was given through the press and FM radio channels. Twenty food service entrepreneurs from across Kerala cooked and served food to many thousands of visitors. This Food Court model was tried again in Thiruvananthapuram the same year, and found similar success. It became clear that the 10-14 days, concentrated sales platform that the Food Courts provided was feasible and viable for women to engage with the market from a position of strength.

The idea firmly took root when leading media groups in Kerala who routinely organise large sales exhibitions in major urban centres of the State during different festival seasons approached Café Kudumbashree with an offer to act as the anchor for their food courts. It started with Malayala Manorama in 2012 at Thiruvananthapuram. Later in 2015, the Mathrubhumi partnership took the concept a notch higher to the Kudumbashree India Food Court - this time food service entrepreneurs from several States in India coming together at Thiruvananthapuram along with their sisters from Kerala. As of August 2020, 10 India Food Courts with participation of more than 800 entrepreneurs from twenty States and UTs of India had generated a total turnover in excess of Rs. 5 crore.

The food court model was successful as it balanced the constraints of the women entrepreneurs with the demands of the market. It did not require the entrepreneurs to stay away from home for very long; they did not need too much funds to invest in working capital. The central management approach that Kudumbashree adopted helped in rationalising costs by sharing them across many entrepreneurs. The food courts were also substantial avenues for exposure and new lessons.

The customer facing set up was such that a healthy, hygienic environment is ensured at every level. The seating area was large and cleaned regularly. Cooking took place in an open area, allowing the customers to see how the food is prepared. Uniform standards, personal and kitchen hygiene practices, maintenance of clean dining space, scientific waste management, proper medical check-up, compliance to legal formalities and food and fire safety norms etc., were assured.

Breaking the Conventional Order

Kudumbashree's presence in the food service sector has got popular attention. What has been highlighted most is how the women are running their own restaurants, catering services, kiosks, selling food at IPL matches or are providing subsidised food in the government premises. "We have to understand the term women empowerment in its larger sense. Awareness classes and exercises alone will not serve the purpose. Giving the necessary skills to earn a living, to be financially independent and to be a contributor to the family income and hence gaining decision making power within the family is the starting point of women empowerment," these words by Jaya K.R, an entrepreneur from Alappuzha summarises what the women have gained.

The food service sector in India is growing at a rate of 10-15% per annum. The work is labour intensive, and multi-dimensional - purchase and management of raw materials, cooking, and delivery to the customers. Though women form a major part of the labour in such enterprises, only 10% of the enterprises are owned by women in the urban sector (6th Economic Census data). There is no data available to show ownership of food service enterprises by women in the rural sector.

Jaya got an opportunity to start her own canteen in 2011 after the then Finance Minister of Kerala Dr. T. M. Thomas Isaac suggested that Kudumbashree women to start a canteen in the premises of a professional drama theatre. She set up a successful catering business and later became a trainer supporting other women set up similar businesses.

Who are these women, like Jaya, who have made a space for themselves with great vigour and zest. They come from humble backgrounds, became part of the Kudumbashree community network and built their own confidence and capabilities to do something for their family's prosperity. It has been a daily struggle, shuffling between responsibilities at home and those of running the business. They have challenged the norms of the business, as a preserve of men. They are leveraging their traditional knowledge and innate wisdom of cooking for the greater benefit of themselves, their families and their immediate community. They are breaking social barriers that kept them confined to the four walls of their homes.

Fathima from Kasaragod is a homegrown chef. Her journey started when she got an opportunity to start a pickle and snack making business along with five fellow NHG members. They started with a capital of Rs. 15,000. With the support of the Kasaragod District Mission, Fathima started attending monthly festivals. As she gained in confidence, she started attending sales exhibitions in other parts of the State. To ensure that her production unit does not suffer in her absence, she employed someone to do her share of the work in the business. She came to Thiruvananthapuram in 2008, and from 2012, shifted her focus completely to her new food service enterprise. She started from a tourist home mess in Vyapar Bhawan where she used to sell 50 meals a day. While business was good, she did not feel happy. To earn additional income, she engaged her elder son

and started a kiosk, Shifa Catering. She started a kiosk near YMCA benefiting from the unrealised potential of that space.

The business provided regular employment to five persons - Fathima and her son, and three other men and women. One of the women was trained by Fathima to develop as a full-fledged cook. “Within three months of setting up my food-truck we had established a good customer base. I offered a variety of dishes at one place and that was the primary attraction. People who had my food at various festivals used to come to eat at my food-truck.” It has been eight years, since Fathima has been running this food truck with her family. While competing with the commercial market Fathima has made space for her business to grow. She says, “I won’t say that I have made a lot of money but I am proud of the name that I have earned today and how strong I stand.” In 2019, she was selected by the Kudumbashree National Resource Organisation to the newly created cadre of Café Mentors. Showing justice to her impeccable record of achievements, today she works as an entrepreneur and travels to other States to use her expertise to influence SHG women to find entrepreneurial opportunities in the food service business.

Café Kudumbashree took a rainbow flight in 2017 when Kudumbashree started its special units for the transgender community in Kerala in an effort to mainstream the community and to generate livelihood opportunities for them.

Amrutha a transgender from Ernakulam aspired for a dignified life and like many from her community, worked for event organisers and stage shows to make a living. She was one of the first members from her community to join Kudumbashree and has proven herself as a competent entrepreneur ever since. She today runs a juice stall in Ernakulam Collectorate, a pickle manufacturing business, undertakes organic farming, and participates in festivals like the India Food Court to supplement her annual income. “.. transgender people in Kerala, even today, are not that open to the ideas pitched by stakeholders like Kudumbashree. They can’t be blamed, of course, their bitter experiences in life always compel them to stay away from the mainstream and to remain in the margins amongst their own kind. I have devoted my life for their cause after joining Kudumbashree and I walk the talk to inspire my community so that more and more people come up to join us in this drive, which I believe is the need of the hour”, says Amrutha.

Livelihoods Security or Social Welfare?

Making a food service brand representative of women has helped in building a good market for women’s food service enterprises. The Café Kudumbashree brand gives an image of a food service chain of affordable, good quality home cooked food. Kudumbashree Mission has succeeded in bridging the knowledge, skill, market and credit gaps to enable the women to aspire for, and build better livelihood options. Strategic moves like converging with government departments helped women establish their units in good locations, provided an assured customer base and a good opportunity to learn on the job.

The Kerala State budget for 2020-21 announced that “1000 Kudumbashree food courts will be started for providing food at ₹25”. ‘Hunger Free Kerala’ is an admirable goal and needs to be truly realised. The question to ask in the context of the discussion around women’s enterprises: Does this have to happen at the cost of the women’s livelihoods?

A similar scheme was enacted in 2006 by the Government, involving Kudumbashree canteen units. Many canteen units lost their market and viability due to participation in the scheme and several of them closed down. The basis for the lower cost of meals, in these popular schemes, is the subsidised rates at which the State Civil Supplies Corporation provided inputs. This is problematic in many ways. The raw materials seldom become available on time. The Civil Supplies Corporation had little regard for the women who stood in line to collect their unit’s rations. A lot of the time of the entrepreneurs was spent following-up with the Civil Supplies bureaucracy than actually running their businesses. The quality of rice supplied varied from batch to batch, affecting the standards and standardisation of food supplied by the outlets. Eventually, even the most loyal customers started giving the canteens a miss, as the quality of food had fallen so much. The entrepreneurs were caught between the devil (the subsidized meal scheme) and the deep-sea (expectations from their regular customers).

The last time around the Kudumbashree Canteen units were at a different level of evolution. Most were institutional canteens, dependent on the goodwill of the heads of the institutions for their survival. They had to follow the diktats from those in power for their survival. These businesses and the women who run them have come a long way since.

The latest announcement begs several questions that need to be examined closely. Are the existing Kudumbashree food service units to provide the subsidised meals? If so, what happens to their business viability? The average labour cost incurred by a typical canteen/Café Kudumbashree unit (considering the MGNREGS wages equivalent of ₹ 300/day as the opportunity cost) is not less than ₹ 36,000 a month. Given the unit economics of the food business, generating this amount of cash to pay for wages, requires a break-even turnover of ₹ 72,000 a month, under typical conditions. The input subsidies promised under the scheme will provide a 25% reduction in material costs, at best, meaning a break-even turnover of ₹ 65,000 is still required. Most of the units are day-time operations, with more than 75% of the revenue coming from the lunch-time meals. If these businesses are to sell their meals at ₹ 25 per customer, they will need to serve 80 customers at lunch-time every day. A typical unit will not have the capability to cater to more than 50 customers, at lunch, every day. How can the businesses survive without breaking even?

If the plan is that 1000 new Café Kudumbashree enterprises are to be created for this, the question now becomes one of cannibalisation. Is there the market readiness for a quick doubling of the number of such businesses? Are there sufficient technical and managerial capacities for this expansion? Will Kudumbashree Mission be able to support the old and new enterprises in the same manner?

Soon after the budget announcement, the State was gripped with the COVID-19 pandemic and the fallouts of the nation-wide lockdown. The Government depended upon the Kudumbashree network to reach out to the last person to support her with meeting basic needs, emotional support and solidarity. Here again, the Kudumbashree food service enterprises came in handy. A chain of Janakeeya Hotel was established across Kerala to provide affordable meals. Many of them were pop-up operations with volunteers from the Kudumbashree network bringing in the necessary technical and logistics skills to ensure timely supply of food. Many existing food service units had also converted themselves into the Janakeeya Hotel category. Given that the economy was fully shut, this was probably a good opportunity for these businesses to survive. As of September 2020, 680 Janakeeya Hotels (569 in Gram panchayats and 111 in Municipal corporations) had served more than 7.3 million meals. The financial details of the operations once available, will help determine how beneficial this has been to the enterprises.

While the COVID-19 response operations need to be seen in the very specific context that it took place in, the same cannot be said about the social welfare agenda of ‘hunger free Kerala’. It is obviously very tempting to paint a picture of the poor helping each other - in this case, poor women running food service enterprises using their business potential to ensure that those in need of food do not go hungry. But as the calculations show, this welfare aspect is likely to erode the viability of the business itself. One may argue about the government paying for subsidised inputs, but it is clear from the numbers that the subsidy does not cover the viability gap caused by the welfare activity.

It also raises the question about the autonomy of the women as entrepreneurs. Why should they follow a diktat in terms of what to cook and sell, to whom and at what price? The Kudumbashree Mission has invested time, money and resources, across many years, to build the capabilities of women entrepreneurs to engage with the market from reasonable levels of strength. It is not that the efforts have achieved fruition at all levels; it is still work in progress and there will still be a large number of existing women’s enterprises that need further support to achieve a minimum level of viability and autonomy.

Transferring the burden of social welfare to the shoulders of the women who struggle to build themselves a better future for themselves has to be questioned.

Many more Challenges

The future of the food services enterprises run by women face many challenges. The uncertainties arising from the COVID-19 pandemic are only bringing some of these in greater relief. The key question that needs to be raised is on the sustainability of the successes that the women have gained for themselves. They operate in a very competitive market, where there is seldom an opportunity to rest on past laurels.

The Kudumbashree food service units operate on four core strengths. It is necessary to consider these strengths and to what extent these will remain on their side. The first, is the USP of their offering - 'Ethnic Taste', 'Home Quality Food', 'Purity'. These are in no way a monopoly of the women and any smart market operator can claim these. The strengths of the women's collective - both in economic and solidarity terms - is the second core element. This obviously will be a continuing and non-alienable strength. But there is not enough evidence to suggest that this alone will assure long term sustainability and viability of the businesses. The third is the support of the local governments - Panchayats and Municipalities. As long as the Kudumbashree network continues, they will be part of the local governance system. The two - local governments and the women's organisation network - need each other and they feed off each other. Despite the party-political struggles at the local level, the convergence of the women's organisation network with the local governments is likely to continue. This will work to the advantage of the women's enterprises as well. The fourth, and final factor, is the support of the State Government. The current phase of growth of Kudumbashree food service enterprises owe a lot to the financial and technical inputs from the government - be it through Kudumbashree Mission or other departments. This is the least reliable of the four factors and for more reasons than one. Changing priorities of changing governments, financial constraints, political alignments and related developments and misplaced priorities such as the social welfare agenda narrated earlier are all factors to be considered in this regard.

There is no doubt that the Kudumbashree women's food service enterprises need to be strengthened. In order for this to happen, the enterprises and entrepreneurs and their support mechanisms need to consider and act upon several key aspects.

The need for a viable scale - The entrepreneurs face challenges in terms of expansion and business growth. The women perform a combination of owner-worker tasks, from procurement of raw materials to food production and serving to the customers. This is while they continue to carry the primary responsibility towards their family and managing household chores. They also struggle with raising finances needed for any expansion or growth. It is not being argued that all businesses have to expand or scale-up. Each entrepreneur should be free to set the limits of growth for themselves and operate within those. The measures of business viability and success therefore, will be measured within these limits. Problems will arise if external persons are to measure the success or otherwise of the businesses, independent of the limitations set by the entrepreneurs.

Limits of the support mechanisms - The support systems in place, like AIFRHM and MEC provide adequate support to women in starting their enterprises at the current scales of operation. Are these sufficient to aid in the growth phase? What additional capabilities need to be created to ensure that the support mechanisms are able to help the enterprises grow? What are the steps needed to ensure that the Kudumbashree Mission need not be the intermediary between the women entrepreneurs and the support providers?

Where are the Icons? -It is commendable to see entrepreneurs like Fathima, Jaya and Amrutha making a mark for themselves in this very competitive business. But how many of their fellow women or TG community members have heard their stories? How many such other stories have we heard of women and transgender people transforming into entrepreneurs? To create and nurture strong entrepreneurial mindsets it is imperative to develop women entrepreneurs as icons who can inspire their fellows to dream and chase those dreams.

Taking this Exploration Forward

This paper is arguably the first attempt to bring together issues related to women's participation in the food services market in Kerala. It is more of an exercise in raising a few pertinent questions than an attempt to answer them. Given the lack of reliable business data of the enterprises, it is not possible to make objective assessments of success or otherwise of these businesses while anecdotal evidences point in the direction of successes. Deeper questions on women overcoming societal and cultural barriers such as managing their time between reproductive roles and engaging with a time-intensive business such as running restaurants will need more greater study.

The following questions, among others, that need detailed study emerge.

- How do women balance the demands of time? What compromises, if any, do they have to make to become successful food service entrepreneurs?
- What are the larger economic/market conditions that contribute to the success of women's food service enterprises? Are they similar to those faced by general food service enterprises?
- What are the design elements for successful enterprises? What ecosystem factors determine the success?

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