



## Performing Participatory Citizenship - Politics and Power in Kerala's Kudumbashree Programme

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**Performing Participatory Citizenship – Politics and Power in  
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Performing Participatory Citizenship – Politics and Power in Kerala’s Kudumbashree Programme.

Abstract

This paper examines the operation of Kudumbashree, the Poverty Eradication Mission for the Indian State of Kerala. Kudumbashree operates through female-only Neighbourhood Groups, which aim to contribute to their participants’ economic uplift, and to integrate them with the activities and institutions of local governance. As such, Kudumbashree echoes poverty alleviation programmes elsewhere in the Global South designed to link poverty alleviation to ‘active citizenship’. This paper evaluates the programme, looking in turn at its impacts on women’s participation in public space, its attempts to engineer participatory citizenship through engagement with the local state, and the wider consequences of its particular linking of participation and poverty alleviation for processes of exclusion within Kerala. It argues that although the programme has undoubtedly been successful in its scale and in supporting women’s public participation, questions remain over both the autonomy of the ‘invited spaces’ it has created, and the underlying vision of poverty alleviation it embodies.

Introduction: Managing Poverty and Performing Citizenship

Kudumbashree, the Poverty Eradication Mission for the Indian State of Kerala, provides an interesting snapshot of current poverty alleviation practices and their implications for the relationships between citizens, the local state, and a dynamic ‘political society’. Although – as will be detailed below – many aspects of this Mission are unique to Kerala, it has broader relevance to contemporary trends in the management of poverty elsewhere across the global South in two specific ways: it emphasises poor people’s involvement in their own ‘uplift’, and it directly links poverty alleviation programmes with participatory forms of governance. At the heart of Kudumbashree is the organisation of poor women into neighbourhood groups (NHGs) supported by and engaging with the local state, which are intended to improve participants’ economic wellbeing and to further their empowerment. This vision has made Kudumbashree a model for poverty alleviation programmes elsewhere in India (Government of India, 2008: 90-4), and chimes with trends in international policy where such ‘active citizenship has become the privileged object of development imaginaries’ (Robins et al., 2008: 1071). This paper evaluates Kudumbashree’s impacts on poor women, focusing on the possibilities and limitations of the particular forms of ‘active citizenship’ it envisages. First, however, we briefly outline the analytical perspective through which we make this evaluation.

We begin with the observation that although it has been commonplace over the last decade to argue that participation and empowerment are crucial elements of poverty reduction, detailed political analysis is often lacking within the development policy literature (Hickey, 2008; Robins et al. 2008). Much attention is given to mechanisms to build poor people’s social capital within poverty alleviation programmes, or to the institutional design of spaces in which poor people’s participation is promoted, but rather less is given to the power-laden contexts within which such interventions are to take place. In short, despite the fact that ‘active citizens’ are the intended beneficiaries (and outcomes) of state-of-the-art poverty reduction programmes, analysis of the relationship between the interventions through

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which poor and marginalised people are to achieve this empowerment and existing patterns of governance is often underdeveloped.

In response, this paper argues that an evaluation of the Kudumbashree programme, or of other state-sponsored attempts to link poverty alleviation to participatory citizenship, should address three important tasks. First, it needs to look at the impact which these interventions have on their intended participants, taking seriously the argument that they can reshape their behaviour and values. Earlier debates within the participatory development literature put forward starkly opposed positions: for its boosters, participation offered a space in which professionals would experience almost revelatory 'reversals' in their worldviews (see Chambers, 1997) whilst for its detractors, it was a tyrannical master narrative which undermined autonomous political action (Rahnema, 1997; Henkel and Stirrat 2001: see Williams, 2004 for a critique). As this literature has matured, there is a recognition that experiments in participatory governance *do* matter, but more subtly through the forms of behaviour their institutional designs encourage. Fung and Wright (2003) argue that experiments in 'empowered participatory governance' can ideally act as 'schools for democracy', allowing participants the space both to (re)formulate their political interests and to develop their political capacities through their active engagement in participatory processes. Cornwall (2004) balances this potential against the costs of these 'invited spaces' of participation: they require participants to act out roles and behaviours envisaged by the state, and this can act to delegitimize other forms of political engagement, or close down informal and indigenous forms of public space. Common to both is an understanding that civil society is to some degree malleable in the face of intentional designs to promote participation: whether participants take up their roles sincerely, reluctantly or instrumentally, these designs can change the ways in which they express their political agency, and their everyday interactions with the state and in the public sphere. Participatory citizenship is thus a performance, in Judith Butler's sense<sup>1</sup>, and one which can have powerful, lasting effects on individuals despite the 'artificiality' of the arenas in which it is played out.

The counter to these arguments about civil society's malleability is the claim that the success or failure of state-sponsored spaces of participation is largely shaped by pre-existing structures of civil and political society (Baiocchi et al. 2008). Rather than treating this as a rival hypothesis to be tested, we see it as indicating a second task for the evaluation of these 'invited spaces': we need to investigate how they shape performances of citizenship at an individual level, but in addition show how attempts to engineer participatory citizenship are located within (and co-constitutive of) multi-layered political contexts. The literature assessing experiments in participatory municipal budgeting in Brazil indicates two related tasks here. The first is to ask 'why would governments transfer decision-making power to deliberative spaces?' (Abers, 2003: 201), or to account for the interests which have led to new governmental arrangements in the first place. The second is to see how these deliberative spaces might change the relationships between civil society and the (local) state: here, Brazilian reforms have been successful in shifting civil society organisations' mode of engagement with the state from clientalism towards rule-bound, transparent associationalism, but not in developing their relative autonomy (Baiocchi et al. 2008). It is thus possible that participatory development fora can become central to community life (Baiocchi, 2006), but remain forms of political 'tutelage' dependent upon the state and

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open to political capture. Here we aim to take up both tasks by investigating Kudumbashree within Kerala's history of decentralisation and the political mobilisation of the Left, arguing that the local variations in political culture and party-political dynamics are important in determining the relative autonomy of Kudumbashree groups.

The third element of evaluation is to contextualise programmes linking poverty alleviation to participatory citizenship in another sense, to look at their role in 'problematization' (Li, 2007), the framing and definition of the issue they intend to address. This framing inevitably involves choices: who does the state invite into spaces for participation, which aspects of their disempowerment does it deem problematic, and how should these be addressed? Especially where interventions have been a significant focus of state activity, as Kudumbashree undoubtedly has within Kerala, it is important to examine the effects these choices have on those who become marginal to the programme, as well as those actively involved within it. Understanding which groups of 'the poor' have been unable to participate fully within Kudumbashree and why, and what this implies for the state's overall treatment of poverty, is therefore an important task.

Taken together, these three elements in the evaluation of programmes which aim to link poverty alleviation with participatory governance offer an analysis that extends beyond the immediate spaces and activities of state-sponsored participation itself. They ask wider questions about the performances which such programmes require of participants, the interactions between the institutional design of participatory arenas and local political contexts, and the patterns of exclusion/inclusion produced by their underlying visions of how poverty should be managed. It is with these questions in mind that we begin our investigation of Kudumbashree, looking first at the programme itself and its location within contemporary Kerala.

**Kerala's Kudumbashree Programme**

Kerala is justly famous for having human development indicators which far surpass those of many richer countries, and for being one of the Left's political strongholds within India. The Communist Party of India, Marxist (CPI(M)) first gained power in the State in 1957, and was successful in delivering a radical programme of agrarian land reform over the following decade. Since this date, control of Kerala's State Assembly has alternated between the CPI(M)-led Left Democratic Front (LDF) and the Congress-led United Democratic Front (UDF), but within this picture of constant change the CPI(M) has always played a major role in setting Kerala's political agenda. The dominant mode of mobilising its primarily working-class power base had been public and highly male-dominated struggles grounded in the demands of different employment groups. Significantly, these spread far beyond unions in the formal sector (industrial and white collar) to include a variety of informal sector workers and agricultural labourers, incorporating much of the state within a 'Kerala model' of employment-based social welfare. By the late 1980s, however, the limits of this particular form of corporatism were becoming apparent: costs of Kerala's welfare model were mounting, and its impressive record in redistribution was marred by increasing concerns over sluggish economic growth (Heller, 1995). In parallel, all-India debates on decentralisation as a means to accountable, participatory and effective local governance had gathered pace from the mid-1980s, supported by experiments in West Bengal, Karnataka and Kerala.<sup>ii</sup> These

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ultimately resulted in the 73<sup>rd</sup> and 74<sup>th</sup> Constitutional Amendments (1994) which required all States to implement three-tier systems of local government.

Against this local and national background, the CPI(M) launched the People's Planning Campaign (PPC) in 1996, an innovative experiment in decentralised planning which, along with Porto Alegre's Participatory Budget, has become an internationally celebrated case of empowered participatory governance in the Global South (Thomas Isaac with Franke, 2000; Thomas Isaac and Heller, 2003). The PPC saw India's most dramatic shift of power and resources towards local self government institutions in response to the Constitutional Amendments: its *gram panchayats* (rural councils) and municipalities have significant autonomy and responsibility in developmental planning, matched by over 35% of State Plan funds (Heller, 2001; Heller et al. 2007). This change was also part of a broader shift in the forms of political mobilisation practiced by the Left. The conflictual politics of labour struggles, although supported by more traditional elements of the CPI(M), had never delivered the Left a platform for sustained electoral dominance. Democratic decentralisation has been championed by others in the party, particularly those connected to the KSSP or People's Science Movement<sup>iii</sup>, as offering a new way to connect to a changing electoral base through promoting locally-based, practical problem-solving for development.

This political context provides a significant part of the answer to Abers' (2003) question about why participatory governance initiatives have been promoted in Kerala. Kudumbashree, launched in 1998, has been important in supporting this decentralisation drive, and its particular framing of a development 'problem' around gender, participation and poverty is also understandable in this context. There has long been recognition that Kerala's redistributive model had excluded some groups, including the Scheduled Tribes (Kurien, 1996), and it also remains a State within which gender discrimination and conservative gender norms remain powerful, despite its celebrated achievements in female literacy and health. Embracing women as a 'new' set of political actors – aiming to surpass the moderate female participation seen within the PPC – thus held the promise of both directly tackling pressing social concerns whilst supporting a move away from decades of conflictual politics.

Central to Kudumbashree's approach are three key organisational features. First, it operates through, and to the primary benefit of, women participants. The focus on women is deliberate, justified as a means of directly addressing gender gaps in literacy, skills, economic and social and political empowerment, but also because women are seen as effective agents of local development: "The working slogan of the Mission is to reach out [to] the family through women and reach out [to] the community through the family." (Kudumbashree Mission [no date] a p.65). Second, female participants are organised into groups for their self-improvement. The base (and symbolic heart) of the mission is therefore the neighbourhood group (NHG) of around 15-25 primarily 'Below Poverty Line' (BPL) women who come together for the betterment of their families and for wider community development. These neighbourhood groups are federated at the electoral ward level into Area Development Societies (ADSs), and at the municipality or *panchayat* level, ADSs are grouped into a Community Development Society (CDS) (see figure 1). Volunteer office-holders from each neighbourhood group are members of the ADS general body, and vote to elect its governing body: in turn all members of ADS governing bodies are ordinary members of the CDSs, and are able to elect its office holders. In this way, the groups are



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structured to represent poor women within strong, federated and autonomous institutions: CDSs are registered under the Charitable Societies Act, giving them an official status equal to registered NGOs, and the eligibility to receive funding from domestic and international sources.

[Figure 1 about here]

The third organisational feature of Kudumbashree, one which distinguishes it from similar federated self-help groups elsewhere in India, is the groups’ relationship with the state. Above the CDSs sit the District coordinators and State offices of the Kudumbashree Mission itself, an important part of the Government of Kerala with a senior Indian Administrative Service officer as its Executive Director. The Mission’s staff are responsible for the coordination of anti-poverty programmes and policy across a range of Kerala’s governmental institutions (from its Scheduled Tribe Department to the Kerala Spices Board), and for the delivery of training and support for group members via the CDSs. NHG formation is thus actively state-supported, and explicitly intended to incorporate all poor women into groups, and ultimately replacing the self-help groups set up under earlier government programmes within Kerala<sup>iv</sup>. Even given this strong governmental support, the roll-out of Kudumbashree has been impressive: the number of neighbourhood groups had expanded from 37,000 in April 2000 to 177,000 in November 2006, and it is estimated that some 3.8 million households, over half the State’s total of 7.5 million households, are engaged within the programme (Oommen, 2008).

Kudumbashree’s neighbourhood groups are thus intended to operate both as autonomous organisations for women’s economic development, and as state-crafted ‘invited spaces’ for their political participation, a blurring of roles that runs throughout the NHGs’ three main day-to-day activities. The first is to be active thrift and credit societies: all NHGs should undertake regular group based savings (of at least Rs.1 per member per day), and through this create revolving credit funds that contribute to interlinked developmental gains. Financially, they are intended to smooth over shortfalls in household income, reduce reliance on private moneylenders, and also to connect NHGs to the formal credit system, with group savings providing the collateral for loans from commercial banks. More broadly, this regular saving is intended to engender a degree of financial discipline and security for members, to foster group solidarity, and to build skills (including financial record keeping and group leadership). Second, they are to be microenterprise groups: the long-term drive within Kudumbashree is to provide women with new income-earning opportunities, enhancing their – and their families’ – economic wellbeing. These roles echo those of group-based micro-credit organisations elsewhere in the world, but the backing of the state is explicit in both: subsidised credit and other state benefits are channelled to neighbourhood groups’ BPL members, and Kudumbashree mission staff (along with government departments) advise and support the microenterprises conducted by them.

The groups’ third role, one explicitly intended to distance Kudumbashree from ‘World Bank’ inspired micro-credit programmes, is their engagement in participatory planning and the day-to-day activities of the local self-government institutions. Here, the NHGs are explicitly intended to provide the means whereby poor women’s ‘voice’ can influence local governance practices. Micro-planning at the NHG level is coordinated through the ADSs and CDSs into a coherent anti-poverty plan feeding directly in to panchayats’/municipalities’ annual planning process. This wider planning role echoes that of

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Kudumbashree's immediate forerunners, the Alappuzha community-based nutrition programme (1991 onwards) and experiments with Community Development Societies in Malappuram District.

Significantly, both schemes emphasised the provision of public goods (public health, literacy, Integrated Child Development Services) at least as much as the individual/group assets of thrift and credit and micro-enterprise activities. More generally, under the Kudumbashree mission, there has been a strong emphasis on encouraging NHG women to participate in the Ward open meetings that are the key opportunities for citizens to directly and publicly debate the activities of local self-government institutions (Kadiyala, 2004: p.20).

Kudumbashree is thus an indigenous programme linking participatory governance initiatives to poverty alleviation with the explicit intention of creating 'empowered' female citizens, and as such raises important questions with respect to each element of the evaluative framework we outlined above. First, it requires women to engage with the local developmental state: this entails particular performances of their participatory citizenship, and we need to investigate how this changes their everyday interactions in public (and private) space. Second, Kerala's history shows why participatory governance was supported by the CPI(M), and also the politicised context within which Kudumbashree operates. Questions about the impact of Kudumbashree's particular form of 'engineered' social space on state-society relationships are therefore important, and need to be investigated in relation to local political cultures. Finally, Kudumbashree sees women as having a responsibility for their families' 'uplift', and for arresting a broader decline in values of 'public service' in Kerala. Devika and Thampi (2007) argue that both are linked to an idea of women as 'caring citizens' and that this reinforces, rather than challenges, some elements of Kerala's conservative gender norms. Kudumbashree's rapid expansion means that its particular framing of the relationship between women's empowerment and poverty alleviation shapes the broader developmental vision of the State, and therefore particular attention needs to be given to who and what this vision excludes.

### **Kudumbashree in operation**

The empirical work presented here is part of a wider study of the participatory governance practices in West Bengal and Kerala, and within Kerala this centred on extended semi-structured interviews in two case-study *panchayats*, each of which was located in one of the State's poorer Districts.<sup>v</sup> Both Districts were included in the first round of the National Rural Employment Guarantee Programme on the grounds of their relative poverty, and both had also suffered from farmer suicides in the wake of the agrarian crisis which broke after 2000 (see Menon and Nair, 2007). The first case study area was located in Palakkad District, the heart of Kerala's rice-producing area, and also a heartland of CPI(M) support. 'Our' *panchayat* reflected this political background, and also had a close inter-linking of party, class and caste identities. A little over half of the *panchayat's* population came from the middle-caste Ezhava community, a group including former tenant farmers who as beneficiaries of Kerala's extensive CPI(M)-led land reforms had become owners of small farms. The history of land struggle still shaped political allegiances today: the local leadership of the CPI(M) was predominantly drawn from the Ezhava community, and the party had enjoyed a complete dominance of the local *panchayat* since decentralisation. The KSSP was inactive in our Palakkad *panchayat*, reflecting CPI(M)'s solidly working-class support base throughout the District. The original landowners, the high-caste Nair community



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(and some Brahmins), were associated with the Congress party, but were not a significant political force in the area.

The second *panchayat* of the study was located in Wayanad, a hill District which has been socially and politically quite distinct from many other areas within Kerala. The area had traditionally been largely ‘Tribal’, and *adivasi* communities comprised 20.9 % of the *panchayat*’s population according to 2001 census (and 17.7% of the District as a whole).<sup>vi</sup> Many of the other groups – Muslims, Hindus, and Christians – were more recent incomers to the District, with some of this ‘settler’ community making large fortunes from the establishment of plantation agriculture in the hills. Although this settlement process had involved widespread dispossession of *adivasi* groups, *adivasi* land rights had only become an important political issue very recently: this struggle had not produced the structured relationships between class, community and party seen in Palakkad. The political leadership of all parties primarily came from same richer strata of settler groups: the Muslim League, the Congress Party and the CPI(M) were all actively vying for control of the *panchayat*, but in sharp contrast to Palakkad, none had particularly well established organisational structures on the ground, and no single party was dominant. The two *panchayats* thus show some of the diversity of local political contexts within which Kudumbashree operates, and we return to the implications this has for women’s engagement with the local state below.

The Kudumbashree programme is active in both *panchayats*, with over 280 NHGs in each, and around half the households having at least one woman participating in the groups (Table 1). Kudumbashree was working well in its basic function as a network of thrift and credit groups: typical contributions from members were Rs.10/week, and members were gaining significant access to formal credit in addition to their savings. The success of micro-enterprise units within these groups was, however, more limited: fewer than 10% of Wayanad’s *panchayats* had started group-based enterprises, and there was a high rate of reported failure of the schemes in Palakkad. The income generating programmes experimented with included dairying, paper bag making, tailoring, rice marketing and lease-land rice farming, the latter being particularly important locally. The Kudumbashree District Coordinator, Palakkad, blamed the difficulties of these schemes on the ‘backward’ nature of the area, and indeed the limited skills and experience of the participants themselves (Interview, 20.03.2009). These seemingly prejudicial remarks point to significant differences between Palakkad and show-case areas for Kudumbashree such as Ernakulam, where groups have successfully undertaken diverse range of schemes including micro-tourism ventures and other high-end services. Regional economic backwardness certainly curtails the opportunities for entrepreneurialism open to Kudumbashree women, and the absence of the KSSP activists in our Palakkad *panchayat* also meant that groups had limited professional support to augment their own resources and experiences.

[Table 1 about here]

The third major activity of the neighbourhood groups, their engagement with the everyday business of the local state, remained high. A range of poverty alleviation schemes were being routed through the hierarchy of the NHGs: some of these were activities of the Kudumbashree Mission itself, such as the identification of destitute families for additional assistance through the *ashraya* scheme.<sup>vii</sup> More

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broadly, the groups had been entrusted with taking on programmes and projects of both the State and National government and two activities were particularly worthy of note here. First, Kudumbashree women had taken a major role in revising Kerala's official measurement of households' poverty status: it was argued that women would be more honest and accurate in their reporting of poverty within their neighbourhoods, but in practice the poverty survey had proved methodologically and politically contentious. Women had spent much time on the survey work, but felt that their exclusion from processes of verification and adjustment which took place in the *panchayat* offices had both questioned their capabilities and left them open to criticism of being complicit in any political manipulation of the final list.

The other role, indicating the LDF government's continued faith in Kudumbashree women (and its dependence upon their labour), was in the implementation of the National Rural Employment Guarantee Programme through the groups. NREGP is now the major national policy for solving rural unemployment during the agricultural slack-season across India, and in Kerala, a Government Order has made ADS groups responsible for the implementation of the Programme's public works schemes.<sup>viii</sup> In our sampled *panchayats*, this meant that women who had proved their worth as competent members of ADS or CDS bodies were playing important supervisory roles in the programme. The presence of these women, and the fact that Kerala's NREGP wages fell below local market rates for male casual labour, meant that in both *panchayats* it was primarily women rather than men who were working under the NREGP. This was challenging some existing gender norms, with women undertaking heavy manual labour, such as compacting stones in road building projects. It also led to the NREGP being seen as 'Kudumbashree work' by many households, with the result that membership of a Kudumbashree group was important in gaining access to NREGP employment in both our *panchayats*.

Kudumbashree had thus penetrated deeply into both our study's *panchayats*: not only did around half of all households have someone placed within a neighbourhood group, but also through this women (and particularly those involved in the ADSs and CDSs) were being closely integrated with the everyday work of the local state. Here we pick up on three important consequences of these changes, each of which echoes the questions with which we began this paper. First, we examine Kudumbashree's effects on women's expression of political agency and their interaction with the local state. Second, we turn to how this action as 'participatory citizens' is embedded within – and constrained by – multi-layered political contexts. Finally, we address the wider and longer-term consequences of this particular linking of participatory citizenship to poverty alleviation, examining the impacts of Kudumbashree on inclusion and exclusion from poverty-alleviation efforts.

*Enacting 'Participatory Citizenship': Kudumbashree and Engagement with the Local State*

There are clear indications that through involvement in the neighbourhood groups and the everyday activities of the local state, Kudumbashree was making some women more visible within public space. A Palakkad ADS chairperson who had become a *panchayat* Ward member in the 1990s noted that how strict practices of female exclusion had been in the area: 'Women were not allowed to go out for work or anything. It was like slavery.... When I came here I remained in the same way for ten years' (Interview, 10.3.2009). With *panchayat* reforms, the CPI(M) in Palakkad had encouraged women to participate in local government. She had been nominated (against her knowledge) and elected to a female reserved

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seat in the *panchayat*, and this had caused a dramatic shift in her own life: ‘Once I started coming out I hardly sit inside the house’ (Interview, 10.3.2009). Kudumbashree has clearly broadened this challenge to ongoing practices of seclusion: although only around a third of *panchayat* Wards have female members, over a hundred NHG members may be active in any given ward. The very nature of their work – the weekly group meetings, visits to banks and *panchayat* offices, or attendance at public meetings – mean that many women are now more visible in public, even at times of the evening when it would have earlier been deemed ‘proper’ for them to be within their own homes.

Many women spoke of the solidarity successful Neighbourhood Groups produced, and the wider impact this was having on social issues beyond their immediate economic roles. Physical presence at the groups’ rotating weekly meetings, held at each members’ house in turn, was important within this:

*Do issues of alcohol, irresponsibility, or violence arise from men?*

Yes, when such occasion comes, Kudumbashree members used to go and advise those husbands. Also, when we gather for meeting at each one’s house, a kind of change takes place there.

*Are women there getting more respect?*

When ten women come and meet at home, the husbands would think that he cannot do certain things so easily.

(Interview with CDS chairperson, Palakkad)

These changes would echo those noted by Sanyal (1999) in West Bengal, where trust and solidarity formed through the economic relationships of savings groups have given some women participants the confidence to intervene collectively to resolve a range of social problems, particularly those around gender relationships within the household. These activities are further strengthened by Kudumbashree’s explicit links to the formal structures of the local state. Observations within both field sites suggest that it was commonplace for Kudumbashree women to comprise the majority of participants within the *panchayat*’s own public meetings (*gram sabhas*), and ADS members were active in publicising these meetings, and in ensuring attendance from their own NHGs. Throughout these activities, Kudumbashree groups’ clear linkages to a well-publicised programme, and to the everyday activities of their local *panchayats*, have supported changes in women’s behaviour. Women were doing ‘government work’, with the implicit blessing of local and all-Kerala authorities, giving a degree of social legitimacy to their actions and room to challenge more socially conservative ideas of good behaviour. Such active participation within Kudumbashree groups can also be the first step towards a local political career. The reservation of 33% of seats for women within local government institutions provides opportunities for those who have demonstrated their competence and leadership potential within neighbourhood groups and the ADSs: evidence from our fieldsites and elsewhere (Devika and Thampi, forthcoming) shows that this can be one path towards women’s engagement with formal politics.

To this extent, Kudumbashree indicates the possibility of remoulding civil society through direct intervention. For some women, such as this ADS Chairperson, the resultant personal changes were significant:

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Since Kudumbashree was launched in [this] panchayat, I am in it organising all poor women. We began a unit with 20 members seven years back. It was done after our own initiation. We elected the President and secretary and started saving. After some time, we started giving loans. It is seven years since we started in 2001. I was the Secretary for three years, and then I became the ADS Secretary. In the latest election, I was elected ADS Chairperson. I didn't have a mere 10 rupees to remit when we began. Once my sister gave me a 20 rupees note and I began with that. The rest was with God. Now I have a good income and am somewhat known among the people around here."

(ADS Chairperson, Wayanad, interview: 20.03.2009)

The 'good income' she mentions here is supported through her position as an Accredited Social Health Activist (ASHA) under the National Rural Health Mission, a post which provides small honorariums for setting up group meetings and training activities. As she went on to note, her engagement with Kudumbashree and her consequent visibility within local government were important in her gaining this employment 'without anybody's support'. For women like her, Kudumbashree has undoubtedly expanded their social networks, and provided a route to secure livelihoods and enhanced social standing. Success in these terms is, however, still mediated by local gender norms: it would have been much more difficult for this woman to be so active within Kudumbashree if she were not already a widow.

It would also be wrong to imagine that all performances of women's participatory citizenship were spontaneous: perhaps inevitably, given the number of positions within the ADS and CDS that need to be filled, some women have these roles thrust upon them. Entry into Kudumbashree leadership can thus be both passive and reluctant, with a number of interviewees relating stories of strong pressure from within the family to become involved. In many cases this passive participation seemed to undermine women's autonomy, both within the household and from party political bosses, when playing their roles in practice. Kudumbashree is clearly opening up spaces in local government where women *can* become more active, but the extent to which they actually do so is shaped by existing gender norms of 'proper' behaviour, and also by the actions of existing power holders. Accordingly, the paper now addresses the contrasts between our two panchayats in the party-political mediation of women's participation.

*Locating Kudumbashree within its political context*

As was outlined above, Kudumbashree is linked to a changing strategy of political mobilisation supported by a section of Kerala's CPI(M), which could be broadly characterized as a shift from occupational-based welfare struggles to a 'developmental' politics based around engagement with decentralised government. These political drivers underpinning the massive growth of Kudumbashree groups across the State have two important consequences. First, tying Kudumbashree groups to structures of local governance, and making them responsible for elements of their planning, itself implies potential conflict between formal elected representatives and views expressed by women participating in voluntary groups, however internally democratic these may be. As Kadaliya (2004) notes, the official status of relationship between the ADS/CDS system and elected panchayat (and municipal) government bodies has been subject to rounds of debate in policy circles, before reaching the position

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that the Kudumbashree groups should be subsystems of the local self-government bodies, but not subordinate to them. This is a consensus of sorts, but a vague one, and open to different practical interpretations on the ground.

Second, although Kudumbashree membership expanded rapidly during the 2001-6 UDF government, enrolling women with different – or indeed no – party loyalties, more recently there has been public debate about the programme becoming specifically identified with (or captured by) the CPI(M). In response, the Congress Party set up rival savings and credit groups under their own umbrella organisation *Janashree* ('people's prosperity'), and attempts have been made by *Janashree* to encroach on Kudumbashree's organisation and vice-versa. In addition, a host of other NGO-, caste- or community-based thrift and credit groups exist across Kerala, many of which pre-date Kudumbashree: the LDF government's policy is to encourage these to link to the Kudumbashree structures, but in practice this sometimes appears to be eclipsed by political struggles to subsume them altogether. The government benefits associated with Kudumbashree membership, and the more liberal access to credit available within some non-Kudumbashree groups, are the resources deployed in these competitions. Women's participation within Kudumbashree therefore unfolds in an environment where its federated groups are, from their outset, potentially both in tension with the formal structures of elected local government and subject to open (and explicitly politicised) competition for women's membership of rival credit organisations. We now examine how these tensions are resolved in the contrasting political contexts of our two panchayats, to see their different implications for women's political empowerment.

In Wayanad, NGO-based savings-and-credit groups had been active long before Kudumbashree's launch. Although one locally important NGO had subsequently collapsed when the agrarian crisis struck the region and many of its groups had defaulted on loans, its activities (and those of other NGOs) had left behind a legacy of women knowledgeable and capable of this work who had no particular party affiliation or dependency. This was also a panchayat of mixed party-political composition where individual parties lacked the capacity to fill all Kudumbashree leadership positions with their own supporters. For example, the Muslim League did not even have an active women's wing locally, and more generally the leadership of all local parties was predominantly from the economic elite: they lacked the dense networks of activists among poorer households that would have permitted the dominance of ADS or CDS nominations.

Within this micro-political context, interviews indicated that the relationship between *panchayat* ward members and kudumbashree leaders was one in which there was a degree of inter-dependence, if not a little open rivalry. One particularly voiciferous ADS member, a Scheduled Caste activist with past membership of the Kerala Dalit Panthers, had openly challenged the panchayat's Ward members. She had battled to ensure the reinstatement of beneficiaries nominated in a *grama sabha* (ward public meeting) but subsequently by-passed by the *panchayat* board in its own meetings, and drew on both her local standing and her links with 'higher ups' in the Panthers in her work. She was proud of her own independence from local party politics, but recognised that party interference in Kudumbashree elections was increasing:



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You know, I got the highest vote from my ward in the panel election. Since most Scheduled Caste people come to me for help, they couldn't avoid me. I did not play any game to be included. Why should we? That time there was no politics in Kudumbashree ...now it's there... after the latest ADS/CDS election. These days most of those who are selected are from CPI(M) families.

(Interview, 03.04.2009)

In contrast, the Palakkad *panchayat's* complete dominance by the CPI(M) meant that the scope for independent action by Kudumbashree women was much more limited. It was clear that Ward members were directly overseeing the actions of Kudumbashree groups on a day-to-day basis, for example by intervening themselves to settle disputes or questions over groups' activities, rather than following the Mission's guidance that these should be resolved through the Kudumbashree's own ADS/CDS structures.

Partly in response to state-wide debates on the political independence of Kudumbashree units, in November 2008 fresh elections were held simultaneously across Kerala for all ADS and CDS office holders to bolster their legitimacy and demonstrate their autonomy. The differences between the two field sites were clearly seen within these elections. In Wayanad, an attempt by the *panchayat's* ward members to get their agreed ADS office bearers elected unopposed backfired: the women put forward a range of other candidates at the very last minute, and open and competitive elections were held (field notes, November 2008). In Palakkad, by contrast, the election passed off extremely smoothly and largely without incident: turn-over of posts was limited, with only minor shuffling the positions of ADS and CDS office-bearers. But as the following interview with the CDS Chairperson indicates, it was clear that the local CPI(M) leadership, rather than the Kudumbashree groups themselves, were directing this process:

*Is there any role for party or panchayat in deciding who should be the [CDS] chairman or president?*

That is normally executed by the party's pre-decisions. And it is as per that decision that the chairmanship is given. This is a kind of confidential operation.

*Is it implemented through [the CPI(M)'s women's wing]?*

No No

*Directly by the party?*

Directly by the party

(Interview, 21.03.2009)

Despite the claims from the Mission's District Coordinator in Palakkad that "in every *panchayat* Kudumbashree has a non-political identity" (interview, 20.03.2009), the elections here were an opportunity for the CPI(M) to both strengthen and publicly assert its control of the entire programme's operation.

These contrasts show the importance of local political cultures in determining the real value of the spaces which institutional designs for participatory citizenship create. In the absence of deeply-established party networks in Wayanad, active ADS and CDS members were able to use their situation to



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carve out a more autonomous role for themselves vis-à-vis the elected members of the panchayat, gaining respect and independent standing within the community as they did so. In Palakkad, the local CPI(M) was not subject to internal challenges from those elements of the party, or the KSSP, supportive of a fuller engagement with the spirit of the Kudumbashree programme. It was thus able to use the ambiguity of the official relationship between the *panchayat* board and the ADS members to consolidate its control of both, fusing the work of the *panchayat*, Kudumbashree, and that of the Party in public perceptions as it did so. As a result, Kudumbashree workers played a vital but clearly subordinate role in the implementation of the local Party's poverty-alleviation work, but were effectively excluded from the arenas where real decision-making was taking place.

*Kudumbashree's wider vision: empowerment for whom?*

The third element of our evaluation is to examine the consequences of Kudumbashree's particular definitions of poverty alleviation (as a transition from group-based savings to self-employment) and political empowerment (based on active engagement with the local state). Both offer important opportunities for poor women, but it is important to ask what each implies for patterns of inclusion and exclusion. With respect to poverty alleviation, not all poor women were able to benefit from group activities. Our interviews indicated that absolute constraints on the money and time participants could commit to Kudumbashree were causing some groups to fail, or stopping the poorest households from joining them at all. For a number of our interviewees, the Rs 10/week subscriptions were impossible to meet on a regular basis, and they could not sustain the sheer amount of time involved in the groups' activities. Those reliant on casual labouring work, and especially those where adult women were ill or infirm, were clearly finding it impossible to combine their daily wage work with the expectations of group membership. In Palakkad, the contrasts between groups of middle-caste Ezhava and Scheduled Caste Cheruma agricultural labourers revealed these constraints well. Many Ezhava families, whilst having one or two agricultural labouring members, were sufficiently well off for younger adults to complete their education and gain access to off-farm employment. This relative economic security, combined with the community's close engagement with CPI(M) activities, meant that Ezhava women were well placed to become active members of NHGs, backed by the financial support and party experience of their families. Many Cheruma families, by contrast, had not been able to diversify their livelihoods in this manner, and remained completely reliant on wage labour: it was among these households that reported rates of non-engagement or group disintegration were higher.

Furthermore, whilst overall participation in Kudumbashree was high in both *panchayats*, non-participation was reinforcing existing patterns of social exclusion. The Wayanad site's Paniya community, locally considered to be a 'backward' *adivasi* group, had a participation rate of only 25% of households, far below that of the area as a whole (55%). Figures for the Palakkad field site's small Nayadi community, a formerly 'untouchable' group which still suffered from extreme social stigma, were even worse: none its 16 households had any Kudumbashree members, despite the local CPI(M)'s efforts to engage the community with the panchayat's activities more generally. Other forms of group-based exclusion may be more voluntary, for example interviewees among the artisan castes in Palakkad claimed that joining the programme was tantamount to pledging support to the CPI(M), and they valued their communities' political independence above the benefits of Kudumbashree. Given the nature of

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caste-, community- and party-rivalry in Kerala, it is unlikely that these Paniya, Nayadi or artisans' experiences are exceptional. Low-status groups beyond the pale of 'mainstream' society are likely to find insurmountable barriers to their participation, but also to be joined in their exclusion by other pockets of households finding themselves marginalised through their position within local political or communal divisions.

These barriers to group participation are, if anything, increased further through the expectations of active citizenship placed upon the groups. Sanyal (2009) is surely right in arguing that savings and credit groups can develop the social networks of poorer women, but it also needs to be stressed that social capital in Bordieu's sense was important in allowing women to make full use of the opportunities for political empowerment which Kudumbashree presents. Our interviews indicated that most Kudumbashree leaders – those active within the ADS and CDS groups – were not drawn from the poorest sections of Keralan society. Most already had a degree of family (and/or political party) support in taking up their positions, and the arguably 'middle class' attributes of being educated, a good spokesperson, and being well-connected were essential to their ability to perform their roles effectively. Where poorer women were playing strong, independent roles within Kudumbashree their pre-existing experience and contacts, such the Dalit Panther background of the Wayanad ADS member cited above, were important in facilitating this.

Kudumbashree was making women more visible through their public enagement with the local state, but again the costs of this participation need to be evaluated. In direct and practical terms, ADS and CDS members were investing time and money in their day-to-day work, effectively subsidising their own posts. CDS members had a very limited allowance for their travel and telephone expenses, whereas ADS members had none at all: several interviewees mentioned this as an additional burden of already demanding jobs. The routing of NREGP work through the Kudumbashree structure to some extent compensated for this (many ADS members supervised NREGP work projects, earning standard NREGP wages for doing so), but this was a recent feature and it remained financially difficult for women in the poorest households in either of our field sites to play these leadership roles. More broadly, in the name of public service, all Kudumbashree women were asked to take on significant work for local government. They conducted re-survey of Below Poverty Line households, were vital in sustaining attendance at the village open meetings (which had undoubtedly fallen away since the beginning of the People's Planning Campaign), and without their presence as supervisors and workers, the NREGP would not have been active in our panchayats. Important jobs – enumeration work, extension activities and information exchange, and even mustering effective performances of the state's commitment to public participation – are therefore falling increasingly on the shoulders of Kudumbashree women, whose under- or un-paid labour has become vital to the local state's everyday operation. The Kudumbashree Mission's intention of 'reaching out to the community through the family' was thus making women more visible in the public life of the *panchayats*, but this was also causing some resentment from the women concerned, particularly in those situations when it was obvious to them that their providision of labour was not matched by decision-making power.

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One final concern is that Kudumbashree’s rapid expansion holds the possibility that poverty alleviation becomes not only a duty for female ‘active citizens’, but also one that is increasingly narrowly conceived in terms of the neighbourhood groups and their prescribed activities. Despite the broad conceptualisation of gender and development that underpinned Kudumbashree’s forerunners in Alappuzha and Malappuram, it was clear that micro-business development had become the ‘default option’ for policy thinking. Although Kudumbashree groups should have a role in identifying poor people’s needs within the panchayat’s anti-poverty planning, in both study areas elected panchayat members were not involving them in this process. Similarly, expenditure within the 10% of panchayat resources reserved for the Women Component Plan was being primarily directed at supporting credit and enterprise activities of Kudumbashree groups, rather than in the provision of public goods or any alternative means to address women’s wider gender needs. This narrowness of thinking was certainly a missed opportunity, and is worrying given the exclusions of group membership and leadership outlined above: this ‘talent effect’ is not surprising in itself, but was being magnified greatly by channelling many of the state’s poverty-alleviation efforts through Kudumbashree. As a result, neither the limitations of self-help groups in providing routes out of poverty, nor the inequity of the burdens of ‘active citizenship’ envisaged within Kudumbashree, were being subject to public debate.

Conclusions

This evaluation of Kerala’s Kudumbashree programme has illustrated three main arguments. First, women’s performances of participatory citizenship within the programme are having real effects on their broader visibility within the public sphere. Kudumbashree’s federated groups of poor women may be ‘artificial’ creations engineered to link to and support the local state, but they have value in themselves, both in facilitating what are sometimes dramatic changes to the lives of individual participants, and in their broader challenge to everyday understandings of ‘correct’ female behaviour. As Sanyal’s (2009) work on self-help groups in West Bengal reminds us, the fact that this challenge is rooted in mundane and economic transactions – the everyday practices of meeting and saving together – should not prejudice us against its potential value.

Second, although this suggests that civil society can be remodelled through the intentional designs of participatory governance programmes, this malleability has its limits and these become clear through an analysis of Kudumbashree’s place within Kerala’s contemporary politics. Throughout the State, the programme is highly politicised due to both ambiguities in the formal institutional relationships between ADSs/CDSs and the *panchayats*, and the open competition between Kudumbashree and rival organisations over the membership and political loyalties of women’s self-help groups. The degree to which these tensions provide Kudumbashree women with ‘invited spaces’ of relative autonomy and power is ultimately determined more locally. These spaces were of value in our Wayanad site’s weakly networked political society, but in Palakkad, the lack of cross-party competition, and the particular nature of the CPI(M)’s local leadership, were important in closing them down: ‘active citizenship’ here certainly involved extensive engagement with government, but under terms and conditions of the Party’s choosing. Kudumbashree therefore offers Kerala’s civil society a form of ‘tutelage’ (Baicocchi et al., 2008): it has brought about new forms of associationalism amongst previously unorganised poorer women, but remains entirely state-facing, and hostage to local political dynamics.

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Third, it is important to question Kudumbashree's wider framing of the linkages between poverty alleviation and active citizenship. Although it provides a welcome challenge to gender norms through establishing federated groups of women, it is clear that group membership – let alone leadership – remains difficult for some of the poorest and most marginalised women, and that Kudumbashree's underlying model of poverty relief as economic empowerment through entrepreneurialism is not suitable for all. It is here that the scheme's aggregate success, in terms of the raw numbers of NHGs created and the billions of rupees both saved and loaned by them across Kerala as a whole, might both ossify its approach and hide the inequities which exist within it. Kudumbashree remains explicitly political in that its group leadership and activities are deeply embedded within the contests of local government, and the linkages between the programme and the CPI(M) are debated across Kerala. It is perhaps depoliticising in another sense, in that Kudumbashree's basis in thrift and credit activities has arguably foreclosed a wider public debate on the idea of poverty alleviation it embodies.

It is this that brings us back to Kudumbashree's place within Indian and international debates on poverty alleviation. As noted at the outset, Kudumbashree's linking of a particular vision of self-help with participatory forms of governance is indicative of wider trends in the management of poverty across the Global South, and as such provides two important lessons for those evaluating similar initiatives elsewhere. The first is that we need to recognise that the impacts of such programmes on the ground will always be mixed due to their complex interplay with local patterns of formal and informal political power. As a result, trying to abstract from Kudumbashree a model of 'best practice' in terms of programme content or institutional design is a fruitless – or even dangerous – exercise unless proper attention is paid to the political contexts of both Kerala, and anywhere that equivalent programmes might be replicated.

The second is that in any such evaluation, the underlying assumptions of programmes aiming to foster 'active citizenship' always need to be opened up to scrutiny. In short, we must always ask what it is that people are being encouraged to participate in. Kudumbashree represents a linking of group participation and state resources to a particular performance of active female citizenship, within which community service, 'respectability', and self-help are important elements. For Kudumbashree's participants, this provided solidarity, and access to both credit and the operation of local government, bought at the expense of supporting the local state through their 'voluntary' labour. For other poorer women, the demands of this form of participation were simply too high to bear, yet still resulted in their marginalisation from a dominant model of poverty relief. Particularly for initiatives such as Kudumbashree which are rightly celebrated for their successes, it is important that academics are in a position to provide grounded critical reflection on the full costs, as well as the value, of the performances of participatory citizenship these programmes entail.

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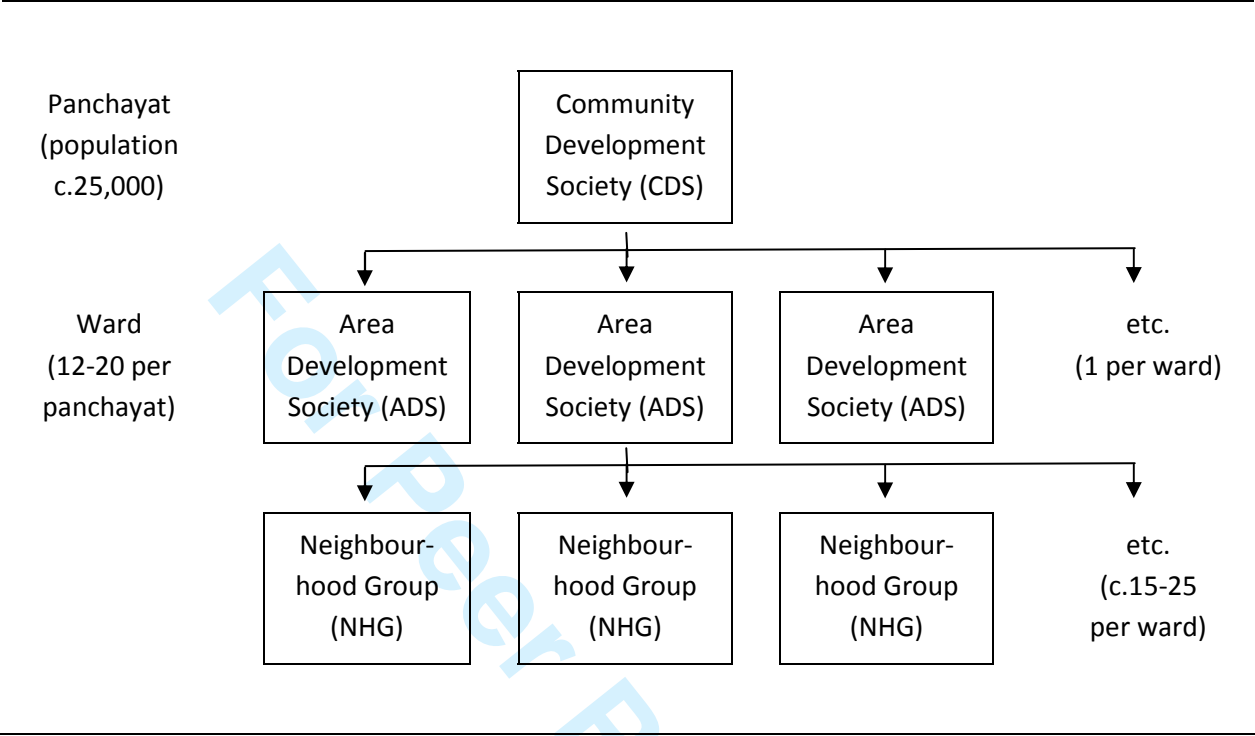
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Figure 1 The Structure of Kudumbashree



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Table 1: Kudumbashree in Wayanad and Palakkad.

	Wayanad	Palakkad
Total households engaging in Kudumbashree	5775	4276
Proportion of households in Kudumbashree*	55%	43%
Number of NHGs formed	302	284
Savings/ member	Rs.3300	Rs.3300
Borrowing/ member	Rs.6200	Rs.8600

Sources: CDS records, Wayanad and Palakkad. All are calculated for the panchayats as a whole, with the exception of \* (Proportion of households in Kudumbashree), based around our own survey of 3 electoral wards (n>1000 for both field sites).

<sup>i</sup> Butler (1999) argues that gender is something which we *do* rather than something which we *are*: we thus perform our gender as part of our identity within the constraints of our social and historical contexts. Seeing participatory citizenship as a performance would similarly highlight the situated ways in which political identity and agency are expressed through action.

<sup>ii</sup> In the late 1980s, Kerala's LDF experimented with decentralised District Councils: these were dismantled by the UDF government which came to power in 1991.

<sup>iii</sup> The KSSP (Kerala Sastra Sahitya Parishad) is a mass organization of left-leaning social activists largely drawn from Kerala's educated and professional classes, and lies formally outside the CPI(M). The KSSP was important in the success of Kerala's 1991 mass literacy campaign, and provided crucial voluntary technical input to the People's Planning Campaign, often from members who were retired public servants.

<sup>iv</sup> Self-help groups established for the purposes of micro-enterprise development under the national Swarnjayanti Gram Swarozgar Yojana (SGSY) have been wound up in Kerala, and all SGSY funding is now routed through the Mission and its women's groups.

<sup>v</sup> Research was funded under the ESRC/DFID Scheme for Research on International Poverty Reduction, award number RES-167-25-0268. The *panchayat*-based fieldwork included a range of methods: the sources primarily drawn upon here are interviews with local resource persons (elected panchayat and Kudumbashree office holders, administrators, and political leaders) and with purposively sampled groups of households from communities facing

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3  
4 different forms of marginalisation. Importantly for the purposes of this paper, whilst the former enabled an  
5 overview of the *panchayat*-level politics, the household interviewees were predominantly among the poorest  
6 groups within the *panchayat*.  
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9 <sup>vi</sup> The *adivasi* (aboriginal) peoples of India are a state-recognised category: as ‘Scheduled Tribes’, they have been  
10 targeted within various government programmes aiming at their ‘uplift’ or integration with ‘mainstream’ society.  
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12 <sup>vii</sup> The *ashraya* programme – 75% funded by the Mission, and 25% from panchayat’s plan funds – aims to meet the  
13 needs of completely destitute households. The ADS (along with the panchayat’s ward member) identify destitute  
14 families at the ward level, and the CDS chair decides about the forms of assistance (clothing, food, etc.)  
15 appropriate for individual cases in conjunction with the panchayat board.  
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18 <sup>viii</sup> NREGP specifies that local government and NGOs, and not contractors, are to implement its schemes: Kerala  
19 specifically chose to nominate Kudumbashree bodies to fulfill this role.  
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