



THE ORDINARY EXTRAORDINAIRE

Narratives by women of Kudumbashree



Aajeevika
National Rural Livelihoods Mission



Kudumbashree
Kerala State Poverty Eradication Mission

Kudumbashree National Resource Organisation

Translated from Malayalam to English by
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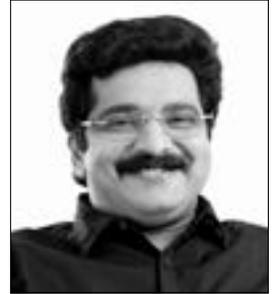
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Kerala



Foreword

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It gives me immense pleasure to bring to you a compilation of a few experiences of women from Kerala translated into English. This is a small contribution from Kerala to the larger women' empowerment movement that the Government of India has envisaged through its National Rural Livelihoods Mission (NRLM). I hope this compilation becomes a medium to better understand the process of participatory development and inspires our friends far and wide to recognise women as the anchors of progress.

I visualise this book being translated in other Indian languages to spread the voices of these ordinary women with extraordinary experiences across the country.

Dr. M K Muneer



From the Executive Director

It is my privilege to present a compendium of extraordinary experiences of the most ordinary women in Kerala who have displayed courage to take a step ahead and make a difference in the lives of those around them. A large number of experiences were penned down by women from the community in Kerala during the 'Pustaka Yatra' event (Journey of Books) organised to commemorate Kudumbashree's 14th Anniversary. From among this vast repository of experiences, a few have been translated into English to form this compilation. I hope these stories become a source of inspiration for many across the country to involve women in their developmental processes.

The first narrative in this compendium is by Late Subaira, the Chairperson of a Community Development Society (CDS) in the Kudumbashree network. Subaira epitomised the spirit of Kudumbashree which is vested in the 4 lakh women across the state. I sincerely hope that her life and struggles serve the cause of women not just in Kerala but across India.

With these words, I congratulate the Kudumbashree National Resource Organisation (NRO) team for compiling this book.

Smt. K. B. Valsalakumari

List of Acronyms

ADMC	Assistant District Mission Co-ordinator
ADS	Area Development Society
ASHA	Accredited Social Health Activist
BRC	BUDS Rehabilitation Centre
CBNP	Community Based Nutrition Programme
CBO	Community Based Organisation
CDS	Community Development Society
CO	Community Organiser
DTP	Desktop Publishing
GP	Gram Panchayat
GSLP	Gender Self Learning Programme
JLG	Joint Liability Group
KILA	Kerala Institute of Local Administration
MGNREGS	Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Scheme
MKSP	Mahila Kisan Sashaktikaran Pariyojana
MLA	Member of Legislative Assembly
NHG	Neighbourhood Group
NRLM	National Rural Livelihood Mission
NRO	National Resource Organisation
SSLC	Senior Secondary Leaving Certificate

A Movement Called Kudumbashree ...

Kudumbashree – State Poverty Eradication Mission of Kerala was launched in 1998, with the objective to “eradicate absolute poverty through concerted community action under the leadership of local governments, by facilitating organization of the poor for combining self-help with demand-led convergence of available services and resources to tackle the multiple dimensions and manifestations of poverty, holistically”.

The Malayalam term ‘Kudumbashree’, in its literal sense, means prosperity of the family. The Kudumbashree network of Community Based Organisations (CBO) consists of a three-tier network of women’s organisations, with membership of families, represented by a woman from the family. At the base are Neighbourhood Groups (NHG) that work on the principles of mutual affinity and benefit. The NHG are federated at the level of a ward in the Gram Panchayat (GP) into Area Development Societies (ADS). All ADS in a gram panchayat are federated as the Community Development Society (CDS). As of March 2015, the Kudumbashree network has a membership of more than 41.14 lakh families, organized into over 2.6 lakh NHGs, 19,773 ADS and 1072 CDS.

Kudumbashree focuses its programs in three domains, namely - economic empowerment, social empowerment and women’ empowerment. The NHGs act as sub-units of the Gram Sabha to engage with the local governance processes; they also act as thrift and credit groups to meet financial needs of its members. Members of NHGs come together in activity groups for taking up various income generating activities such as collective farming and micro enterprises. Social Development activities of the Mission include: Asraya project for rehabilitation of destitute families, Bala Sabhas for capability enhancement of children and BUDS special schools and BUDS Rehabilitation Centres (BRC) for rehabilitation of mentally challenged children and adults.

Women empowerment is a holistic term in itself. The Kudumbashree network provides ample opportunities to women to earn income and support their family. Once they are able to stand by themselves, they get involved in supporting the needy in their neighbourhood and community. The NHG collective and the network give the women the strength to face problems and challenges, be it in the family or in the neighbourhood. Kudumbashree runs the Gender Self Learning Program (GSLP) to enable women to discuss and find solutions to the issues they face in day-to-day life. Locally contextualised modules on issues such as women and work, women and health, women and mobility, are developed for discussion in NHG meetings.

Pustaka Yatra - 'Journey of Books'

On the occasion of the 14th Anniversary celebrations of Kudumbashree in 2012, an initiative called Pustaka Yatra (Journey of Books) was organised as a part of the GLSP. The prime objective was to provide the members of the Kudumbashree network a platform for sharing with each other and the larger world, their experiences of being a part of Kudumbashree. These experiences shared by community women included stories of strength and support received through the NHG collectives; the economic, social and political empowerment they achieved, and experiences from the activities and initiatives they were involved in for the development of their community.

The consolidation of these experiences occurred over a span of three phases. Firstly, NHG members wrote down their individual experiences. These experiences were shared at the NHG level and the ones that were collectively decided to be the best by the NHG members were then sent to the ADS. At the ADS level, the ADS General Body and other interested members sat together, read the received stories, and consolidated the best ones. The consolidation was categorised into experiences that portrayed changes in individual life, skills acquired through Kudumbashree, positive influence on, and support provided to another individual or family, work done for the community etc. The consolidation from ADS was sent to the CDS where the final consolidation for making of the CDS level book was done. For this purpose, an editorial board including five women from outside the network was constituted. The editorial board that comprised of women writers, media persons, and activists selected the best stories to be included in the mentioned categories, made required changes in the language and additions to the content with the permission of the respective authors, and made a set of best stories that were published by the CDS.

1072 compilations including experiences of above one lakh Kudumbashree women were published by the 1072 CDS across Kerala. Once the books were ready, the Pustaka Yatra began from two points, one in the North of Kerala (Hosankadi in Kasargod district), and the other from the South (Udiyankulangara in Thiruvananthapuram district). A bus started from these two locations, covered the districts on their way to Ernakulam, the venue of the 12th Anniversary celebrations. En-route, the Pustaka Yatra met with Kudumbashree members assembled at specific locations, with the books collected from the various CDS in a given area. Thus, the books from 1072 CDS were collected by the two Yatra buses. The Yatra team consisted of a cultural team that engaged with the Kudumbashree members at each stop through a street-play on the power of collectives of women. Leaders from across the political and social spectrum attended the book collection events along the route.

The Kudumbashree Pustaka Yatra was perhaps one of the first grass root level writing campaigns organised in the history of Kerala. Ordinary women narrated stories of their extraordinary lives in their own words. The Kudumbashree NRO is privileged to present a consolidated volume of some of these inspiring experiences translated in English, for sharing them with a wider audience.

The experiences in this book are grouped around the three themes of Kudumbashree's work: women' empowerment, social empowerment and economic empowerment. The pieces published in this book belong to the respective authors and have been translated and published with their consent.

Subaira

Subaira was the Chairperson of the CDS in Thillenkeri Grama Panchayat of Kannur district. She passed away, after a long fight with cancer. But fight was what she did, all through out her short but meaningful life. Kudumbashree NRO is honoured to begin this collection of narratives with Subaira's. But, before that we would like to pay homage to the enduring spirit of resistance that Subaira embodied. We reproduce, with permission, a tribute that Sarada Muraleedharan, a long-time friend of Subaira and former Executive Director of Kudumbashree published as a Facebook post.



"I can still remember Jagajeevan describing his first encounter with Subaira - he was in a meeting with the Chairpersons of the community network of Kannur when he noticed a frail, angular woman with an extraordinary dress code - long flowing skirt, and extra-large shirt

with a shawl draped over her shoulders; she looked like the slightest whisper in the wind would blow her away. He was the one who was blown away - the moment she spoke - her deep ringing voice, her ageless wisdom, and the fire and determination cutting into the most cynical naysayer was a revelation. Beautiful, powerful Subaira. It was a voice that made one believe that it was possible for a people to take their destiny into their own hands. Subaira had known pain and deprivation beyond understanding. Born into a poor Muslim family, from early childhood Subaira had been frequenting hospitals, and had had more surgeries than she cared to remember. Subsisting for years on one meal a day, and on a liquid diet, her unique way of dressing was because her body could not handle any other type of attire. But she channelled that experience of pain, loss and excruciating poverty into an unrelenting crusade to obliterate hunger from that tucked away corner of Kerala that was her home. This is what she said of herself - "my body is of no use to me. Let it at least be of use to the people of my village." Thillenkeri is undulating terrain of many small hills and poor connectivity, but for the women of Thillenkeri, if Subaira beckoned, then they would just drop everything and climb over hill and valley to be at her side. She could make everyone believe - the sceptic banker, the wary Panchayat, the fence sitting official, and if they didn't they would still do it for her anyway because she believed. So Thillenkeri brought acre after acre into cultivation, built an impressive blood bank, carried water across hills to barren fallows, developed and packaged organic compost on a large scale, dotted the flanks of the village with goat farms, nurtured song and history in its children, and became beloved of the earth.

It was Thillenkeri that showed us how a close-knit community of women could forge ties for convergent development beyond our most ambitious projections. It was Thillenkeri that showed us that even the most remote green spot of the State could reinvent itself into a flourishing and proud livelihood community. It was Thillenkeri who graced us with Subaira, of the indomitable will and the passion for service. Who had no patience for small talk. Who made breaking barriers and wearing down stereotypes look like a walk in the park. Who would not be defeated - not by the world, not by her body. Whose dreams were larger and richer than yours and mine combined. Whose final fight with a debilitating and hopeless cancer was as matter of fact, and brave as every other living moment of that pain-racked glory-filled life. As she moves beyond the world we know, we honour her compassion, her faith, and her resilience. And we shall persevere."

Subaira wrote the following piece in Malayalam for the Pustaka Yatra Book that was compiled and published in 2012.



Kudumbashree - The Light of My Life

It is close to eleven years since I joined this great movement called Kudumbashree. This period has been eventful for me. A glance back on the path I traversed before Kudumbashree still sends shivers through my body. That period, the dark years of my life, were terrible and scary. The troubles that I went through

cannot be contained on a sheet of paper; the stories would be as wide as an ocean or as large as this earth. Let me narrate some portions of it here. Portions that will reveal to my Kudumbashree colleagues how I evolved into what I am today, starting from those painful years.

I was born into a poor Muslim family as one among eleven children, nine of whom were girls. My early childhood was mired in sickness; we lived in poverty, struggling for every meal. Poverty coupled with chronic bodily ailments made me a lonely and aloof person. I did not mingle with people; my mind had become cold; I kept myself away from people.

I built a world of my own behind the closed doors of our home with books. This was the time Kudumbashree was being formed in our village. Some of the women who knew my plight encouraged me to join Kudumbashree. Breaking the walls of my self-imposed isolation was not easy. I was reluctant to come out of that loneliness built around by sleeping pills and reading materials.

Eventually I succumbed to the persistent efforts of those who were aware of my state and joined Kudumbashree. Little did I know that I was going to become the President

of the Kudumbashree unit later. When I refused to take up the responsibility citing my problems, others encouraged and even forced me to be the President. Within a few weeks of becoming the President, I realised that my life was indeed changing; intense light of the outer world was doing wonders to me.

Overcoming my self-imposed perception of inability, I started dealing with financial transactions of Kudumbashree. My work made me interact with increasing numbers of people. When I became Secretary of Kudumbashree my responsibilities multiplied. I became busy; my life was changing fast. This transformation that my family saw in me caused changes in them as well. My family as a whole was moving out of a dark and morbid past; they started enjoying these positive changes too.

At a personal level, my expenses on sleeping pills and books started transforming into deposits in neighbourhood groups. Even though small, those savings did contribute to enhancing my confidence. Kudumbashree had unleashed energies in my life that I never thought were there in me. In the years that followed I held the responsibilities of the Chairperson of ADS and CDS. Today, I know people not only in my surroundings; my world has expanded not just to other places and people in Kerala, but also to other states. My ability to communicate to the world of my village Thillengeri, the land of the martyrs, has been developed through my activities in Kudumbashree.

In hindsight, I can tell you that it was Kudumbashree that made the Subaira of today. What if Kudumbashree had not occurred in my life? My life would have ended in that dark room of mine; probably through a suicide. Subaira's tale would have ended without anybody knowing that such a woman existed.

It is responsibilities that drive me today. The problems of the 2,500 odd families of Thillengeri are my own problems to me. I incessantly work towards finding solutions to people's problems while working with them. That is what I live for. There is no Subaira without Kudumbashree; my dreams are woven around Kudumbashree, my aspirations are driven by Kudumbashree,

Not that my diseases did not follow me over these years; they did. Every time I fought them, they returned as though with vengeance. Surgeries and long stints of medications however failed to quench my thirst for action. Running from hospital bed to CDS office makes me stronger. Kudumbashree helped me fight death which tried conquering me time and again. Every time it was like a victory of the mind over death; and it is this mental strength that I gained over these years that made me a CDS Chairperson who is known across Kerala.

The journey had not always been smooth. There had been objections from religious quarters. There were occasions when CDS members found me tough and even rigid. This had led to the creation of ill feelings in certain cases. But, eventually the women realised, and I can confidently say that my positions stood vindicated, providing me with more confidence to act. It is the strength of the positions that I took that helped build such solid organisational effectiveness that we have today.

Diseases may keep haunting me; death may overpower me with stealth and vengeance; but today diseases or even death cannot affect the mental strength that Kudumbashree has given me.

Women' Empowerment

Kudumbashree is more than an organisation or a mission; it is an identity that each member carries with herself. She proudly says, 'I am Kudumbashree'.

Kudumbashree has given these women a space to step out of their domestic lives, collectivise, and understand that each one of them is capable of doing much more than just being a mother or a homemaker. Today, they are confident of speaking out and voicing their opinions. They earn incomes and save money for their families. They participate in the decision-making process within their families and in the community. They make the Gram Sabhas in Kerala vibrant. These women ensure that the benefits of development schemes and programs reach the deserving beneficiaries. Many of them are elected representatives in the various tiers of Local Government. Women collectively fight alcoholism and atrocities against fellow-women. They unite for protecting the environment and conserving natural resources.

This section of the book includes a collection of such experiences of women from across Kerala.

Chandrikamma and Maya talk about how Kudumbashree has helped them face challenges in life. Geetha writes of the legal battle she fought to bring to justice, the men who raped a woman in her community. Saleena and Jayashree talk of women in leadership roles in their respective articles. Chandri talks of how Kudumbashree added colour to her life. Sathi, Saraswati, and Santhakumari talk about the strength of organisations and collectives in their narratives. Radhamani talks of convergence initiatives undertaken by her CDS with the local government. Ramlath talks of Kudumbashree as an unexpected blessing in her life. Leela shares her happiness and Kudumbashree experiences through a letter to her friend.



Chandrikamma,
Thiruvananthapuram District

Chandrikamma has been a part of the Kudumbashree family for 14 years serving as Secretary of her NHG and the ADS Chairperson of Aliyadu ward of Manikal CDS. Her group also runs an oil mill which is a micro-enterprise supported by Kudumbashree

Recording My Experiences

I am a member of Swaraj NHG in Aliyadu ward of Manikal Gram Panchayat. I have a few experiences to share. My childhood passed in misery and poverty. I nourished an intense desire to study but I could study only up to standard IV. Yet my sufferings taught me many things. I got married at the age of 22 and gave birth to a child. But that life turned out to be a failure. My husband maintained an illicit relationship with another woman. She came and squatted before my house and demanded justice as she was with a child. It took much effort to send her off. It was a matter of great humiliation. As a result my husband and I decided to separate.

Finding it hard to maintain my one and a half year old son and aged mother without any job, I happened to get in touch with the trade union movement with the help of a head load worker. Eventually, I obtained membership to become a recognized head load worker. I was the lone woman in a workforce comprising of 18 men. I served as their convener for twenty four years. Social service of this kind led me to become a member of the tremendous women's movement termed Kudumbashree. I have been serving for the past fourteen years as the Secretary of our NHG and as the ADS Chairperson of Aliyadu Ward of Manikal Panchayat. There are eighteen members in my Kudumbashree family. We operate a mill and a grain collection and purification unit. I learnt many new things while working with the Kudumbashree unit. We were able to make a profit of Rs. 12,000 from our endeavours.

I could help many people socially with the help of various CDS activities like collective farming, self-help and bank linkage. I believe that Kudumbashree has empowered me to contribute to the relentless progress of women in various fields. I have been able to help many women by leading them to start small-scale as well as large-scale industries and engage in collective farming by availing linkage loans and grants. I feel happy and take pride in having been able to achieve this much.

'Kudumbashree, you are the light of the home

And you are a treasure for the country.'



Maya Sasidharan,
Ernakulam District

Maya was Chairperson of Choornikara CDS in Ernakulam for two terms. She has also started a training group in Ernakulam called AWAKE (Association of Women Activists for Knowledge and Empowerment) and is a State level trainer for Kudumbashree.

Kudumbashree... Pain to Power

I am Maya Sasidharan and I would like to take you through the journey of my life...

I was born in a poor family. We just had four cents of land as our entire property. My father did not have enough money to get me and my sisters married. The proposal from my husband came during that time. It was the first proposal that I received and I did not have any option other than to obey my parents and marry him.

My husband's family did not demand any dowry. Their only demand was that I should take care of his sister and father. I was just 18 years old, studying in UC College, Aluva when I got married. My sister-in-law was a diabetic patient and she was encountering serious problems due to the illness. Soon after my marriage her health condition worsened, her kidneys became weak, she lost sight, and, the doctor suggested amputating her legs. The doctor had claimed that she will not survive for more than five months. These troubled times haunted our family that had already lost four members in eight years. My parents-in-law could not cope up with the situation; my father-in-law became an alcoholic and my mother-in-law started suffering from mental illnesses. Soon, my elder brother-in-law got married and his wife did not share a good relationship with the family. My younger brother-in-law was single.

I have two sons. My husband worked in a provision store, and we also had some farming land which sufficed for our livelihood needs. Our family was also engaged in tutoring pupils and animal husbandry. We stayed with my in-laws in one house, while my elder brother moved to another house which my father-in-law purchased for him.

In the Panchayat election of September 2000, I was a candidate from Ward VI of the Choornikara Gram Panchayat. Even though I had lost the election by 16 votes, the Panchayat gave me an opportunity to work as a Gram Sabha facilitator.

Soon, I started taking classes for the functioning of SHGs and also became a Secretary of a SHG. At that time, Kudumbashree initiatives had not reached our Panchayat. The government implemented Kudumbashree in my Panchayat in the second phase and the SHG was converted into an NHG. I became the first ADS Secretary, and the first CDS Chairperson of Choornikkara. After the bye-laws came, elections again took place.

I was unanimously elected as CDS Chairperson three consecutive times in 2002, 2004, and 2006 respectively. At that time, I neither had a mobile phone, nor any honorarium. It was only after two years that I started receiving Rs. 250 per month as honorarium. The family members, other than my father-in-law, did not like the work I did. They claimed that I was not on the right path.

Soon, the family property was to be partitioned. The ancestral house, in which we were presently living, was given to my younger brother-in-law, but we were allowed to stay in that house till we built a new house. My brother-in-law turned hostile and asked us to leave the house. We were forced to shift into a rented house. At that time, our daily income was only Rs. 40 i.e. my husband's daily wage from the provision shop. It was impossible for us to meet the rent. So we took a small portion of one house for Rs. 500 per month. It was difficult for me to tutor pupils in such a small room. I used to walk daily to the Panchayat office and did all my work meticulously by sitting on the steps. I was recognised as the Best CDS Chairperson of my district and got an award from T.K Jose, IAS.

Since the people had to board two buses to reach the CDS office, most people preferred coming to my home to know about the projects we were working on or planning to undertake. The owner of the house didn't like the people coming to the house. The situation became worse when I had to give his phone number to people for consultation. We soon had to leave the house.

We found another rented house. The same issues started popping up even there. One night the house-owner came drunk and instructed us to vacate the house immediately. He stated that, "the people who have no home should sleep at railway station; if you are decent you should vacate this house at this moment". We took all our belongings and put them in the neighbour's car porch, and sat there whole night. I still can't forget that night. My younger child started vomiting and both my children could not sleep. Next day early morning we started searching for another home, but could not afford any of the houses. My father-in-law saw our plight and took us to the elder brother's house and requested him to allow us to stay there. But they were afraid that the father would take away the house from them and so they did not allow us to enter their house. However, all the neighbours were with me and they supported me a lot during this tough time. The CDS members came to me and said, "What can we do for you? What help you need from us?" In that critical situation those words gave me strength.

Eventually, we started living with my elder brother-in-law. But, my sister-in-law began to harass us every day. She did not allow me to take water from well, use the bathroom, and sit in front of the house. When my husband came in the evening after his job, she started quarrelling with us and made up cases against my husband. He lost his sleep and began to drink, and started beating me up. At last, my father-in-law sold all his property and gave us our share. With that, we bought 18 cents of land to build a new house. I realized that my husband stopped his job in the name of construction of new house. I noticed that he was not doing anything substantial for the construction also. I decided to change my decision immediately. I decided to buy a new house with the amount that I had and by raising the extra amount through a housing loan. I discussed the idea with my father and a bank manager. The manager was ready to do anything because he knew my problems, and we shared a good working relationship as I was involved with CDS transactions. Within four days, he sanctioned the loan without even

checking the house. The new house was at Keezhmad Panchayat, so I had to quit from the Choornikara CDS in 2007.

After that, I joined the District Mission as Ashraya faculty and started preparing Ashraya projects at the District level. I was asked to take classes at the State level. My husband had become an alcoholic by then. He did not allow me to attend any residential training. He even assaulted me to prevent me from going. I had an inner voice which asked me not to give up. At that time, Smt. Tanny Thomas, Assistant District Mission Co-ordinator (ADMC), Ernakulam, spoke to my husband and got his consent - he allowed me to go to Trivandrum. But, soon things got worse. One day when I reached home in the evening from the District Mission, I saw that he had thrown away all my clothes in the courtyard to burn it. He also broke the mirror of the almirah and threw away all the food that I prepared for my children. While sleeping he even attempted to murder me. Those were sleepless nights for me and my children.

I suffered all this for my children. I worked hard for their education. I sent my eldest son for Marine Engineering. He now works in Singapore. My youngest son completed his Diploma in Electronics. Now I am being appreciated by my husband and my relatives for the pain I had taken in teaching my children. My husband tells me now, "Maya, I am proud of you."

I started with Kudumbashree activities while I was a homemaker. Later, I performed various roles such as being the CDS Chairperson, District and the State faculty, formed a training institute named AWAKE with eight of my fellow colleagues who are faculties of Kerala Institute of Local Administration (KILA). I got opportunities for taking classes for various groups, including good governance for implementing officers of all the Panchayats in Kerala, leadership trainings for lady representatives - Presidents and Standing Committee Chairpersons of the Panchayats, write-shop with NMMU for NRLM in NIRD Hyderabad, and now I am also performing a role as a NRO Mentor Core Group member. I have also given training to officials of Social Welfare Department, District Industrial Centre's Entrepreneurs and beneficiaries of Khadi Village Industries.

Thanks Kudumbashree....and at the same time thanks to my father-in-law, who is no more with us



Geetha Vijayan,
Kottayam District

Geetha is the secretary of Chaitanya NHG. She is also working as the Vice Chairperson of Ettumanur CDS.

Fighting atrocities against women

I am the secretary of Chaitanya Kudumbashree group in Ettumanur Grama Panchayat in Kottayam district. I am also the vice chairperson of CDS.

The daughter of a member of my Kudumbashree group, an adolescent girl with mental disabilities got pregnant from a man in the locality. She was only 16 years old and her mother informed me about it. I discussed the matter with the secretary of the ADS and the concerned ward member. We informed the man's father about the incident. To our dismay, his response was that there were three others also who had exploited the hapless girl.

I took the initiative to enrol the girl at a rehabilitation centre run by a friend of mine and went ahead to file a case against those who had exploited the girl. I did this in spite of repeated requests by those men and their families to drop the case. Police arrested the four men and the event gained state-wide attention as it was covered extensively by the media. Court denied bail to them.

Once the accused were behind bars, there was a sudden change in the scenario. People in general started blaming me for the incident. The worst was when the members of Kudumbashree submitted a mass petition against me saying that one of the arrested persons was innocent and that the case was frivolous. I had to face several threats including those on my life; there were also threats that I would not be allowed to continue with Kudumbashree activities. As pressure mounted, all members except four women in the group stopped attending meetings. I did not yield to pressure and went ahead with Kudumbashree activities and the case.

The girl attempted committing suicide while at the rehabilitation centre. She survived but the event led to abortion. Threats continued as the accused got bail after two months. The case went on, and subsequently the crime branch of Kerala Police took over the investigation.

Neither the girl nor her mother survived to witness the trial that commenced in April 2011 and the eventual judgement. While the mother succumbed to her illnesses, the girl died of jaundice. After their death, I was under pressure to change my witness

account and turn hostile during trial. The court took close to two hours to complete my examination as a witness. The court sentenced the main accused for seven years' rigorous imprisonment.

In hindsight, I see this legal battle as an important chapter in my life; one made possible only through the strength and resilience that I gained through Kudumbashree. While the case was an acid test of my confidence and perseverance, I am sure it also contributed to the cause of empowering women. Personally, it helped me overcome the sorrow caused by my husband's untimely death.

The strength that women gain out of fighting for socially important issues, along with the economic benefits from running businesses collectively adds to their empowerment in a big way.



Saleena,
Palakkad District

Saleena is the Secretary of Harishree NHG. She is also the CDS member from her ward and convenor of micro enterprises for Nellaya CDS.

A story from Nellaya, Palakkad

Saleena lives with her husband and three children in Ward VI of Nellaya Grama Panchayat in Palakkad district. Born in Thrikkadeeri Grama Panchayat, Saleena has a success story to share, encouraged and facilitated by Kudumbashree.

Saleena had a desolate and unpleasant childhood. Early death of her mother left her in the lonely precincts of her uncle's house as her father re-married and went away. After she completed her Secondary School Leaving Certificate (SSLC) examinations she wanted to study further; but her relatives did not have the wherewithal to support her. Hence, she was married off to a man with unsteady incomes. Sufferings of a lonely childhood thus refused to leave her even after marriage.

Within six years of marriage, Saleena gave birth to three children - Hasna, Husna, and Musthafa, with an age gap of two years each between them. Caught between an irresponsible husband and three young children, Saleena was clueless on how to move ahead; it was around this time that she was initiated to Kudumbashree. Saleena first became the president and then the secretary of Harisree, a budding Kudumbashree group of twenty members formed in her ward.

Misfortunes had always been the rule rather than exception in Saleena's life. She met with an accident and was bed-ridden for a month. Without work, and having to look after three children, she would have lost hope but for Kudumbashree. With Kudumbashree's support, Saleena started a unit for producing homemade sweets. She went around Cherpulassery, a nearby town and won orders for supplying sweets to nine shops.

It was not easy; she did not have adequate skills to make sweets. Meeting the orders was important. Saleena, as always, did not have any breathing space to think twice. The necessity to earn an income to look after the children kept her moving. She would get up at 4 o' clock in the morning and start making sweets. Her children, who unlike Saleena, had the good fortune to be brought up by their own mother, supported her in all her efforts. Saleena had been able to meet the orders from the shops while maintaining quality of products and timely supply.

Once the business stabilised, Saleena and children did not have to look back. They earn

a margin of Rs 300 per day; payment by the shops has been prompt. Saleena has been able to bring up her children well and educate them. Hasna has successfully completed schooling; Husna is in the tenth standard whereas Musthafa is studying in the eighth standard. Saleena has been able to build a small house with the support of the Grama Panchayat. She has a two-wheeler now, which helps her in timely delivery of products to the shops. Their cute little house has a television, necessary furniture, and appliances.

Saleena believes it was Kudumbashree that saved her and her children from the vagaries of a poverty-ridden, abusive marriage. "I wouldn't have been able to reach this stage without Kudumbashree's support" says Saleena. Once the supply of sweets is done, Saleena joins her friends in NREGS work.

Saleena then started a larger unit for producing sweets jointly with seven others. Kudumbashree district mission extended loan of Rs 1.6 lakh with a subsidy of Rs 80,000. Members are also engaged in tailoring and cow-rearing. They hope to have a vehicle of their own to supply sweets to a larger number of shops.

"Looking back, I can see the path we took to come forward and improve our lives" says Saleena. In the past when they were mired in poverty without any source of income, there was no one to support her and her children. Neighbours would not invite them for marriages and functions. Saleena and her small children used to sit in their hut and watch with tearful eyes when others went to attend ceremonies. Poor, without assured food and decent clothes; they remained uninvited.

"All that changed after I joined Kudumbashree. It helped me to put an end to our perpetual suffering". Meanwhile, Saleena also attended a computer course and now also works at an Akshaya centre. More than the reasonable salary that she gets from the centre, it is the confidence that she gained through computer education that Saleena values more. "Now I know, if anything goes wrong, I can at least work in the billing section of a store and earn a living". She aspires to pursue an undergraduate course through the open-university system. As a person having been denied the due opportunity to study further in her youth, Saleena finds time within her tight schedule to upgrade her skills and knowledge.

Currently, she is the secretary of Harishree Kudumbashree unit. She is also the CDS member from her Ward and the convener of micro enterprises. Through her years in Kudumbashree, she has been able to go beyond her struggle for survival and extend a helping hand to the needy as well.

A lady with psychological problems lives in her neighbourhood alongwith with her daughter. Saleena spoke to a family known to her in her capacity as the secretary of Kudumbashree group and the family agreed to look after the girl. On hearing that her mother was too sick on the evening of a festival, Saleena and a colleague of hers went to her home. They saw the hapless woman lying in filth; extremely sick to even get up. They cleaned her up and informed the Grama Panchayat. The Panchayat transferred the woman to a rehabilitation centre. Since then her health has improved and she is now back in the village. It is a matter of immense satisfaction to Saleena when the woman calls on her at least once a week and tells her that it was because of Saleena that she survived the perils of her illnesses.



Jayashree,
Kasargod District

Jayashree is the Chairperson of Badiadka CDS in Kasargod district of Kerala. She is also the President of Sarada NHG

Jottings on my experience

Born into a poor family, I had to struggle through my school years to reach tenth standard. Still it was my dream to study and get a job. My family background did not permit it. Two years after my tenth standard, I was married off into another poor family. I started a life which was only about cooking, serving, and other domestic chores there.

One day our ward member and a health department official visited our home and invited me to a neighbourhood group meeting scheduled for the next day at the anganawadi near our home. Although I was unaware of what neighbourhood groups meant, I went for the meeting with a neighbour. I could not comprehend most of what was discussed in the meeting which was attended by more than 15 women. The women decided to form a group and proposed my name as president. I refused stating that I was not adequately educated and asked them to select someone else. They did not accept my refusal.

I reached home pondering in my mind about this role of a president which I never wanted. I felt as if I was getting pulled down by some unknown weight. I could not sleep that night.

Meanwhile, I was again called for a meeting at a different location. This turned out to be a meeting to form the ADS. As per instructions given to us, five of us went to the meeting. When we reached there, the Ward member and a functionary of the health department were already present there. There were also a number of women.

When the ADS was formed, I was made its President too. This process culminated in me becoming the CDS Chairperson next July. I did not have any idea about my responsibilities. I was unsure of talking to others. I had no knowledge about interacting with officials and visiting offices. Yet, I tried to understand and learn. I tried to learn more about Kudumbashree from the Panchayat office. The GP President and the members of the Panchayat committee supported me.

When Ashraya project was announced, Kudumbashree groups conducted a survey to identify the beneficiaries. The survey identified 52 beneficiary families for the project.

I contested the by-election caused by the resignation of the Block Panchayat's Vice President and won with a huge majority due to the support of political parties and Kudumbashree members. I worked as a Member of the Block Panchayat for three years. All these were made possible because of my association with this great movement called Kudumbashree.

It is Kudumbashree that encouraged a person like me with a limited life within the four walls of a poor house to come out in the open and work for the betterment of so many others in the area. I wish all the success to Kudumbashree in its pursuit of women', social, and economic empowerment.



Chandri T.V.,
Kozhikode District

Chandri is the Vice Chairperson of Payyoli CDS and she also acts as the secretary of her NHG, Gramadeepam.

The light of the village

I live in Payyoli Grama Panchayat in Kozhikkode district. I was the only daughter of my poor parents. I have also been a home-maker who has suffered badly despite marrying the man of my choice. My husband deserted me when I was 32. I started living alone with three little children at my home, wondering how to move ahead as I had no source of income to look after the children. My children and I were looked after by my family who kept hurling taunts at us just like other outsiders because I was an additional burden on them.

The only thought in my mind was on how to improve our condition. I had to provide good food and ensure quality education for my children. I also wanted to show my erring husband that a woman is not weak when she is faced with challenges in life. I had taken a pledge that I had to do this. Everything I thought about, every idea that I considered, and every step I took, was towards achieving these ends.

What initiated me into Kudumbashree was its potential for social empowerment through women empowerment, and the economic empowerment that follows. I shall now share my Kudumbashree story with all of you.

The name of my Kudumbashree group is Gramadeepam. It was formed in April 2002. The then ward member explained the objective and methods of Kudumbashree to us. Our group had 22 members. I was elected secretary of the group in the first meeting. I was a bit unsure about taking up the responsibility. Still, overtly I was happy. When I was asked to extend a vote of thanks at the end of the meeting in my capacity as secretary-designate, I was unprepared; my body started shivering. I tried to convince them that I was not prepared. Even today, I still remember all those great people with heartfelt gratitude who were there on that day.

I was selected to the CDS of our panchayat as one of the nine members in the ADS general body meeting held in 2003. I was taken by surprise. In those days there were no elections, the ward member would nominate names which the general body would approve. I felt really happy about the selection and considered it a recognition of my selfless service till then. As a member of CDS, I got the opportunity to interact with

officials and other important persons. I still remember an incident when the then secretary of the panchayat scolded me for laxity in the accounts management of CDS. I consider that event as a milestone, a blessing in disguise, as it inspired me to develop skills to look after accounts at any level in the Kudumbashree system.

As the membership in CDS meant a lot of responsibilities without remuneration, members started dropping out. I could never do that; I could never leave the CDS or the panchayat. There were days when I borrowed money to pay bus fare to reach the panchayat office.

In August 2005, I was offered a job as Receiver representing the panchayat at river side points meant for sand extraction. The work involved was tough as the entire area would be crowded by men including truck drivers who came in from distant places. I thought about my children and decided to take up the job. The confidence that I had gained through Kudumbashree helped me in arriving at this decision.

Once I joined the job, the relationship between CDS and the Grama Panchayat became stronger. I would participate in all the development initiatives of the GP as a CDS member. Since I started earning, I could contribute more meaningfully towards my children's development as well as Kudumbashree activities.

In 2005, after the new panchayat committee took charge, Kudumbashree's activities started reaching new areas including micro enterprises and group farming. The president of the panchayat insisted on farming in each ward, using crops that were suitable to the local context. At the insistence of the president, we organised a group of eight women and took up farming in 2.5 acres of land. We also had chilly cultivation in three plots of 25 cents each. The soil was not fertile in our coastal village; still we worked hard and were able to produce good results. The harvest was inaugurated by the MLA as a festive occasion. We had food with important dignitaries such as Sarada Muraleedharan, Executive Director of Kudumbashree, our MLA, and other leaders and officers; we also took photographs with them. All these were unforgettable events in my life.

Even though we could not gain much through enterprises, we have been able to provide gainful employment to ten women by engaging them in mat weaving and production of handmade soaps. Now, as our Kudumbashree group completes ten years, I have several achievements – personal and professional – to count on.

In January 2012, I was elected vice chairperson of the CDS. This offered me an opportunity to extend my activities to the whole of the Panchayat's area. Today, my role in the ward as well as in the panchayat is considered quite important.

I conclude by extending my best wishes to the Kudumbashree movement in its future endeavours. Kudumbashree can unite people beyond caste, religion, and political differences.



Sathi Biju,
Malappuram District

Sathi Biju is the Chairperson of Pothukal CDS. She's also the President of Chaithanya NHG in Pothukal.

With pride we stand

My name is Sathi Biju; I live in Santhigram in Pothukal village in Malappuram district. I joined Kudumbashree in August 2000. I was initiated into this movement at the time when the erstwhile Community Based Nutrition Programme (CBNP) was transforming into today's Kudumbashree. I remember with pride that Kudumbashree and Sathi Biju were synonymous to the people of Pothukal for 4-5 years, mainly because I joined the movement at the crossover between Kudumbashree and CBNP.

Those days there was an APC and a CO (Community Organiser) for CBNP in each Grama Panchayat. I was the first CO for the newly launched Kudumbashree in our Grama Panchayat. I started working with the APC and CO of CBNP. While they were content with ten neighbourhood groups each under them, I went on expanding the network, enrolling more and more members and forming new groups. COs were expected to visit all neighbourhood groups, prepare account statements and send them to block coordinator along with the passbooks of the groups. A CO had to visit each neighbourhood group twice a month. The honorarium was only Rs 500 for COs. Therefore, the District Mission had set a norm of 25 neighbourhood groups per CO. But, I did not stop there, and had close to fifty neighbourhood groups associated with me.

My work in Kudumbashree led me to a job in the newly launched Jalanidhi community based water supply scheme in Pothukal Grama Panchayat. This, however, meant that I had to stay away from my Kudumbashree role for a couple of years. In 2005-6, when I returned to Kudumabshree I became President of Chaithanya neighbourhood group. As President of the group, I insisted on regular meetings and prompt attendance. In the elections held in December 2006, I was elected as Chairperson of the ADS. In the subsequent elections, I became Chairperson of Pothukal CDS.

As Chairperson of the CDS I had many difficult tasks at hand. Loan delinquencies, improperly kept account books, and unwritten cash books were part of the challenges that I faced. Putting that chaotic system back on the rails was no easy job. I worked hard, without taking a day's leave or availing holidays to put the house in order.

As CDS Chairperson, I also tried to bring in discipline and accountability to processes

that I handled. A case in point was an altercation that I had with the President of the Gram Panchayat regarding disbursement of funds for house construction under Ashraya scheme. As per Ashraya norms, the money was to be disbursed in three instalments after completion of three specific stages. The problem started when the President of the Panchayat wanted the first instalment to be disbursed to a person hailing from his ward without meeting the criterion – which was completion of foundation for the house. The president instructed me to pass the payment. When I refused, he behaved arrogantly and called the ADS Chairperson and instructed her to bring 25 Kudumbashree members presumably to ‘discipline’ me.

I stood my ground; when the District Mission Coordinator called up, I explained my stand to him. First, the ADS chairperson and the women came. Media persons came next. I was treated as if I had indulged in some anti-social activity. I spoke citing Ashraya guidelines. The beneficiary from the president’s ward finally had to leave saying that he would come back after completing the foundation work for the house.

We, through our collective work, were able to win the best CDS award in 2008-09 and ‘A’ grade in 2009-10 for Pothukal. It is women who are more active in the Grama Panchayat in social activities. It is through the hard work of the women that the district has achieved the first position in women’s participation in NREGS.

Kudumbashree members worked hard to get me elected as the member of a division in Nilambur Block Panchayat. They elected me with huge majority even though I did not have affiliation to any political party. I consider my association with ART, a training organisation working with Kudumbashree accreditation as a position of higher value than the membership in the Block Panchayat.

I love Kudumbashree more than my family. Let me conclude by saying this from my experience: “If you serve Kudumbashree with sincerity and selflessness, Kudumbashree will serve you too”.



Saraswati,
Kozhikode District

Saraswati is a member of Pavithram NHG in Thamarassery CDS of Kozhikode district in Kerala

Our 'Thatha' and house construction through collective action

I am Saraswati, a home-maker looking after a family consisting of my husband and two children. I became a member of Kudumbashree in December 2006. Pavithram is the name of our Kudumbashree group. From a home-maker, I have now become the president of Kudumbashree group and the ADS. Even though women had invited me earlier to join their groups, I never showed any interest. Finally, it was my husband who encouraged me to join. When I asked an acquaintance about it, she said they were planning to form a group and had decided not to call me presuming that I would not join. Thus, I joined Kudumbashree; and had experiences that would stay with me throughout my life.

Before joining Kudumbashree, my only social relations were with my immediate neighbours. Now, I interact with a wide range of people and officials. I also intervene in people's problems and help to resolve them. Kudumbashree has taught me to empathise with people in resolving their problems.

When my children and I were down with chicken pox, Kudumbashree members took care of us like a family. During this incident, I understood that it would be the group members who would stand by us in our hour of crisis.

We celebrate important days such as Independence Day, Republic Day, New Year, Onam and Vishu. It has also become a practice to make sweets at the anganwadi on Independence Day and share it with children. Group members also participate in other social activities, fairs and events. I am also a member of a joint liability group (JLG). Our collective spirit is really good; we have also won prizes at Panchayat level.

It is a matter of pride for us if anyone asks our Kudumbashree group members about their achievements because we have definite answers to provide. Our gains from collective action have been impressive by any standard.

We had an old lady without any relatives as a member of our group; we called her 'Thatha'. She lived alone looking after her cows and calves. When we visited her

premises, we noticed the dilapidated state of her house. We discussed about her plight; she was alone, without any support, and lived with her cows and cats in a house that might collapse any day.

The secretary of the group and I approached the Gram Panchayat to see whether any support could be made available to Thatha to build a house. We realised that the money had already been sanctioned but could not be utilised as there was nobody to take up the responsibility. Panchayat offered to release the amount if Kudumbashree was willing to take up house construction. We did not have the courage for this. We discussed the matter in the group; had discussions with our family members; still we could not gather the strength to venture into it.

Every week when the group met, Thatha would say she might not be there for the next week's meeting as her house might collapse before that, trapping her under it. These remarks made us re-think our position. We thought, what was the purpose of a group if it could not support the neediest among us? The group members agreed on this. When my husband also encouraged me, I went forward to lead the initiative.

There were challenges however in accomplishing this task. The funds allotted by the Panchayat were not sufficient for building a house. And, the Panchayat would only release funds in instalments and that too after the construction reached specific stages. In Thatha's case, demolishing the existing house, clearing the site, and foundation were to be completed before we got any funds from the Panchayat. We decided to work against all these odds, mobilising more funds through collection from the neighbouring areas. We also availed the support of the church, shops, and other local organisations. We started the work by hiring labour.

The problems started when work stopped for a few days due to labour shortage. A local level leader challenged the stoppage of work; allegations were raised about fund malpractices. Newspapers carried this story and we had to face questions from the District Mission, the Panchayat, and newspapers. We were able to explain everything as we had collected the fund as a cheque from the Panchayat and had deposited it in the concerned bank account. All the accounts relating to house construction were in order. We had also made all the payments through cheques. We had not kept any cash in hand. This financial discipline helped us explain the truth to everyone. The District Mission, CDS, ADS, and Panchayat stood by us.

Even though the incident caused a lot of tension, it did have a lesson for us. We were able to convince everyone only because we had not handled cash. We realised the importance of making all payments through cheques through this incident. We also learned the fact that whenever you initiate anything good, there would be a set of people who would oppose that too. We completed the house construction and organised the house warming as a function. The happiness we saw on Thatha's face that day was unforgettable.

We would not have been able to build Thatha's house but for the confidence that we had gained through Kudumbashree work. Our experience also underlines the need for taking our families into confidence, because they are the ones whose support is crucial during times of crisis. If my husband had not supported me, I would have even lost my

Kudumbashree membership due to that incident.

Now, I work as a desktop publishing (DTP) operator in my own firm. When we started the group, only three members had an income of their own. Now, there are only two women who do not have their own source of income. We intend to start an enterprise soon to help them also earn an income. We want to ensure that all the members in the group are able to pay their weekly savings from the money they earn through enterprises. I wish Kudumbashree all the best and hope it continues to form the solid steps for all poor women to rise in their lives.



Santhakumari,
Kollam District

Santhakumari is a member of Chaithram NHG in Edamulakkal CDS of Kollam district in Kerala

Rebirth

I am a member of the Chaithram neighbourhood group of Edamulakkal Panchayat in Kollam district. My family comprises of my husband who is a tree feller and two children. My family is sustained by my husband's income alone. A secure house had been our dream just as everyone else. We built a house by obtaining a loan of 70000 rupees by mortgaging the meagre land we had at the Agricultural Bank. However the happiness of our home came to a premature end. With the aggravation of my husband's asthma our only source of income dwindled. We took him for treatment everywhere without any visible effect. I found it hard to find money for the education of the children, repayment of the loan, and even for our everyday needs.

The bank sent me a notice when I began to fail in repaying the loan. The loan amount doubled with the addition of interest and penal interest. I could not do anything much though the bank granted me time. In the end, the bank initiated recovery procedures. When they pasted the recovery notice on the wall, my husband could only stare helplessly at it. The children stood looking at me with scared eyes. I felt my eyes going dark. People crowded around the house. Some of them sympathized while others passed sarcastic comments. When we stood there hugging our weeping children, the only thought in our mind was about suicide.

I was unaware that at that moment the members of my neighbourhood group were sitting together to deliberate on the means to save us. They held an emergency meeting to find a solution my financial problems. They repaid my debt of 125000 rupees. They collected the money by mortgaging their gold ornaments. They obtained another linkage loan for me in three days so that I could repay the whole amount of my housing loan. Thus, I managed to recover my house and property which had almost sunk deep in the mire of debt.

The experience taught me a fresh lesson about life. Only the members of my neighbourhood group recognized the moment when I began to think of suicide. Just as only the blind realize the value of eyesight, only those who experience poverty can understand what it is. If my neighbourhood group hadn't provided me with strength of will and saved me from the abyss, my family would not have been on the face of

the earth. I will not forget this until my last breath. I realize happy days are dawning in my life. At times I remember those dark days with a shudder. But, I also feel proud of the willingness of the women of the Kudumbashree group to help and the role of their financial intervention in rescuing the poor and the helpless.



Radhamani Prasad,
Kottayam District

Radhamani is the Chairperson of Kaduthuruthi CDS and the joint secretary of the Kudumbashree training centre in Kottayam.

My life experience for Kudumbashree

I am from Kaduthuruthi Gram Panchayat in Kottayam district. I am a mother of two children and had been living a very ordinary life under ordinary circumstances till I joined a neighbourhood group in 1999. I got the opportunity to work as the President and Secretary of our group. Since Kudumbashree's formation in 2001, I have been fortunate to hold responsibilities at all levels.

During our early days with neighbourhood groups, reaching the President's house was a difficult task as the pathway was too narrow to walk. The President's mother was bedridden and had crossed 100 years of age. At the end of every group meeting, the President used to complain that she would not be able to carry her mother to the church when she dies as there was no pathway. When I asked her why she could not widen the pathway, she showed us the huge trench that the land owner had dug up on one side of the pathway, which did not give her the required space to build a road.

We discussed the matter among our member households and I took the initiative to make a road to our President's house. We approached a person from the adjacent Panchayat who had some land in that place. He was nice enough to come and visit the location, but insisted that we buy 10 cents of land from his plot if we were to make a road. He was under the impression that we would withdraw when he made this proposal. But, I took him by surprise and offered to buy the land.

We discussed the matter at the Panchayat. When the President of the Gram Panchayat realised that we did not have money but would not withdraw from this good cause, she took out a gold ring from her hand and gave it us. I pledged some gold from my home and got some more money. We entered into an agreement with the land owner and made the road to our President's home. Later, an anganwadi also came up on the same land. When the President's mother died, the family could offer her a proper funeral, carrying the body to the church through the new road. The road also turned out to be very helpful while conducting her children's marriage ceremonies.

It was Kudumbashree that helped me gain confidence and take up such challenges. In the next election, I was elected President of the CDS. That year, Kudumbashree got the opportunity to work on the Asraya project. We have been able to take the lead in helping 65 families in the Panchayat through the project. In order to construct the house for one of the beneficiary families, I learned masonry on my own. I built an extra room attached to my house and completed all its work, including roofing. Based on the experience gained from this construction, my friends and I decided to take up the job of constructing houses of beneficiaries under the Asraya project.

We were able to build small but beautiful houses with two rooms, a hall, and sit out. I realised that I was not scared of climbing the staircase any more. Years back when we had finished constructing our own house, I got on top of it in excitement. But, I could not climb down as I was scared and started shivering. I could not believe that I was now able to go up and down the ladder and do masonry work. These responsibilities that I was given, overpowered the fear I had for many things.

I never had to look back after this. I went ahead and took up leadership roles in various development activities in the ward. But among them, the implementation of a drinking water scheme is what I consider as my best contribution.

Ours is an area that faces serious water scarcity for six months a year. When the district panchayat allotted a drinking water project, it lay idle for nine months. Seeing the suffering of women in the ward, I took an initiative to implement a drinking water scheme. We took Rs. 50,000 from a voluntary organisation, Rs. 68,000 from the MLA's Local Area Development Fund, and used MGNREGA to do the trenching. We organised the women in 135 households and encouraged them to take drinking water connections for their houses. Thus, I was able to ensure that water reached these 135 houses. Preference was given to the beneficiaries of Asraya project in allotting house connections.

Today, I am the Joint Secretary of the Kudumbashree training centre in Kottayam. I pray that I should get more and more opportunities to serve our society through this great movement called Kudumbashree.



Ramlath V.C.,
Kannur District

Ramlath is a member of the Vijaya NHG Group and is also the Chairperson of Chembilode CDS in Kannur district of Kerala

Solace

To my parents, I was their dearest daughter. I lived enjoying the love and affection that my family including three siblings poured on me.

Everything changed for me after my marriage. I struggled through the marriage even as I gave birth to four children. After the fourth child was born, my husband left me for another woman. I felt left out and desolate. I started thinking of suicide.

In order to look after the children I started working odd jobs including very tough ones. I met with an accident while handling rubble and lost my index finger. It was around this time that I was initiated into Kudumbashree. Initially, I joined it knowing only that I would get some support and help.

I became the Secretary of the group and slowly gained capabilities in different areas. This was a blessing to a person like me with little education. I was taken by surprise when I was elected CDS Chairperson. When I told the outgoing CDS Chairperson about my ignorance, she encouraged me and said I just had to work together with her.

I have been able to build a small house through support from the Grama Panchayat and loan from Kudumbashree. Kudumbashree was a boon for person like me who was left alone in poverty with four small children to look after. Kudumbashree is everything for me today; it is like a pleasure trip with friends and colleagues. I have stopped thinking of death; Kudumbashree offered me life.

Kudumbashree stands by us during our moments of crisis. In grief, it is source of solace. Kudumbashree is the main source of strength to me today..



Leela Raju,
Wayanad District

Leela is a member of Jyothis NHG at Pulpally CDS in Wayanad district of Kerala

To Meera, with love

Dear Meera,

I got your letter. I am happy to know about your decision to join Kudumabshree. Good that you realised its importance at least now. I offer all my support to you in your new role. I think sharing some of my experiences with Kudumbashree over the last nine years may motivate you further in moving ahead with your decision.

Jyothis, our Kudumabshree group was formed by a few enthusiastic women of my village nine year back. It marked a change in the nature of our village as women from sparring families came together to form such a group. It marked a shift from a culture of creating feuds on petty issues to one of cooperation and collectivism. It was from there that those women confined to their own homes without any source of income whatsoever gained strength and made major strides towards mainstream societal roles.

My life also changed. From the dull and the mundane to the delightful and exciting. From the state of shivering to utter a word in front of others, I gained strength and confidence to be the President of our group, to speak freely with the members of the group, and to engage in serious conversations at the Panchayat, with the Block Panchayat, and even with the banks. Being Secretary and President of a Kudumbashree group is no ordinary task. It is tough initially; it takes time to realise how effective one could be in those roles.

I also grew to a position where I could mobilise and handle large funds for the group. I recollect with pride, the day I received three to four lakh rupees from the bank and carried it in my bag to the group. But what gives me satisfaction is the opportunity that I got to help and support the destitute and the vulnerable through the social activities that I could be part of.

It has not only been the society around me that I could serve through Kudumbashree; my family also benefited. I have been able to earn a small income through animal rearing. In addition, I have availed loans from the group for my children's education and other family expenses. When I heard my husband telling his friend that he was getting

support in running the family from me, I felt proud. My younger son says his mother would be happy to skip a meal but would not miss the Kudumbashree meeting on a Sunday.

Those who discouraged and even ridiculed us initially have now become our supporters. The group's growth, the improvement in the income levels of its members, and above all the collectivism and friendship that have evolved over the years are what contributed to this change.

I think I wrote a lot about my experiences; I wish you all the best and am sure that you will have many more good experiences to share after a few years of work with Kudumbashree. It is indeed a journey from the boundaries of kitchens to a larger world. It is when we achieve our dreams in that larger world through collective action that we would contribute to poverty eradication.

Yours,

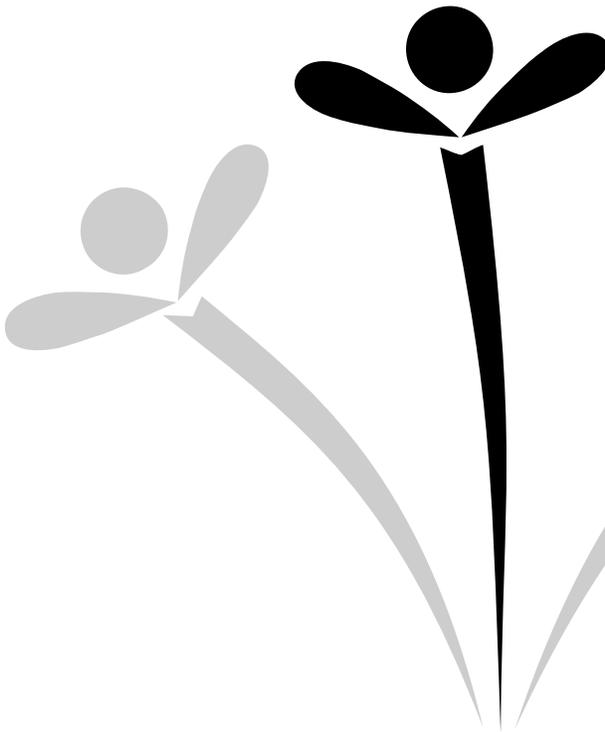
Leela Raju, Pulpally, Wayanad.

Social Empowerment

Kudumbashree Mission has undertaken a wide variety of social empowerment activities; three programmes in the domain stand apart: Asraya, BUDS, and Balasabha. Helping the marginalised and weaker sections of the society, empowering the tribal communities, caring for the differently-abled... these are the guiding visions of these programs.

This section presents experiences narrated by women from the Kudumbashree network, who have been associated with social development activities.

In her narrative, Susheela talks about how Kudumbashree women in her panchayat played a role in creating a positive attitude towards an HIV patient in their community. The success story of a differently abled woman who became the treasurer of a NHG is an inspiring piece penned down by Lekha. Maniyamma writes about her group's initiative in helping tribal households in her locality. Mini's and Rasheedha's narratives are around the Asraya project of Kudumbashree. Sheeba shares her experience of working at a BUDS school. Omana talks of the joy and support she has received as an Asraya beneficiary. And Usha gives an account of Raveena, the Balasabha girl.





Susheela,
Kollam District

Susheela is an NHG member of Dhanlakshmi NHG in Thekkumbhagom CDS in Kollam district of Kerala

Unseen by those who had pelted stones

A Kudumbashree NHG member's husband was pursuing a job in Kollam after having worked in Bangalore for years. He was not aware that he was afflicted by AIDS during his stay in Bangalore. AIDS takes years to manifest itself in a healthy human body. The husband of our NHG member did not recover from a fever that he caught, for three whole months. He was referred from the local hospital to the Medical College. Examinations there revealed that he was afflicted with AIDS. Knowing his fate, the husband left for home in the night itself with his wife without the knowledge of the hospital authorities. Even then he did not reveal that he had AIDS to his wife.

In due course of time, he began to exhibit symptoms of tuberculosis, fever, and cough, with swellings appearing all over his body. They lived in a small hut. At the height of his illness he could not sleep from high temperature. On the third day of his return from hospital he left home after a scuffle with his wife. He died two days later. On that very same day the health centre in our Thekkumbhagom GP received a message concerning the unauthorized departure of a patient from the medical college, asking them to inquire about him. At the inquiry of the nurses from the PHC, it came to light that the person who died that day was the same patient. They informed the Ward member of it and he conveyed the information to us. It came as a shock to me. The fact that he had spent some days ill in my own home frightened me. But, I found solace in the knowledge of the way the illness spread.

The Ward member spoke about it to some sturdy young men who gathered there. Keeping this news hidden, the Kudumbashree women and the neighbours cooked and served gruel for the people gathered there. Everyone knew by the evening from hearsay that the man had been a victim of AIDS. Everyone left the place but for his and his wife's relatives. In the night itself some people tried to evict them from the place by stoning the house. But they could not do any real damage since the Kudumbashree women gathered there and declared that they would not allow anyone to drive them out under any circumstances.

Some people prevented our NHG member and her family from drawing water from the well at my home. When the protests of the people grew in volume, about ten women amongst us united to protect them. Their three year old son studies in the anganwadi. In a few days, other parents began to take their children home as soon as this child arrived there. They declared in unison that they would not send their children there if this child continued to be there. We, the Kudumbashree women explained things to the people. It resulted in generating an inclination among them to let the child continue his studies there.

Panic spread in the village after a few months. News spread to the effect that his wife and children also had AIDS. Examinations revealed that wife was HIV positive while the children were HIV negative. When the school authorities denied them admission to the Ammayarnada School, they were admitted to the Sankaramangalam School. They were not allowed to study there either. The parents prohibited their children from talking to these children and making friends with them. Kudumbashree members bought victuals for them during Onam. Our group provided them with coconut oil. I bought toys and festive cloths for the children as well as coconuts and firewood besides giving the family Rs. 200. Thus, they could celebrate Onam even in the absence of any income. When the woman fell ill after many years she was taken to her ancestral home. She lost her mind realizing she had AIDS. She was admitted to the mental hospital. The illness aggravated and she died. Presently, our Kudumbashree groups are engaged in the arduous task of finding means to protect the orphaned children.



Lekha Sudhakaran,
Alappuzha District

Lekha Sudhakaran is the Secretary of Nirmallyam NHG in Veeyapuram CDS of Alappuzha district in Kerala

Nirmallyam sets an example

This is the story of Subha Sivadasan, a member of Nirmallyam Kudumabshree unit. Subha has speech and hearing disabilities; her husband too shares the same problems. After we made her a member of Kudumbashree, she has been able to attend meetings regularly. Moreover, she has been able to understand the issues discussed in meetings and communicate with the group.

When I proposed bringing Subha to the group, most of the members objected it. My colleagues even wondered whether I was trying to put the group in trouble by bringing in a person with disabilities. But, I told them that we should support women like her and help them in actualising their dreams too.

Today, Subha is just like any other member in the group. She is able to engage in all the activities of the group. She has joined the savings scheme and has taken loan for her children's education. She has been able to promptly repay her loans. Subha has also learned to do bank transactions. The bank employees and others look at her with respect when she goes to the bank for managing Kudumbashree group's account. If anybody else goes to the bank, the employees would ask where Subha is.

The group gets a great sense of satisfaction when Subha attends meetings and communicates with members in her own language.



Maniyamma,
Pathanamthitta District

Maniyamma is an NHG member from Anjali NHG in Thannithodu CDS of Pathanamthitta district in Kerala

A touch of kindness

Earlier, activities of our NHGs included collection of monthly subscription and sundry deposits, recording them in the books of members, and maintaining minutes. However, at the suggestion of the Ward member, we began to have debates on important social issues.

While we were holding neighbourhood meetings, we chanced upon five tribal families living along the riverside in the forest near Pulinchal colony. They lived in huts made of wild plantain leaves and bamboo poles. I had heard that many among them lay ravaged by Malaria. Taking the members of NHG with us, we visited the tribal huts. As we approached the huts their domestic dogs drove us away. Hearing our cries, a man of about sixty years of age emerged from a hut. Seeing all of us he retreated to the hut.

The sight within the hut was heart rendering. A huge fire had been made in front of the hut using logs. Children as well as adults lay cuddled on pieces of rags and old sacks around the fire in each of the four huts. Flies covered their drooling mouths. They told us that their traditional remedies using medicinal plants failed to cure them and they hadn't eaten anything for a number of days. We decided to inform the ward member of the situation with due seriousness. The Ward member conveyed it to the Panchayat. The Secretary of the Panchayat, its President, and the medical team from the Primary Health Centre (PHC), and the Ward member took us on their visit to the colony.

We reached the tribal huts crossing the forest carrying the medical kits provided by the medical team and the packets of food brought by the ward member. None of them emerged from the huts since they had no real touch with the external world and they habitually hid in their huts at the sight of strangers. We gathered courage to enter their huts to hand over the food packets. We were amazed to see the glow in the eyes of the children when they saw the food packets. After they took the meal the medical team made enquiries about their illness and gave them the required medicines. We sprayed the huts with the lotion and bleaching powder provided by the medical team.

Convinced of our sincerity, the medical team entrusted us with the duty to collect information about their illness and inform the PHC if the situation worsens. Unfortunately,

their condition worsened. Since the PHC had only limited facilities they asked us to take them to the General Hospital at Pathanamthitta. We conveyed the suggestion to the Ward member. He gladly undertook the responsibility. He reached Pulinchal colony with a vehicle declaring that there was no question of withdrawing when the members of the NHG stood behind him. The first question was how to bring the sick from the forest to the vehicle. They did not even have proper clothes. We somehow carried them till the vehicle after making them wear the clothes we brought. Some of the men among us carried an old man to the vehicle in a makeshift hammock made of old pieces of sack. It was a tough task to reach the vehicle at the bottom of the steep hill. We took them to the General Hospital at Pathanamthitta using the money collected by the Ward member from the generous villagers. Seeing the throng of vehicles and the crowd at the hospital, the tribals tried to flee. We sought the help of the security people to move them to the Ward and the matter was reported to the Collector.

Concerned officers from the tribal office at Ranny reached the hospital at the direction of the Collector. The next day a public demonstration highlighting the refusal of tribal people to resort to hospitals was made before the tribal office by the members of Kudumbashree.

The sad plight of the tribal people near Pulinchal colony was prominently carried by newspapers the next day. We felt gratified and encouraged at the success of our efforts to bring the plight of the unknown families to public notice and we took pride in seeing our names and photographs in the newspapers.

The tribal people gradually recovered from their illness. The philanthropic spirit imbibed from the activities of the NHG had made us get 30 kilograms of ration, oil, and pulses sanctioned by the forest department and bring them to tribal huts in the following months as well.



Mini Tommy,
Idukki District

Mini Tommy is the Chairperson of the Purappuzha CDS
in Idukki district of Kerala

Safe and confident under this shade

I felt extremely happy to know about Kudumbashree's initiative to publish a souvenir commemorating its 14th anniversary. The news, in fact, opened a door of memories for me. A stream of thought took me to where I started from and where this journey has taken me to.

Fourteen years down the memory lane, I can still see that unknown woman that I was, engaged in the daily grind of household chores, without any source of income. Timid and insecure, I used to feel scared of the idea of going anywhere alone even to buy things; visiting an office to get something done was beyond my imagination. I would feel nervous to speak even in a small group of three to four people.

I did not know anything about the Panchayat or village offices. I had never even tried to know; my circumstances were such that all this never occurred to me in the first place. That was the time when Kudumbashree was formed in my Ward. The group had worked in its initial stages against disheartening and even demoralising comments from the usual 'opinion makers' in the village.

Opinions in our village got formed along the roadsides and at crossroads, where men, and always men, crowded around with judgemental and politically loaded comments that in general had an explicit gender bias against women. How far can these women go? How much can they do?

While all this was happening, I kept an eye on the activities that the women were engaging in. I also joined them, overcoming my initial reluctance. Within six months the group elected me as their President. Next, I became an ADS President and a CDS member and got to attend several training programmes organised by the District Mission on the ways and processes of Kudumbashree. I also started attending Gram Sabha meetings, which I had never attended before. During the course of these, I developed an orientation towards thinking on how to help the needy through the various schemes of Kudumbashree.

Soon, I got to know the state of some of the most backward families of my panchayat through a survey that we conducted to support Kudumbashree's Asraya project, which was just being launched. The survey was an eye opener for me; it made me realise the pathetic conditions in which some of our fellow people lived. The experience instilled in me a spirit to work for such people; I told myself that being able to help and support even a single person living in such conditions would be a big reward for me.

In one of those houses I witnessed the plight of a hapless family where the family head, suffering from high fever, lay on a run-down floor covered with torn bits of old gunny bags. Their hut did not have walls; rain seeped in through the crumbling thatch roof. They did not own land so the Gram Panchayat would not sanction a house-building grant for them.

I decided to support them through whatever means possible. I found some land for them; organised a loan from the neighbourhood group. This was not enough; I pledged my wedding chain to add some more funds. We bought the piece of land in their name. The Grama Panchayat could then release a grant of 30,000 rupees for constructing a house. But who would build a house with insufficient funds for a family without ability to pay a single rupee beyond that? How could the cash flow be managed when the panchayat would release the money only in instalments and that too against stages that had been completed? Above all, who would manage this?

Building construction has always been a men's domain. Here I had to prove that a woman could also do it. I took up the responsibility end to end; from deciding on the site and location of the house and arranging materials and labour to supervision of actual construction. I even cooked food for the workers on my own. When the money was over I discussed the matter with several people and took their help and support. In the end, that family could move into a decent house built on their own land and stay there comfortably. Houses were constructed for three more poor families in similar ways in my ward.

I realised the transformation that Kudumbashree had been driving within me; poverty and helplessness of people were instilling a new sense of purpose in me. A sense of purpose so strong that I would not bother about my personal losses in helping them; it was about taking focussed steps to support the needy, once I understand the nature of their problem; without ever looking back.

One day an old woman came to meet me at Kudumbashree office. It was amidst irrepressible flowing tears that she narrated her story to me. Her story was one of the most heart-rending ones that anyone could think of. She lived with her middle-aged son who was a cancer patient in a decrepit shed. Her son's leg had been amputated; the wound never cured and was infested by worms. This old ill-fated woman was struggling to look after her son; at an age when any mother in our society would feel safe under her son's protection.

Her demand was very minimal; she wanted support to take her son to cancer hospital in Thiruvananthapuram. She said if I could help her, she would stay with her son at the hospital till his death, without ever returning. Stunned by the misfortunes of an unlucky mother whose only hope was to let her son's perpetual suffering end peacefully, I stood there holding her hands. Then I gathered strength and consoled her. I arranged the

money for their travel to Thiruvananthapuram and also for the stay at the hospital. Every time I see a cancer patient; that mother's face appears in my mind.

Kudumbashree prepares us not only in realising our rights as well as the rights of our fellow people. It also capacitates us to face the challenges and crises in life. It creates in us the ability to negotiate the governmental systems to access schemes and programmes available to support the needy. It provides us the strength to take leadership and initiative in matters of common interest.

An incident that occurred four years back remains vivid in my memories even today. I got a phone call from Kudumbashree asking me to reach there urgently. When I went there, I met with a mother and her three children. She had come out of her house unable to withstand her husband's atrocities against her; with an intention to commit suicide as she did not have any place to go or anybody to look forward to.

I could handle that situation too; I took her to my home and let her be there for a few days. I sent the children home. We managed to find a job for her. In a way, those four lives sustain today because of our great movement called Kudumbashree; it was Kudumbashree that called them back from suicide.

Today Kudumbashree has grown to play important roles in the state's administration of welfare schemes. Let it grow further, providing protective shades to thousands of poor and marginalised people.



Rasheedha. K,
Kasargod District

Rasheedha K. is presently a Chairperson of the Ajanur CDS in Kasaragod district. She is a member of Kuravankunnu NHG and had held the post of an ADS President as well.

Kudumbashree initiating overall development

The changes that Kudumbashree, the great development movement of Kerala brought in my life would take several pages for me to explain.

Born into a conservative Muslim family, my life had always been a struggle. My father passed away when I was five years old. Mother and brothers had to struggle a lot to look after the family. My brothers dropped out of studies and started working. Even though I worked hard, I could not complete my pre-degree education. I learned tailoring as a way of finding a source of income. It was when I started gaining a little income from tailoring that I became President of our Kudumbashree group in 2001. I did not have the confidence to take up the post. The then President of the Grama Panchayat and members of a neighbouring Kudumbashree group motivated me to take up the challenge.

I got the opportunity to understand more about the objectives and methods of Kudumbashree when I was elected president of ADS in 2004. Kudumbashree helped me to know more and more people in our society, to understand their problems, and support them in availing schemes that they were eligible for. I have been visiting government offices in connection with ensuring that benefits of schemes for house construction and renovation, sanitation, and welfare pensions reach the people. I got the confidence to be able to do all this from Kudumbashree. Today, I am confident of speaking in front of large gatherings; a transformation from the woman who used to find it difficult to speak to even a few individuals.

Kudumbashree took me out of my home and offered me myriad avenues to intervene in the development of our area and people. I worked as a member of the resource team for the Grama Panchayat; involved in participatory studies on development issues, needs, and local resources. I have also been involved in a study on the possibility of forming vigilance committees aimed at protection of women and another one on local level development. I established excellent relationships with people through these activities.

I was elected CDS Chairperson in June 2006. Naturally, I had to handle a lot more issues and face many more problems in the new role. I would be able to return home only by late in the evening once I leave home early in the morning. This created problems at home also. But nothing could stop me. My mind was full of people's problems and I kept trying my best to help them through my position as CDS Chairperson. These initiatives taught me the true meaning of life. I could succeed in mobilising women from the backward coastal areas and make them Kudumbashree members. I have been able to support them and bring them to the mainstream and encourage them to participate in local development initiatives including Grama Sabha meetings.

I worked tirelessly for women empowerment, cutting across the boundaries of caste, religion, and political affiliations. I engaged in the debates on local development issues and worked towards enhancing the incomes of Kudumbashree members. The training that Kudumbashree District Mission organised in Uduma in 2006 provided me motivation for these activities. My family initially opposed my leaving home and staying away to attend training programmes. As I went ahead, my family started supporting me. In the first year of becoming CDS Chairperson, I had been able to increase the number of Kudumbashree groups as well as the incomes of its members.

Due to all our collective efforts, more than 250 loans were arranged through bank linkages for a plethora of needs such as children's education, medical treatment, completion of house construction. Furthermore, house loans were arranged for 80 members; 432 LPG connections had been arranged. We also conducted fairs for promoting sales of products made by Kudumbashree groups and organised children's panchayats and camps.

In addition to engaging in these activities, I have been able to ensure that benefits of Asraya scheme reach the most vulnerable and backward families in the panchayat. I was pained by the state of the most marginalised families and individuals suffering from disabilities, chronic ailments, and other serious problems. I used to visit the home of 28 destitute families in the Panchayat every month. These families still occupy a prime slot in my mind. I have grown aware of the real worth of life after getting the opportunity to engage with marginalised and vulnerable people through Kudumbashree.

When I think of destitute people, it is Thampaiyettan and Meenakshiyetty who come to my mind first. When they became bedridden from chronic illnesses, I visited their home regularly and consoled them. I learned the sign language used by the speech and hearing impaired to share the sufferings of a woman and her daughter having those disabilities. I found time to be with them and console them. I was happy to be part of the initiative to support them through Kudumbashree for building a house and earning an income.

Today, I consider my colleagues and friends my greatest assets. It was as part of a joint programme of Nehru Yuva Kendra and Kudumbashree that I got to meet the HIV patients at a rehabilitation centre in Kanhangad. My friend Sujatha and I had initial fears in interacting with them. However, as we understood the cause of their suffering, we started empathising with them. There was a Muslim girl in that centre who had contracted HIV from her husband, who was a foreigner. She was forced into that marriage by her family. Others also shared their stories with us. They said that various government functionaries went and met them. When they said it was the first time that

Kudumbashree activists went to meet them, it touched our hearts. We had tea with them before returning.

Several people have supported me in moving ahead with the gains of our Kudumbashree work, helping in overcoming a number of hindrances and challenges. I won the award for best CDS chairperson in Kasaragod district in 2007; in 2008 our CDS won the best CDS award too. In 2010 we got an award of Rs 50,000 for being among the best three CDSs in the district.

Today, my husband and even my two year old son support my activities with Kudumbashree. It was when my son was just nine months old that I attended the three-day conference of CDS chairpersons held in Thiruvananthapuram. It was Kudumbashree that gave me the opportunity to travel beyond Kasaragod district. I have attended training programmes in Kannur, Thrissur, Kozhikkode, and Thiruvananthapuram. I could witness the proceedings of Kerala Legislative Assembly and also see a meeting of the state cabinet.

My ability to travel alone, the capacity to move ahead without succumbing to challenges and crises, the courage to learn driving and ride my own vehicle; all these and more I got from this great movement called Kudumbashree. My best wishes are always with this movement in its endeavor to support the suffering women of this state.



Sheeba,
Thiruvananthapuram District

Sheeba is a committee member of the Venganoor CDS in Thiruvananthapuram district in Kerala. She also works as an 'Aaya' at the BUDS School

An account on Venganoor BUDS School

I am Sheeba and I currently work as the 'Aaya' (helper) of the Kudumbashree BUDS School at Venganoor Gram Panchayat in Thiruvananthapuram district, which is a first one of its kind school for children with intellectual disabilities among almost 42 other such similar schools in Kerala.

As workers of Kudumbashree, we faced a great deal of hardships and untold miseries in initiating the functioning of the school. But, at the very same time we are fully satisfied to have achieved such a huge task of gaining support of the Gram Panchayat authorities, peoples' representatives, the NHGs and the people of the Panchayat at large for the school.

In 1999, I began working as the Secretary of the Pratheeksha NHG. In due course of time I was made the CDS committee member of the Kudumbashree network in my Panchayat. At that time there was a development project of the Gram Panchayat for a 'children friendly panchayat' and we, the Kudumbashree members, were asked to conduct a survey for the same.

It was an eye opener for us when we experienced the field realities which showed us the helplessness of families with intellectual and physically disabled children of various types. It goes without saying that these families are poverty stricken and destitute because the parents cannot even leave these children unattended to fetch a job or earn some wages. Some parents were even reluctant to reveal the fact of having such a child, fearing that they may be considered lower in status. We have seen children who cannot move, sit or stand, eat or drink or even take care of their personal hygiene needs without the help of their parents. We have witnessed parents who are lamenting or even cursing their Gods for giving them such a plight. Some were pleading to us to get their children into day care centres while others whole heartedly hoped that such children die before they themselves died so that they don't become a burden on someone else.

However, the survey results drew the concern of all including the Panchayat President – Sri Roofus Daniel, Panchayat elected representatives, and the Kudumbashree CDS, ADS, and NHG members. We made a joint effort and the panchayat stood behind us to support us all in our endeavours. Hence, a building with 20 cents of land to start a day care centre for the mentally challenged was constructed. A private conveyance for the to-and-fro travel of children was also arranged for the same. Two of us were sent for training at Thripunithura Aadarsh School. The children were medically examined through medical camps and certificates were issued by the Medical board. All such initiatives paved the way for the opening of the Venganoor Buds School by the then Chief Minister of Kerala – Sri A.K. Antony in the month of July 2004. In the beginning there were 165 pupils in which some were physically disabled and were sent to regular schools. For some time the school ran during morning sessions only but later the Panchayat and Kudumbashree provided meals so that the school could run from morning till day time.

Caring for the intellectually disabled is not an easy job and we understood it gradually. The inflictions on each student are different and therefore every individual has to be given special attention. Sometimes due to their natural inflictions, they become rude and restless and attack us with whatever they can find. But, in due course of time and help, such tempers can be changed and teaching can be made more effective.

For a long period, we were serving without any monetary benefits but after getting the long awaited registration from the Education Department and grant from Government, we are receiving remuneration. Even before that, the Panchayat and Kudumbashree had offered a helping hand to us with an honorarium that they could afford. It is to be well remembered that the first Principal of this school Smt. Vimala Menon was working throughout her tenure without demanding any monetary benefits. Not only that, she had been spending her own money to meet the conveyance, meals and healthcare expenditures for children and herself without any hesitations.

Now, it has become a full-fledged BUDS school where 54 mentally challenged children are taught and taken care of by two well trained teachers, 4 aayas, one cook, one helper and one driver. Here, I would like to point out that a new bus has been provided by Kudumbashree for our school. A BUDS Rehabilitation Centre (BRC) has also been started alongside this institution where intellectually disabled people of age 18 and above are given vocational trainings to become economically and socially independent.



Omana,
Kollam District

Omana is an NHG member in Pooyapally CDS of Kollam district in Kerala. She is also a beneficiary under Kudumbashree's Asraya project

A sense of care

I am Omana. I am aged 65 and unmarried. My family refused to give me a share of the family property since I am unmarried, but I managed to receive some money after much struggle. With that money as well as the money I saved doing odd jobs, I bought 6 cents of land in my name during my middle age. I stayed there in a shed because building a proper house was beyond my means. Moreover, congenital infirmities and frequent illnesses prevented me from working regularly to save money. As it was a mere hut the porous roof let rain water leak during rainy season. There were many days when I had to survive on the food offered by neighbours and remain empty stomached and tormented by illness. I withdrew from the outside world, not knowing whom to inform of my plight or where to turn for help.

One day Sindhu, who lived nearby, visited my house with a group of people. I did not know that they were members of Kudumbashree and I had no idea about the positions they held in the organisation. I realized they were sent to my house by Lathika Teacher, the Ward member who knew of my plight. They made me a member of the NHG. Since I had no regular income they exempted me from the weekly subscription of Rs. 10 that is mandatory for attending meetings of the group. They convinced me of the advantages of mutual support and the specific benefits I could gain from it in those meetings.

They made another visit to my hut, promising some other assistance under Kudumbashree's Asraya project. This time they took my photograph standing beside the hut. But after that they were not to be seen for a while. In the meanwhile I went to the Gram Panchayat at the suggestion of an ADS worker in my neighbourhood. The subsequent experiences and changes to my living conditions are beyond words. The NHG began to send me resources for my food every month. They built a modest house for me under the supervision of a member. Now, I live in a secure house. I get foodstuff every two months from the ration shop.

The NHG keeps me informed of new developments and important news. Now, I receive an old age pension as well. A sense of having someone to care for me has replaced my feeling of insecurity and total absence of support. I happened to come across many a destitute who shared my own plight at the Panchayat. I wish that they also could benefit

from Kudumbashree and the Gram Panchayat the way I did. I hope that Kudumbashree will protect and sustain them and will provide light in my darkness for the days to come.



Usha Rani,
Palakkad District

Usha Rani is the Chairperson of Srikrishnapuram CDS in Palakkad district of Kerala

Raveena....

I am Usha Rani, CDS Chairperson of Sreekrishnapuram Panchayat in Palakkad district. Though I have had many interesting experiences through Kudumbashree, I would like to share about the Balasabhas we formed in our panchayat, and specially the success story of one bala sabha child, Raveena.

Raveena is the third daughter of Krishnankutty and Subhadra. Her eldest sister, Karthika is doing nursing, her second sister, Praveena, is a third year degree student, and their younger brother is studying in the sixth standard. Raveena is a eleventh standard student. She is the top scorer in her class. Her father is physically ill and he cannot go for work. He runs a small petty shop. The income from the shop is not enough to meet the needs of the family.

Raveena was a member of Adithya Balasabha under the Sreelakshmi Kudumbashree in Ward V of the panchayat. When Raveena was in fifth standard, the CDS conducted trainings for making umbrellas. 40 Balasabha children attended this training and later, began to make umbrellas. The Kudumbashree members helped them in identifying the markets. It became a successful business. All children made the umbrellas during vacation time. However, Raveena continued to be involved in the umbrella making whenever she got free time during school. She sold the umbrellas mainly in the seasonal and festival markets organised by Kudumbashree. At one go, she could earn about Rs. 5,000 - Rs. 7,000.

Now, Raveena is ready to give training sessions on umbrella making to interested candidates. NHG members say that her umbrellas are of a very good quality. As we Kudumbashree members say, one of the prime objectives of Kudumbashree through Balasabha activities is to help stop the spread of poverty from one generation to the next. This is one classic example of meeting this objective.

Economic Empowerment

Over the years, Kudumbashree has expanded its idea of economic empowerment, moving beyond the concept of thrift and credit. While collective farming initiatives and micro enterprise activities are widely undertaken by Kudumbashree women, the Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Act (MGNREGA) has also gained much popularity. Community-based marketing activities and Samagra projects covering the production-supply value chain are some of the other initiatives of Kudumbashree.

This section consists of experiences of women engaged in different livelihood activities.

Shobhna shares her experience of working in Joint Liability Groups (JLGs) as part of the collective farming initiative. Fausia gives an account of the working of her micro enterprise unit. Janaki and Sindhu talks about the problems faced and battles fought to keep their enterprise units functional. Ammini shares her experience of working in MGNREGS. Bindu narrates her experience as an entrepreneur. Sujatha's article on the Goat Village initiative gives the reader an opportunity to understand the concept of Samagra.





K.V. Shobhana,
Kasargod District

Shobhana is a member of Aiswarya NHG under Thrikkaripur CDS in Kasargod district of Kerala. She is one of the first people to propose the idea of collective farming in her NHG.

Flame – My experiences with Kudumbashree

Our Kudumbashree group is in Thrikkarippur Grama Panchayat in Kasaragod district of Kerala.

Our attempts at forming a Kudumbashree group did not get an encouraging response initially. Hearing about Kudumbashree groups being formed elsewhere through various sources, when I approached women in the neighbourhood, they were sceptical. The common response was how would the women who never come out of the confines of their homes would join such initiatives. However, a friend and I kept trying and finally succeeded in organising a group of twenty women.

Aiswarya Kudumbashree group is now fourteen years old. We have been able to resolve issues arising out of differences of opinion and move forward. One thing is for sure, there is no chance of any drop out from the group. None of us can think of a life without Kudumbashree anymore. We have been able to do small businesses from our savings and loans. The fact that the group had been able to avail a subsidy of Rs 1.25 lakh itself had been an exciting experience.

When I first proposed collective paddy farming, the response of the group members was not encouraging. I kept trying and eventually formed a group of five members for farming. We requested a member of another Kudumbashree group in the village for land. She agreed but insisted on joining the group; thus we became a group of six.

Kuttanady, where we got a plot of 1.25 acre area for paddy cultivation, is known as the rice bowl of Thrikkarippur. We named our farming group Kuttanady Joint Liability Group (JLG). Our journey since then made this JLG known across Kerala from Kasaragod to Thiruvananthapuram.

When we started work in the fallow land that we got, the attitude of the people around was definitely not encouraging; some even wondered whether we did not have anything better to do. But, we went ahead. We took advice from an old woman and decided to plant a rice variety locally known as '90-day paddy'. As the name indicates, this

variety takes only 90 days to get matured for harvest.

After sowing, the next problem that we faced was about the timely release of water into the field. We had to start this from the seventh day after sowing; naturally a difficult task as the field was at a considerable distance from our neighbourhood and we all had to look after our domestic responsibilities. While we sat beside our field and discussed this, I proposed that we could release water at 4 o' clock in the morning. My partners found it shocking; women leaving homes during the wee hours of the morning and traversing a considerable distance to water their fields was not something that they could easily imagine. But, they agreed when I insisted. When I told my husband about our decision, he started wondering whether his wife had gone mad.

I set an alarm on a clock and woke up early in the morning; went to another member's house and woke her up. The two of us together woke others up and walked to the field. While walking to the field and back on those days, we discussed matters of common interest among ourselves. It was a memorable experience indeed to have come together and taken up tasks of this kind.

While this became a routine, I kept myself busy through the day too with vegetable cultivation; In addition, I have also been an ASHA worker. From the earnings of two rounds of paddy cultivation, I bought a cow and looked after it too.

Our group has won the first position in Kasaragod district for collective farming. We also got awards from CDS twice for our efforts. For me, the opportunity to go to Thrissur as part of Mahila Kisan Sashaktikaran Pariyojana (MKSP) was also memorable. I am at a loss of words to explain how I enjoyed the three-day stay with Ummukkolusu at a home in Thrissur, away from the responsibilities of my family.

During one of our meals at home, I proudly reminded my husband of the fact that the rice and vegetables that we eat were the fruits of my efforts. It is Kudumbashree that gave me the confidence to voice my opinion in front of my husband. I have also developed confidence to be simultaneously involved in collective farming and vegetable cultivation in addition to performing my responsibilities as an Accredited Social Health Activist (ASHA) worker.



Fousia M.
Kannur District

Fousia M is a member of Lavanya NHG in Valapattanam CDS of Kannur District in Kerala. She talks of the numerous initiatives she and her fellow NHG members have taken up for livelihood purposes.

Becoming brave and bold

I am Fousiya, member of Lavanya Kudumbashree in Valapattanam Gram Panchayat. I became a member of Kudumbashree in March 2001. It was Shri Abdul Rahman, the current President of the Gram Panchayat who was a Ward member then who initiated me to Kudumbashree. Thereafter I held the responsibility of president and secretary of the group; also became member of ADS and CDS.

After becoming a member of CDS two years ago, there have been major changes in my life. I gained confidence to express my thoughts and act. Five of us women together started a tailoring unit. Kudumbashree provided support to set up the unit.

We started constructing a new house. This was the time when my husband passed away. The loss was unbearable to me. House construction had to stop; I was clueless on how to go ahead with our children's education.

It was Kudumbashree that provided me support, and helped me gain confidence to come back to life. Grama Panchayat provided support to complete the construction of the house. Grama Panchayat also gave subsidy to buy a cow. Life went on with income from selling milk, which became the major source of income for me and my three children. I could move ahead so much only because of the support that I got from Kudumbashree.

The awareness that I developed on legal issues, health, and national rural employment guarantee scheme over a period of time helped me on several fronts. I have been able to earn a reasonable income through participation in Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Scheme (MGNREGS) work too.

When the Grama Panchayat decided to train two women as drivers for its plastic management project, no one came forward. I attended the training against the wishes of my family members and community. People even said that if a woman from Muslim community went to learn driving, nobody would even marry her daughter. I told them that I would do any decent job and that only those who understood my living conditions need to come forward to marry my daughter. I went ahead and learned to drive auto-rickshaw. I also learned to ride a scooter. I started carrying milk to homes by scooter to

be sold to different houses.

Today, I am the driver of the auto-rickshaw used for collection of plastic waste in Valapattanam Grama Panchayat. It was the Panchayat and the CDS that provided me with the motivation and support for this. Kudumbashree gave me confidence to take up these challenges.

On 08 March, i.e., International Women's Day, CDS conferred me with an award for being the 'brave woman of Valapattanam'. That was a memorable moment in my life. Today I earn Rs 2500 per month by driving the auto-rickshaw for plastic waste collection. In addition, I also earn money by selling milk. My children and I live comfortably. My daughters have been married off. All of this and more has been possible only because of Kudumbashree; I am indebted to Kudumbashree for all these achievements.



Janaki Krishnan, Ernakulam District

Janaki Krishnan is an NHG member in Chottanikara CDS of Ernakulam district in Kerala. She is one of the most successful entrepreneurs in Kudumbashree and her Devi Flour Mills has provided inspiration to many entrepreneurs in Kudumbashree.

Steps to growth

Janaki Krishnan is 73 years old. This lady with SSLC education remembers that it was the Kudumbashree neighbourhood group that provided her with the ability to be independent at the age of 65.

Janaki joined three other women in starting a very small enterprise named Devi Flour Mill to supply rice powder needed for the nine festive days before Onam, the regional festival of Kerala.

They started with machinery worth a lakh of rupees given by Cochin Refineries, a subsidy of Rs 50,000 by Kudumbashree mission, Rs 45,000 loan from Federal Bank, and Rs. 5000 as their own contribution – this was how they started. Devi Flour Mill was slowly established as a viable unit; Janaki's enthusiasm coupled with the collective action of the members added to their pride of owning a business.

The group had been able to clear their liabilities and improve the facilities and machinery with the help of Rs. 3,00,000 loan from Vijaya Bank and Rs. 1,00,000 subsidy extended by the Grama Panchayat. They faced a serious setback when the land owner decided to sell the building which they had hired to run the unit. However, they had been able to find another place a kilometre away from the original unit and shifted there. But the monthly rent went up from Rs 1,200 to Rs 2,500; in addition they also had to pay an interest-free deposit of Rs 50,000 as guarantee. This shifting of place happened when the group had an outstanding loan amount of about Rs 2,00,000 with the bank.

Shifting to more expensive rented premises, having to deposit a large guarantee amount, and associated problems with these could have put this small unit in trouble. It was the goodwill generated due to timely repayment of loans coupled with the customer loyalty developed out of their insistence on maintenance of quality that saved the unit. Janaki was completely taken by surprise when the branch manager of the bank visited the unit and offered support. The bank subsequently enhanced their loan by another three lakh rupees and also re-scheduled the loan to ease out the cash flow pressures on the unit.

The unit has been able to generate adequate revenues to ensure a monthly salary of Rs 6,000 each to its four members after meeting the running expenses which included Rs 4,000 on gas cylinders, Rs 2,500 on rent, and Rs 1,500 on electricity; expenses also include regular maintenance charges of the machinery. The group has been able to promptly repay their monthly instalment of Rs 11,000 against the existing loans.

Janaki says she has been able to achieve a few things through the collectivism inculcated in her group by Kudumbashree. She got an opportunity to visit Italy as a small entrepreneur. She feels that she would not be able to stay away from the unit even for a day. The pleasures of entrepreneurship that she gained from running the unit could not be replaced.



Sindhu Lalu,
Kottayam District

Sindhu Lalu, an NHG member from Ettumanur CDS, Kottayam is one of the founding members of Thejas Power Laundry Unit. Facing many odds from the community, Sindhu talks of how the unit has survived these many years.

Up against all odds

I am a member of the Thejas Power Laundry Unit belonging to the ninth ward of Punnathura West under the CDS of Ettumanur Grama Panchayat. The laundry group was begun by 10 members from among four Kudumbashree units of ward 9. We provided the service of washing and ironing soiled clothes supplied by various hotels with the help of machinery.

We had to wait a year to begin the unit after receiving training from Venmasree group in Marangottupally Grama Panchayat. The bank had unconditionally rejected our application for loan in the light of the failure of certain units to repay loans and their gradual extinction. Later with the efforts of the District Mission, CDS and the ADS chairperson the unit started to function with a loan of Rs 2,00,000 and Rs 1,00,000 of back end subsidy. People viewed us with skepticism at the beginning. Wherever we went we were met with comments like...whatever women begin will only last a few months, it will be closed in no time, and don't you have anything else to do?

However we took a firm decision among the ten of us to go ahead no matter what happens. We canvassed for work at places like hostels of the nursing college, hotels, resorts, and hospitals. It was a firm step for us in the line of progress. We met an agent to ensure the supply of required raw materials.

Lacking prior experience of going beyond the four walls of the kitchen, we were apprehensive to visit hotels and resorts at the beginning. Sticking to our decision of going ahead at any cost, we gathered orders and entered into agreements. We had to compete with bigger and established laundries in obtaining orders. We were able to gain the confidence of resorts in Kumarakom, Kottayam, and Pala by doing the jobs entrusted to us properly.

The profits were negligible at the beginning. We willingly carried on with the work though our expenses exceeded profits for a year. Our family provided generous support to us. The CDS and the District Mission kept encouraging us despite a section of people continuing to denigrate and taunt us by calling us 'washer women'. Presently, we receive a considerable amount as monthly salary. Some people with evil intents remain despite

our tremendous progress. It was the hardest challenge we had to face. Not many might have been subjected to such ignominy. Some people in our neighborhood, mostly men, found pleasure in spreading gossip about despite us being equivalent to their daughters or sisters in age. They would surreptitiously spread baseless rumors about us being apprehended in raids at hotels for immoral acts, and that we were released from the police at the surety of a certain person and so on. They enjoyed teasing us and making cryptic comments when they met us on the street. It was a severe affront to our womanhood. People at home supported us knowing the truth of everything. We resorted to legal remedies. Eventually they had to admit that the rumors were false. They sent prominent emissaries to us for an out of the court settlement. They tendered apologies in public as well. This event empowered us to confront crises of various kinds.

Crises kept popping up in the course of the progress of our movement. The monsoon added to our problems. During the season of uninterrupted rain, rain water ran downhill, reached the land around our laundry unit building and spilt into the courtyard of the neighboring house. The neighbours moved the court against us on the ground that their drinking water was polluted with our waste water resulting in a person catching jaundice. They attempted to get our license issued by the Grama Panchayat invalidated by resorting to the Right to Information Act.

They complained to the Grama Panchayat on the grounds that the building where we operated had not obtained a license for the laundry unit. Consequently, the Panchayat invalidated our license and rejected our applications. In response to a complaint signed by all of us an enquiry commission comprising three Ward members and the President visited our unit. They found the complaints baseless and granted permission to us to carry on with our work.

Seeing the unit still in operation some people collected some boys, got them drunk, reached our laundry premises and continued their unbridled words of abuse. Having reached the limit of our patience, we filed a complaint with the Women's Commission at the behest of the District Mission. Our complaintants never appeared for hearings. Following this they filed a writ petition seeking permanent closure of our laundry unit, on the grounds of environmental pollution and threat of fatal diseases. The enquiry commission appointed by the court could not find any flaws on our part. However, since it was a civil case it dragged on without conclusion. The aged house owner who was in no way related to the case also had been made a respondent in the case. The Ward member and the Secretary of the Grama Panchayat also have been included in the list of respondents.

We are yet to receive our license from the Panchayat despite having approached them many a times with the required documents such as the certificate issued by the Pollution Control Board and the recommendation of the Department of Health because litigation in the court of law is yet to conclude. We decided to decline the amount of Rs. 200000 granted to us with the efforts of the Ward member and CDS for buying land as it was entangled in legal complications. Having repaid the primary loan we approached banks for a loan to buy land. We had already paid Rs 40000 in advance to buy four cents of land. The bank refused to grant a loan as the land not possess a license. Since the landlord asked us to vacate the rented house we shifted the operation of the laundry to a shed constructed adjacent to the house of one of our members.

We surged forward with remarks regarding the closure of the unit in six months. We

have already completed six years and always remained dauntless at the face of criticism and undeserved abuse. We are now confident to assert our demands everywhere. Kind hearted people continue to extend their support. It all depended on our unity in the face of adversity.



Ammini Abraham,
Pathanamthitta District

Ammini Abraham is a member of Dhanashree NHG in Malayalappuzha CDS of Pathanamthitta district in Kerala. Among many of the experiences she has also mentioned, her working with MGNREGA is an interesting experience.

Yet a few moments here

I live in a remote corner of Ward number 13 of Malayalappuzha Gram Panchayat. Life had been agonizing after the death of my husband. I spent my days struggling to bring up my children by working in neighbouring houses and trying my hands at cottage industry. However, fate continued to be unkind to me. I began to suffer cardiac complications. The education of my children ran into difficulties. I had to send my second son to an orphanage. He stayed there and studied for eight years. I could not keep working after a surgery. I incurred a great amount of debts as well. Our house was not fit enough to be called by that name. In the meanwhile, I had to conduct the wedding of my elder son. With that, life seemed to have reached a dead end. There was no one to support us.

The 2005 election to the Gram Panchayat occurred at that time. I failed to get a house though I applied for one under the People's Plan Campaign. I had not received any other benefits either. So I tried to insult everyone who came seeking for my vote. However, when a candidate persisted for the fifth time I narrated my plight to him. He promised to help me if he got elected. He won the election, came to visit me, sympathized with me and renewed his promise to help.

At that juncture we formed a Kudumbashree unit. The member arrived and persuaded me to become the unit's president. I informed him that I was ill and did not expect to live long with the doctor himself marking my lifespan to be less than six months. However, he persuaded me to be the President and assured me that I would be all right for another fifteen years. I survived another seven years under medication. I began to pay more attention to the activities of Kudumbashree. At the beginning we found it hard to remit the thrift fund. I had no idea how to sustain the activities of the unit. I had to suffer the taunting remarks of people. I did not know how to behave in a government office.

Kudumbashree sent me for training. I learned more about Kudumbashree activities and sought means to increase our income. I explained things to others too. I learned to address people in public gatherings. From staying ill at home I got a fresh lease of life. I almost had a feeling that my illness had left me. I was also elevated to the position

of the President of ADS from the neighbourhood group. I got the opportunity to work within a whole Ward. Those who had taunted me earlier began to appreciate my work and cooperate with it. I have earned a name and position in the society by now.

I have spread my activities as Secretary of the unit, ADS president, member of CDS, and the Mate under MGNREGS. The love, sense of cooperation, and mutual trust that facilitated the discussion of every person's difficulties, the discovery of remedies and the exchange of soothing words after joining the neighbourhood group is beyond words. I believe that it might have helped a lot in extending the thread of my life. If not for it, death might have claimed me a long time ago.

The wages I received from the MGNREGS programme has uplifted my family from poverty. I took a loan to find a way of living for my son. I managed to gradually repay my family's debts. There is about eighty thousand rupees in my thrift deposit which I had found hard to remit earlier. All of this is a result of Kudumbashree activities. I feel happy and take pride in it.

It would be improper not to mention my experiences with my fellow MGNREGS workers at the workplace. My fellow MGNREGS workers were people with contrasting characteristics. It was not an easy task to get along with them. But, I made them work together using nice words and even chastising them at times. They would bring food for me as well. Many a time I had to take the food I brought with me back home. They saw me in the place of their mothers and sisters. It is difficult to explain the bliss one experiences being a recipient of such love and respect.

The intervention of certain people had hurt me too even as I received a great amount of love and respect. The empowerment of women had enabled me to respond whenever necessary and appreciate the appreciable.

Women emerged from the kitchen and proved their skills and abilities. Thousands of people of my kind managed to sustain life with the peace and happiness brought by the activities of Kudumbashree. I pray to the Almighty to preserve and maintain the activities without hindrance. With pride I submit this brief account of my experiences with Kudumbashree which has saved me from imminent death.



Bindu,
Thiruvananthapuram District

Bindu Pallichal is from Pallichal CDS in Thiruvananthapuram district of Kerala. She is a member of Aiswarya NHG unit. She has struggled her ways through to make her enterprise unit a success. Here, she presents a brief account of the same

An enterprise experience...

My name is Bindu Pallichal. I am from Pallichal village of Trivandrum District. I belong to a poor family. My family consists of my father, mother, and three siblings. My parents struggled hard to make both ends meet as my father did not have a permanent job. Owing to the financial constraints at home, I began to take tuition class for lower primary students at the age of 14. With the small income that I received I continued my studies and graduated in Sanskrit.

I got married at the age of 23. At the time of the marriage, my husband ran a business of repairing watches which was not profitable. Our expenditures increased when we had children. As a leisure activity at that time, I used to write poems and stories which were used by the children in the locality for winning competitions at school.

My experience with women' collectives started when one of my neighbours approached me and urged me to join an SHG called Samrudhi. We had made a plan to start a medicinal hair oil unit but unfortunately, due to some group dynamics, the project did not kick off. After leaving the SHG, I gathered a group of 10 women in the locality and formed an NHG under Kudumbashree named 'Aishwarya'. We took up the same idea of producing medicinal hair oil and with the thrift and loans available through Kudumbashree, we started our production. Initially we just sold the product to women in locality but once our CDS Chairperson bought our product and was really impressed by the product's impact and encouraged us to approach the Kudumbashree District Mission. Soon, I found myself at the State Mission where the officials keenly inquired about my product and encouraged me.

I participated in a fair organized at St. Mary's school in Pattom on the eve of Kudumbashree's 10th anniversary. I was able to sell 36 bottles in a single day but I realized that our bottles did not carry labels and our contact numbers due to which customers could not call us for further feedback or enquiries. Later I attended a fair at Jawahar Balbhavan where I introduced a new product called Ramacham scrubber. This time I had taken a loan from Kudumbashree to label my products but unfortunately I earned only 20 rupees during the whole two day event. But I did not give up and in the next Canara Bank fair, we made 150 rupees and gradually our business grew.

In the next fair at Chandrashekharan Nair Stadium, I introduced two new value added Ayurvedic products – Brahmi dessert and Brahmi rice soup. The new products turned out to be a great success and I started studying more about Ayurvedic medicines from Manuscripts and Ayurveda practitioners. I came up with more products and approached the State Kudumbashree Mission where the ED gave me enormous support and backing. State Mission helped me by printing 1000 copies of ingredient details and product specifications which gave wide publicity and acceptance to my products.

I started selling my products through 'Gramashree shop' of Kudumbashree at Palayam which helped me find a fixed market for my product. This helped me in introducing 18 more ayurvedic products. Now we are a group of 5 including me and my husband and we have employed 3 women from poor families who earn Rs. 2,000 each from our unit monthly. On an average we have a turnover of about Rs. 20,000 per month and at times it goes up to Rs. 50,000 during fairs. I was honoured by the Kerala State Government with Best Entrepreneur Award in year 2012 which included Rs. 10,000 cash award and a certificate. I was also given an award from my Gram Panchayat and Rs. 80,000 as subsidies. I have procured a food licence now and we are trying hard to get a drug licence. The most memorable moment of my life was when I was awarded by the State and District mission jointly on 8th March, 2013 where the renowned Malayali poet and environmentalist – Saraswathy Samman winner Smt. Sugathakumari honoured me.

From turnover of Rs. 20, I have now reached Rs. 50,000 and I owe this all to Kudumbashree mission for paving the way of success and standing by me during good and tough times. I am blessed to be a Kudumbashree member and I will stay one, forever.



Sujatha K.S.,
Thrissur District

Sujatha K.S. is a committee member of Alagappa Nagar CDS in Thrissur District of Kerala. She was one of the core members of the goat village project that was initiated in their panchayat and had achieved great recognitions for the same. Here, Sujatha gives a brief account of the goat Village Project.

The goat village project

Sujatha embraced the Kudumbashree movement for guidance in her arduous journey of struggle and survival. She has a story of pride and dignity to tell along with the story of pain and tears behind it as well. It is the story of how Kudumbashree gave her strength to transform tears to power.

Sujatha who had never seen the man who gave her life was brought up by her grandfather. He was a man with moderate wealth and a practice of indigenous medicine. When his son and his family moved the court against him demanding the family property he got paralysed and did not survive long. Bad days for Sujatha began with that. She had to survive on the five thousand rupees she had earned by working in a press at five rupees a day apart from the one sovereign chain her grandfather gave her and 13 cents of land.

So she did not think twice before agreeing to marry Sabu from Alappuzha who claimed that he was willing to marry her without any dowry. But her dreams about her future husband began to tumble from the second day of the marriage. She did not receive due consideration in the husband's house. Moreover, when they were given a tiny space covered with thatches near the kitchen of the big traditional mansion to live in, she discovered the esteem accorded to hers and her husband there.

It was difficult to survive on the meagre amount he brought home presumably from working in a press. She willingly backed his decision to buy and operate an auto rickshaw on his own. She gave him the required money by mortgaging the 13 cents of land in her name. But he spent the money on his own expenses and family expenses. Then he made it a habit to wastefully spend money borrowed at huge interest rates. He remained irresponsible even after becoming the father of three children. Ignoring his protests, Sujatha became a member of Pavizham Kudumbashree of the 8th ward of Alagappa Nagar Panchayat in 2007. Beginning with the remittance of 10 rupees, in due course of time she took loans of Rs 500, 1000, and 5,000 for the needs of her children apart from buying a goat.

Sabu kept away from home at the pretext of seeking jobs at distant places. Behind

Sujata's back Sabu fell in love with a nursing student and had a child with her. When Sujata came to know from her neighbours that he had eloped with the girl, she was shocked. When Sujatha mooted suicide along with the children for want of any means of living, a farmer named Babu chanced upon them and saved them. Babu invited her for collective farming in his three acres of land. When Babu handed her money at the harvest Sujatha took a firm decision. She bought 33 cents of land at moderate price, seeing that the money was not enough to repay the debt on her 13 cents of land. She felt assured to survive on the newly acquired land in the event of getting evicted from her 13 cents of land by the money lender.

Her days with Babu fuelled the usual gossip leading to her being thrown out of the house by the grandmother. She started to live on the 13 cents of land with her children in a makeshift hut.

She began to grow a sheep by the pet name Ammu. Its owner gave her the mature goat asking her to give him half of the profit. She started to grow hens as well.

The goat village project of Kudumbashree reached the village at this time. She participated in the compulsory training for five days after much struggle. She enrolled her name with the project encouraged by the training she received. The beneficiaries of this project were five person groups with each of them receiving Rs 20000. The subsidy was Rs 50000 (a subsidy of Rs 10000 for each person, the beneficiary share of Rs 2000 and bank loan for Rs 8000). With the money, she bought the goat Ammu given to her by the goat's owner to raise. The District Mission Coordinator of Kudumbashree Mr. Jyothishkumar and the veterinary doctor supported her in gaining proper training in selecting goats and looking after them properly from time to time. She began to collect and sell the urine of goats, entering an agreement with Oushadhi Ayurvedic Institution. The dung was sold as manure. Two, three, and even four ewes were born in a single birth. Instead of selling the milk she would let the ewes drink the whole of the milk to make them gain weight.

The Kudumbashree District Mission, the Panchayat, and CDS monitored the project meticulously. Trading facility and vaccines for the ewes were properly provided. Sujatha complemented the facilities and gradually her sufferings paved way for better days ahead. She made her life saviour Babu, her life companion. Sujatha progressed to her goals through collective farming and the goat village project undaunted by social chastisement. The hard working and well behaved Babu provided her support.

The money earned from collective farming and growing hens is in a different account. A great amount of money spent to construct the house under the I. A. Y Project also came from goat farming.

Sujatha saves the money in the form of insurance, chits, and gold for the sake of her children with a view to never let them experience the kind of suffering she had gone through. Babu contributes to the household as the father of Sujatha's children. Now, Sujatha visits other villages of the state to share her experiences. She has been amply recognized for her contributions.

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