

Class Feminism: The Kudumbashree Agitation in Kerala

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Class Feminism

The Kudumbashree Agitation in Kerala

B L BIJU, K G ABHILASH KUMAR

The day and night agitation organised by women self-help groups in Kerala associated with Kudumbashree – officially known as the State Poverty Eradication Mission – proves that weaker section of society can be mobilised and empowered through decentralisation and participatory development. The agitation was an appropriate reply to critics who equated decentralisation with depoliticisation of the development process and an ideological deviation from class struggle.

The women's movement in Kerala reflects the value system, demands and methods of agitation of different strands of feminism. Socialist feminism is not dominant in Kerala despite the fact that the women's wing of the Communist Party of India (Marxist) – CPI(M) has a large membership, and debates relating to third generation feminism and its subversive politics are principally confined to women intellectuals and celebrities. The enactment of the 73rd and 74th amendments to the Constitution that ushered in an era of decentralisation in local self-governance, percolation of procedural democracy to the grass roots, reservations for women in elected bodies, and gender-inclusive welfare programmes have seen women's participation in public spaces, political institutions, and democratic struggles.¹

Public cynicism, especially among men, about women's entry into politics has gradually faded. The decision of the previous Left Democratic Front (LDF) government (2006-11) to increase reservation for women to 50% in local bodies is an indication of a gender-class combination emerging in local politics. However, the presence of women in politics and allocation of an appropriate share of welfare funds for women was not achieved because of massive agitations. Indeed, as a category of political citizens, women had a very passive relationship with the welfare state.² In addition, a large majority of women's organisations have remained independent from political parties, which is a reason for both their strength and weakness.

It is against this background that this article looks at the "day and night agitation" (*rapakal samaram*) organised in front of the state secretariat in Thiruvananthapuram during the first week of October 2012 by women self-help groups (SHGs) associated with Kudumbashree (officially known as the State Poverty

Eradication Mission).³ The agitation was led by the All-India Democratic Women's Association (AIDWA) and supported by the CPI(M) to protest the United Democratic Front (UDF) government's decision to reverse the process of decentralisation and re-bureaucratized development, affect a heavy cutback in the total plan outlay for the poverty eradication mission, and block resource devolution. Though the agitation received overwhelming support from Kudumbashree units across Kerala, the UDF government remained obdurate. It was only when the agitators raised the stakes and threatened to lay siege to district headquarters that the government agreed to negotiate and on the ninth day of the agitation signed an agreement in favour of the women's demands.⁴

This event brings to the fore the specificity of women empowerment in Kerala, its articulation in the form of gender-cum-class demand, gender-effects of decentralised development, and the relationship between the political left and women's movements.

Participatory Action

Kudumbashree was launched in 1998 as a community network that would work in tandem with local self-government institutions (LSGIs) for poverty eradication and women empowerment. It is a joint programme of the Government of Kerala and the National Bank for Agriculture and Rural Development (NABARD), formally registered under the Travancore-Kochi Literary, Scientific and Charitable Societies Act (1955). The governing body is chaired by the state minister of LSG assisted by a director at the state level. There is a field officer in every district.

Kudumbashree SHGs in villages and municipalities are organised in neighbourhood groups (NHGs) that send representatives to the ward level area development societies (ADSS), which in turn send representatives to the community development society (CDS). Today, there are 1,94,000 NHGs, 17,000 ADSS and 1,061 CDSs in the state. The total membership of this SHG network is about 40 lakh, which has proved helpful in bringing women into gram sabhas. The CDS has a significant role in development activities ranging from socio-economic surveys and

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enterprise development to community management and social audit (Kudumbashree 2011). All villages and municipalities have a number of Kudumbashree units. Originally started as microfinance-led financial security model, Kudumbashree soon became a comprehensive model of local economic development and participatory mechanism for women empowerment.⁵ Jagratha Samithi, a vigilance group that monitors oppression of women, is part of the network and has been effective in bringing such matters for discussion and collective action by women.

The Kudumbashree network is the strongest and the best organised institutional group among various local-level collectives that have emerged in the post-decentralisation period. Its link with state power, participatory and democratic way of decision-making, and qualities such as voluntarism and self-mobilisation have helped it to become the most developed institution of government-backed community-based mobilisation. At the behest of LSGIs, private companies and entrepreneurs have also been permitted to join Kudumbashree units. Though the economic assessment of the Kudumbashree network has given mixed results, its effectiveness in mobilising poor women by providing them a shared community space in their home courtyard is noteworthy.

Perceiving the Difference

Even though the UDF government (1991-96) was instrumental in implementing the 73rd and 74th amendments to the Constitution in Kerala, the participatory mode for decentralisation (widely known as people's plan campaign) was the contribution of the LDF government (1996-2001), which introduced institutional reforms and financial devolution to supplement the efforts to empower the weaker sections of society. Since the objective was to pair development with democratisation, Kudumbashree provided institutional support for the mobilisation of poor women. In fact, Kudumbashree's structure and administration showed a sense of balance between community initiative and state support.

However, the succeeding UDF government (2001-06) reversed the process of

decentralisation, abandoned the campaign mode and re-bureaucratized development. A heavy cutback in the total plan outlay obstructed resource devolution. As a result, participation in gram sabhas declined. However, Kudumbashree continued as a forum for collective entrepreneurship and microfinance. And since "self-help" became a catchphrase in the neo-liberal discourse of development, the Congress-led UDF government did not dismantle it altogether. However, there was little effort to strengthen it as a platform for empowering women by mobilising them. Interestingly, the government found Kudumbashree useful for welfare services and conducting field surveys at lower administrative cost. Ironically, the government presented Kudumbashree as a successful example of "targeted development" to obtain financial aid from the centre.

The LDF, mainly the CPI(M), had perceived the significance of the SHG network

better and earlier than their counterparts.⁶ With the increase in reservation, women became a category of political citizens and before deciding to field women candidates, political parties had to consider their experience in Kudumbashree. The LDF government (2006-11) took steps to expand and strengthen women SHGs by means of financial devolution and introduction of new statutes.⁷ Thomas Isaac, the then finance minister, introduced his last budget describing it as "Gender Budget". Not surprisingly, Kudumbashree achieved unprecedented results in such a favourable administrative, political and financial environment.

The LDF government initially fixed the budget allocation for Kudumbashree at Rs 50 crore, and charged only 4% interest, enhanced later to Rs 100 crore on government loans to SHGs. The most important move was to select Kudumbashree as the nodal agency for implementing

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the centrally-sponsored National Rural Livelihood Mission (NRLM). Kudumbashree members represented local government next only to elected representatives before the people.⁸

Janasree vs Kudumbashree

The incumbent UDF government has debilitated the institutional capacity and drained the financial resources of Kudumbashree. It increased the interest rate on government loans from 4% to 12%; indefinitely postponed the promises of the Gender Budget; and relocated its expert administrative staff. Above all, the government issued an order permitting Kudumbashree members to become members of the Congress-sponsored non-governmental organisation (NGO), Janasree as well, i.e., hold dual membership.

A section of Congress leaders started the Janasree Sustainable Development Mission in 2008 to counterbalance Kudumbashree. The negative verdict against LDF in the 2010 panchayat election and the change in state government in 2011 gave them an opportunity to nurture this

party-sponsored NGO. However, Janasrees could attract only 10 lakh members despite the government permitting double membership. In a strategic move, the Congress Party's Members of Parliament (MPs), with the help of a memorandum signed by UDF's block panchayat presidents, appealed to the central government to replace Kudumbashree with Janasree as the nodal agency of NRLM. However, the central government did not yield because Janasree had no track record comparable to Kudumbashree. In its reply, the central government described Kudumbashree as a model SHG for other states.⁹

When the Congress' attempts to recruit poor women with an attractive financial offer through borrowed money from the central government, public sector banks and NABARD failed, the state government provided money for Janasree. Its hastily designed projects were approved and sanctioned Rs 14.9 crore under the Rashtriya Krishi Vikas Yojana (RKVY). The opposition criticised it as a political manoeuvre and an attempt to siphon

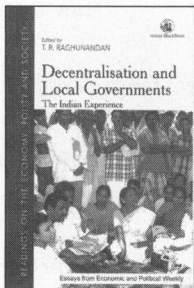
public funds to a party-sponsored NGO. Indeed, a person who had been booked in corruption cases related to micro-finance was appointed as the director of "Janasree Microfin", its newly formed microfinance wing.

No information is available about the resource mobilisation, stakeholders and functioning of the Janasree to the public. Its non-transparent functioning has bred suspicion and given strength to criticism that it is an NGO of the Congress. On the other hand, Kudumbashree has the advantage of a larger membership than Janasree, longer historical record, familiarity to the local public, institutionalised linkage with LSGIs, and decentralised and participatory operations. Since Congress leaders in Kerala have been accused of corruption for personal gain, its NGO could also follow suit (Devika 2012). Kudumbashree, however, is free of such taint. There are multiple channels of social audit and greater chance for state vigilance in its operations. To the public, it is easy to appreciate Kudumbashree as a state-people interface, while Janasree

Decentralisation and Local Governments

Edited by

T R RAGHUNANDAN



The idea of devolving power to local governments was part of the larger political debate during the Indian national movement. With strong advocates for it, like Gandhi, it resulted in constitutional changes and policy decisions in the decades following Independence, to make governance more accountable to and accessible for the common man.

The introduction discusses the milestones in the evolution of local governments post-Independence, while providing an overview of the panchayat system, its evolution and its powers under the British, and the stand of various leaders of the Indian national movement on decentralisation.

This volume discusses the constitutional amendments that gave autonomy to institutions of local governance, both rural and urban, along with the various facets of establishing and strengthening these local self-governments.

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In the case of Kudumbashree, the state government is its patron at the macro-level. At the middle level, bureaucrats ensure its coordination, and at the micro-level it is solely under the control of the NHG, ADS and CDS properly wedded with LSGIs. All political parties can be involved in its activities, build rapport through their representatives in LSGIs, and also recruit women party members into its three-tier structure. Although there were equal opportunities for all political parties to control Kudumbashree units, the CPI(M) was more successful because of its principled commitment to decentralised development and people's mobilisation, active women cadres capable of leading Kudumbashree units¹⁰ and generous support from the then LDF government.

Mode of Agitation

Decentralisation in Kerala did not give a free run to NGOs; there was scope for collaboration between NGOs and political parties as well. However, weaker sections were already familiar with party-led political mobilisation, much before NGOs entered the picture. By decentralisation the CPI(M) meant the deepening and institutionalisation of the process of mobilisation and democratisation. Scholars (e.g. Heller 2005) remarked that the CPI(M) used decentralisation to embed class struggles in mass mobilisation. While critics denounced it as an ideological deviation and class compromise, admirers appreciated it as a strategy to interconnect class and non-class.

In the Kudumbashree agitation in Thiruvananthapuram, the CPI(M) took up the specific combination of class and non-class identity of economically backward women. The agitation did not face any major criticism from independent women organisations, though none of them declared their support. After the agitation met with success, they complained that AIDWA had hijacked Kudumbashree at the behest of the CPI(M) (Devika 2012). However, Kudumbashree, which provides means of livelihood, credit and meeting space, had already become a household name for poor women and any move to debilitate it was seen by

women as an attempt to dismantle their base of associational life, participation and livelihood.

Class Feminism

The CPI(M) and AIDWA played the role of a midwife for the agitation. The groundwork and technical details of the agitation are most striking. There were 2,500 permanent volunteers from different Kudumbashree units permanently stationed in front of the state secretariat on an indefinite strike. They sat in groups representing different districts. Crowds of women from SHGs from different districts came to the city and participated in demonstrations on a daily basis and their numbers increased day by day. When the organisers declared that the agitation would spread across towns and district headquarters, the government yielded and agreed to negotiate.

The media, which initially ignored the agitation, later understood its consistency and gave headline news. Earlier, many women-led demonstrations against the price hike in various places and a number of strikes organised by nurses (mainly women) working in private hospitals for better wage-service conditions in Kerala had prepared the mood for the Kudumbashree agitation. The celebration of Kudumbashree's 14th anniversary in Kochi just a week before the agitation was an occasion for its members to assemble and share common problems.¹¹

The CPI(M) was looking for a new arena of struggle in state politics. The group-specific targeted development through LSGIs and increased reservation for women in local bodies indicated the possibility of gender voting. In this agitation, the party and women intellectuals did not form two fighting camps. The legitimacy of Kudumbashree in women/feminist circles went in favour of the agitation and became a threat to the government. Most probably, it was an expression of "class feminism".

The agitation mobilised poor (class) women (non-class). Such an agitation was necessitated by the realisation of the impacts of and reasons for the Left's major failure in the panchayat election 2010. In spite of plenty of welfare projects to its credit, the CPI(M) did not win

votes. So it became necessary to unionise women SHGs with the help of AIDWA. The CPI(M) in Kerala has been trying to expand its multi-class coalition to counterweigh both its adversaries in the party system and in civil society.¹² Through the agitation, the CPI(M) warned the government, which has a thin majority in the assembly, that any step to reverse the welfare policies initiated by the previous LDF government would be fraught with political risk.

Conclusions

Decentralisation and participatory development are recent attempts of the political left to protect, mobilise and empower the weaker sections of class and non-class varieties. The Kudumbashree agitation proves this point well. AIDWA's state unit, often ridiculed by its critics as the "pet children" of "patriarchal CPI(M)", had a very decisive role in this agitation. The agitation was a fitting reply to critics who equated decentralisation with depoliticisation of development and ideological deviation from class struggle. The agitation signalled the mainstreaming of gender-class combination of demands to the attention of the state. It was a political struggle born out of mutual understanding between a left political party and poor women through multiple ways of interactions in light of a participatory model of democracy and development.

The agitation brings to our attention two parallel processes of women empowerment initiatives in Kerala – first, with the active involvement of AIDWA and CPI(M), and second, with the leadership of autonomous NGOs and feminist intellectuals. Some working alliances or a dialogic relationship between the two would have helped the task of empowering women with improved strength and legitimacy.¹³ The agitation has left an indelible imprint in the history of people's struggles in Kerala as an example of how decentralisation could become a preparatory ground for mobilisation and massive struggles of class and non-class groupings.

NOTES

- 1 It is beyond doubt that they are not integrated as fully empowered, autonomous and free-choosing groups. Patriarchal norms and practices of traditional society have not been completely

- removed. It re-emerges in modern forms. Moreover, liberal individualism is not the norm that dominates politics, economy and social relations in contemporary Kerala.
- 2 It places women movements in contrast to the caste and class movements for redistribution and representation.
 - 3 In Malayalam, "Kudumbashree" literally means "opulence/prosperity of family" (This may displease very radical feminists).
 - 4 Their demands include: reinstate Kudumbashree as the nodal agency for NRLM; reduce interest rate on loans to 4%; writing off the dues for housing loans under Bhavanashree; implement the increase in budget allotment to Kudumbashree; cancel the allotment of project given to Janasree under RKVY, etc.
 - 5 Devika and Thampi remark: "[The] history of Kerala since mid-20th century is characterised by changing 'regimes of empowerment'. The first type was characterised by the obvious commitment of the state to welfare and the willingness and efforts of the political society to negotiate the interests and demands of the organised poor against the state power. The second type which is of recent emergence in the context of liberalisation and changes in political society, is characterised by the weakening of state's commitment to welfare and increasing support to private capital and the decline in the political society which has stripped of its linkages with masses. The state and political parties perceive women empowerment within the second type of empowerment regime" (Devika and Thampi 2007: 43).

- However, the authors hardly see the difference between CPI(M) and its opponents in pursuing the second type of empowerment regime, in policy content, purpose and procedures.
- 6 While maintaining criticism about the AIDWA's subordination to "patriarchal CPI(M)" in "high politics" in women issues, scholars approve that it organises below the poverty line women in the Kudumbashree SHG network (Devika and Thampi 2012: 6).
 - 7 The gravity of state finance (either by direct funding or through negotiation with public sector banks and local credit cooperatives) over private/self-finance during the LDF rule is the reason for the microfinance model remains sustainable and free of credit traps in Kerala.
 - 8 Two popular Malayalam movies were released based on the life of women in Kudumbashree as the theme.
 - 9 *The Hindu*, Thiruvananthapuram, 21 March 2012.
 - 10 Devika (2012: 17) points out that the agitation gives a feeling that AIDWA worker and Kudumbashree member are one and the same; and it should be avoided for "real" empowerment of women.
 - 11 Recollecting her beginning as a social worker, Jayalekshmi (Minister for Tribal Welfare) said that earlier engagement in Kudumbashree gave her the courage to become a political leader. She added: "It was the emergence of Kudumbashree that enabled many women to start a bank account and gave them the courage to perform in various organisations" (*The Times of India*, Kochi, 29 September 2012).

- 12 In civil society, the late 1990s witnessed a surge in anti-CPI(M) critics claiming support of various fractions of "voiceless political society". Factionalism inside the party affected the ability of CPI(M) to effectively encounter this. This was also the main reason for not being able to make use of local governance and decentralisation to expand its support base adequately.
- 13 The sensational and anti-left mainstream vernacular newspapers, journals and television news channels hardly provide space for such a constructive dialogue.

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The Substance of Style

SANKARAN KRISHNA

In the context of the Ashis Nandy affair, this brief essay speculates on the literal-mindedness and supposed inability of India's lower classes to appreciate the nuanced defence of their corruption as well as what it says about the public sphere in contemporary India. This affair holds up a mirror to who we are, and the picture may not be to our liking.

Somewhere, Salman Rushdie must be smiling wryly. Back in 1990, when the controversy over *The Satanic Verses* raged and the Ayatollah's "fatwa" hung over his head, Ashis Nandy was one of the few who dared counter the knee-jerk defence of free speech and creative licence that formed the mainstay of most of Rushdie's supporters and that of the man himself. Nandy's analysis at the time was bracing. He pointed out that Muslims were a beleaguered minority in countries like the United Kingdom, the United States, and India where the protests found greatest resonance. Moreover, globally Muslims were subject to the most vicious caricatures by an omnipresent western media.

In such a context the utterances of one of their own, a fellow Muslim, seemed to them an act of betrayal. Rushdie ought to have taken this into account while exercising his fictive imagination. In addition to placing the right to free speech

in a wider sociopolitical and diasporic context, Nandy further averred that he suspected Rushdie knew what he was doing, and in some ways, was complicit in the enormous controversy that ensued.¹

Given the predictability of much of mainstream coverage of the Rushdie affair (mostly driven by narratives either defending free speech or bemoaning the inability of literal-minded Muslims to appreciate irony and imagination in a work of fiction), Nandy's insights at the time were, as is so often the case with him, both persuasive and out of step with the mainstream.

Almost a quarter century later, Nandy finds himself in a predicament somewhat similar to that of Rushdie back then. Sure, there are no fatwas or bounties hanging over his head and there is no question of his going into hiding for his safety. But too many of Nandy's defenders, like Rushdie's, are dropping anchor in free speech, creative licence, and the alleged inability of his intended beneficiaries (dalits, adivasis and the Other Backward Classes (OBCs) in this instance) to appreciate his creativity and counterintuitive thought. And one cannot but help wonder to what extent Nandy

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