# KITEs:
# The Case of First Women IT Micro Enterprises in Kerala

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### Abstract

This paper is based on a study which captures the formation of a gender-inclined Government Information Communication Technology (ICT) programme of Kerala. Kerala is considered one of the most developed southern states of India, known for its unsurpassed place in various Human Development Indices. The study illustrates the targeted development of women through Kudumbasree, utilizing ICT as a priority for the achievement of sustainable development. The programme was named the Kudumbashree IT Enterprises (KITEs). The paper has also tried to elucidate the structural situations which prevailed in Kerala during the formation of KITEs. Data was collected from the 63 Kudumbashree IT enterprises in the state of Kerala. Group discussions were employed to generate data. The study is focussed around the only existing government ICT programme for women in Kerala known for its unprecedented schemes and innovative policies which led to a huge impact on the power of choice exercised by women during 1990s.

### Keywords

ICT, kudumbashree, micro-enterprises, women

### Introduction

The state of Kerala, situated in southern India achieved significant success in reducing poverty and social inequalities through popular mobilizations and public actions. Kannan (2005) observed that the development trajectory

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traversed by Kerala demonstrates a unique experience displaying social development with poverty alleviation achieved along with remarkable reduction in spatial and gender gaps. There have been attempts by some scholars (Mathew, 1997; George, 1999) to unravel the severe fiscal and economic situation in Kerala which prevailed to cause certain serious development dilemmas. The 73rd and 74th Constitutional amendments to the Indian Constitution by the central government led to decentralized planning devolving administrative powers to local bodies. In 1996, the Left Democratic Front (LDF) government launched an innovative programme of micro-level decentralized development planning based on the newly acquired political system of local administration (Franke and Chasin, 2000). This new initiative was called the "People's Plan," which skilfully made use of the experiences from the "Total Literacy Campaign" and "People's Resource Mapping Programme" initiated at the behest of the Kerala Sastra Sahitya Parishad (KSSP) which was primarily known as Kerala's largest NGO during the 1980s (Franke and Chasin 2000; Parayil and Sreekumar, 2003). This resulted in the formulation of systematic micro-level planning with the assistance and participation of local communities under the guidance of the three tier local administrative bodies. During this period, the already evolved system of the Community Development Society (CDS) emerged with newly acquired support from the government, the National Bank for Rural Development (NABARD), and other donors. Families identified as poor were organized into neighbourhood groups (NHGs) by a community organizer, an employee of the municipality (Kadiyala, 2004). The potential of these NHGs was recognized through the various thrift and credit societies and microcredit activities handled by the group members.

According to Kadiyala (2004), the government of Kerala decided to broaden the functioning of the CDS throughout the state under the name "Kudumbashree" during April 1998, which literally meant "prosperity to the family". It acts as a women-oriented participatory programme and aims to eradicate absolute poverty through concerted community action under the leadership of local self-governments (LSGs). As a result, women's issues were highlighted and the "women's group" came to the forefront of the development agenda. The discretionary power of choice rested in the hands of these women for becoming a part of Kudumbashree and also paves the way for the better understanding of the effective functioning of decentralization in Kerala. This system has encouraged experimentation

and innovation, enabling good practices worthy of replication. Activities through community-based organizations with the aim of the empowerment of women were centred on community-based service co-ordination, encouraging thrift and credits, and the starting of micro-enterprises.

A simple and practical way for identifying enterprises was devised; any idea that could solve a problem existing in the society (Problem Solving), fill the gap that existed (Gap Filling) or cater to new opportunity (Emerging Opportunities) was converted into an enterprise. As a result, the officials of the project decided to tap into the potential of ICT for employment generation and poverty eradication. This was contrary to the opinion (or rather misconception) of the common people of Kerala and the political leadership, as they believed that ICT is for elite people and it can generate employment opportunities only for the highly educated, well versed in computer programming (Prasad and Sreedevi, 2007). However, the Kudumbashree officials encouraged poorly educated women from the NHGs to set up micro-enterprises based on the effective application of ICT which were popularly known as Kudumbashree IT Enterprises (KITEs). Hence, deviating from the "tried and tested" pattern so far followed by various government and private agencies for implementing self-employment schemes, promotion of innovative business ideas through micro-enterprises based on ICT were tested for the first time under the Kudumbashree project. This has been innovative in its instigation as very rarely has any attempt been made to enable poor women to make direct use of ICTs (Manoj, 2012). Heeks (2005) argued that these ICT consumption projects gathered the capacity to generate jobs, incomes, skills, gender equalities and empowerment. Kudumbashree has a tie-up with the Entrepreneurship Development Institute of India (EDII) to improve the performance of its micro-enterprises. All these cooperative enterprises are owned, managed and operated by women. A similar study was put forward by Rhodes (2009) which saw the emergence of such micro enterprises as an opportunity for providing gainful self-employment to the poor living below the poverty line and thereby improving their income and living standards. This explains the role played by such entrepreneurial activities judiciously utilizing ICT as a tool to enhance women's participation.

This article explains the experiences of the first IT micro entrepreneurial activities of women who organized themselves into a group under Kudumbashree. The paper analyses the emergence as well as the current status of these enterprises.

## Methodology

The study employed a mixed methods approach. The combination of qualitative and quantitative research methods provided  grounds for methodological pluralism or eclecticism. Empirical data was collected from Kudumbashree IT enterprises as these were the only government-initiated ICT programmes for women in Kerala. The research attempted to capture the fundamental structure of the government-initiated gender-focussed ICT programme for women in Kerala. These ICT programmes were the outcome of "gender focussed" government of Kerala intervention that required the application of ICT as a major force in the mode of production. The list of government women ICT units in Kerala was obtained from the head office of the Kudumbashree mission. The state of Kerala had 63 women's IT enterprises and all 63 KITEs were studied. Women in these units were in the age group of between 25–60 years. Those who had more than five years of experience in the ICT programme for women innovated by the government of Kerala formed the sample of study. More experienced women were selected purposively to ensure objective, normative and imperative responses to add to the interpretive understanding of their social action. Thus the total sample of the study was 280 women.

Data collection was carried out from December 2013 to March 2015. Quantitative data was collected using an interview schedule from the 280 women about their socio-economic profile, their reasons for taking up this job, the challenges they had to face and how they overcame them. Qualitative data was collected through semi-structured interviews, in-depth interviews and focus group discussions. In-depth interviews were carried out with 38 group leaders and some of the women whom we understood from the quantitative data had taken this job as a challenge and emerged as really successful. Sixteen focus group interviews consisting of 6 to 8 members were moderated to identify certain factors like group structure, individual links that are both overt and covert, hierarchy, rules, allocative resources, authoritative resources, interactions, group solidarity and social capital. Key informant interviews, which were mostly semi-structured, were carried out with the officials of Kerala State Women Development Corporation (KSWDC) and Kerala State IT Mission (KSITM), politicians and bureaucrats at the state and local level. All the data was subjected to "research cycling" to enhance data validity by moving to and fro between reflection and experience, from experience to ideas, and from ideas to reflection to obtain lucid data content without vagueness, ambiguity, illusion, and confusion.

## Constitution

Conceptualization of Kudumbashree IT Enterprises (KITEs) can be considered to be the result of various social reforms and the resultant structural changes which were the aftermath of the 73rd and 74th Constitutional Amendment Acts of 1992, leading to decentralized planning. As a result, Panchayathi Raj Institutions (PRIs) and Urban Local Bodies (ULBs) obtained constitutional status as part of decentralization. In Kerala, the People's Plan Campaign was launched by the LDF government on August 17, 1996 to institutionalize the process of decentralization. Women's issues were highlighted and neighbourhood groups (NHGs) came to the forefront as solutions for various problems faced by women in Kerala. Shortly afterwards, Kudumbashree was launched on May 18, 1998 as a gender focussed programme for women to address the issues of poverty and empowerment. It worked in tandem with the local self-government institutions (LSGIs) for poverty eradication. With the formation of the Kudumbashree Mission (KM), various government departments were symbiotically tethered to enhance women's participation at grass roots level. Efficient opportunities like thrift and credit, service-coordination and micro-enterprises or self-help groups (SHGs) were formed through women's community networks. Micro-enterprises are shaped by the three factors identified by the authorities which were: problem-solving, gap-filling and emerging opportunity. Hence, Kudumbashree officials decided to tap into the potential of IT for employment generation and poverty eradication amongst women. This venture became Kudumbashree's most innovative aspect (Manoj, 2012).

As previously discussed, in Kerala, it was during the beginning of 1999 when the potential of IT to generate opportunities and employment was identified. This prospect of IT was also recognized by the officials of the Kudumbashree Mission (KM) and they found an opportunity to solve the problem faced by the local bodies. There was a huge backlog of data to be digitized in 34 departments of the government. Panchayath employees' Provident Fund services credit card generation, the Motor Vehicle Department's driving licenses and registration of vehicles, and the Civil Supplies Department's ration card data entry were some of the major future projects they wished to launch by the initiation of the Kudumbashree IT Enterprises (KITEs). The problem context was put forward during a meeting held on August 15, 1999 under the authority of the executive director in the presence of programme coordinators from the Kudumbashree District

Mission (KDM). Women became the target group as two widows came in search of employment at the KDM office in Thiruvananthapuram which propounded the idea of constructing a collective alliance of women in the form of KITEs. The process of data entry appeared to be an ensuring venture due to the huge availability of data. But the process was complex in terms of assuring the obtainability of data entry assignments which demanded a system of strategic intermediation from Kudumbashree officials. Location, infrastructure and funding were the factors to be covered before starting the programme.

In order to perpetuate the functioning of such an agency, the Kudumbashree Mission ensured the district coordinators and the entrepreneurs that all the units initiated before March 31, 2010 would be provided with the required tasks and assignments worth Rs. 1 million without any hindrance. This information was systematically distributed through CDS, COs, municipalities, grama sabhas and panchayaths to finally reach the bottom of the structure, the NHGs. Banks had apprehensions regarding the efficacy of KITEs but the Kudumbashree Mission took care of these concerns by persuading the bank officials and reassuring the monitoring role handled by them. Based on the mutual understanding between the officials of both sides, loans were approved from the Syndicate Bank in Thiruvananthapuram. The proposed project cost was Rs. 0.3 million and Rs. 0.1 million was the subsidy sanctioned as a reward or support for instigating such a novel venture. The Kudumbashree Mission had already established itself as a comprehensive poverty-alleviation programme which focussed primarily on micro-finance during the late 1980s and early 1990s (John, 2009). SHGs and NHGs were constructed among poor women as part of this endeavour to effectively converge resources and actions (Thomas and Prabhu, 2014). This pre-established popularity also resulted in the wide acceptance of KITEs among the women. Attributes related to the associated roles were defined in terms of their age, essential skills and educational qualifications. It was also required that these members or anyone belonging to their family should be enrolled in a nearby NHG. Women below 35 years of age, having Secondary School Leaving Certificate (SSLC) or above as educational qualifications and skilled in typewriting were the prerequisites identified for the members. Basic awareness and hands-on experience of computer applications was also preferred. The raw data procured from government departments or local bodies was

collected and organized by the Kudumbashree Mission to make it error free. Forty-nine applications were received from Thiruvananthapuram, where the attempt to create an IT programme for women first commenced. After screening these applications, 10 women were selected. On September 15, 1999, Thiruvananthapuram saw the beginning of the first Government IT programme for women in Kerala. Its inauguration was held in the presence of all the district Kudumbashree Mission coordinators, ten entrepreneurs, bureaucrats from government departments, the director and executive director and programme coordinators of the Kudumbashree Mission. V. Sivankutty, the then corporation mayor, inaugurated the first KITE, which was situated on the ground floor of the KDM office, Thiruvananthapuram. It started working with 10 entrepreneurs, 5 computers and a 3 kg UPS (uninterrupted power supply) supported the very basic infrastructure. Work was handled on the basis of shifts from 8 a.m. to 2 p.m. and 2 to 6 or 8 p.m. which was dependent on the amount of data to be entered. A software team was also recruited by the Kudumbashree Mission to design and construct the required data entry software associated with each type of work. The Kudumbashree Mission used the cascade effect to brief the information to a greater population. Follow-up meetings were organized and this resulted in the formation of 47 KITEs within the span of one year. The tasks were standardized and incorporated into the structure of the Kudumbashree Mission. Hence, three categories of KITEs were formed to enhance their coherence and self-dependence. They are listed below:

### 1. Consulting Enterprises

These IT enterprises provide ICT related support activities like computer and software training, consultancy and other services. It was a turning point in the history of IT implementation in Kerala when the IT@School Project under the general education department was set-up to augment the IT education in schools. Government of Kerala rolled out this project in the year 2001 to enhance the quality of IT education towards a complete ICT enabled educational system. The project envisaged enhancing the role of IT as a teaching aid for learning all subjects. It was Kudumbashree Mission which seized this opportunity to obtain a five year contract to implement IT education at schools through Kudumbashree women. As a result, Vidyashree IT units were established successfully all over the state as consulting agencies with five women in each enterprise and charging R.50

per student. During the year 2006, there were 151 Vidyashree IT units working in all the 14 districts of Kerala.

## 2. Processing Enterprises

These units use ICT as a primary processing technology. They provide data entry services, ICT based business services, and software customisation. They create local digital content for public sector organizations. Such work was mostly done by data entry enterprises existing all over Kerala. A software team of professionals was also formed to support them in data entry assignments. They reached the maximum number during the year 2006 with 96 KITEs working all over Kerala.

## 3. Hardware Assembling Enterprises

They produce ICTs as an enterprise output. They assemble hardware and produce hardware, software, and telecommunication products (Duncombe et al., 2005). The formation of such enterprises was also intended to make them self-reliant by equipping them with the necessary expertise to tackle computer system issues. There were six hardware units amongst KITEs which played a major role in handling the hardware issues of various enterprises.

### Motivating Factors

The novel initiative was an inspiration for the women entrepreneurs as it utilized IT as a contemporary, complex and enthralling entity in those days, as a viable tool. They saw the undertaking of government-related transactions as a possibility to attain considerable respectability. The nature of these transactions also held an opportunity to continuously interact and network with the people as well as government officials. Moreover, the presence of a collective agency, a known location to work and the extreme support provided by the government, established self-assurance in their mind set which further enriched their motivation. For the purpose of starting an enterprise, these women were initially supported by the government and these supports were mainly in the form of loans, infrastructure, market and consultancy. A subsidy of Rs. 0.1 million was sanctioned as reward to motivate them and the rest of the amount had to be raised by these women as a group. The proposed project cost was Rs. 0.3 million, therefore around Rs. 0.25 million was taken as loans from banks which were easily made available to them under the assurance of the Kudumbashree Mission (Arun et al.,

2004), providing a significant degree of institutional support from government departments, banks, other financial intermediaries, and local organizations. As a result, by the year 2006 there were 254 KITEs in total which included 97 data entry enterprises, 151 Vidyashree IT enterprises and 6 hardware enterprises all over Kerala. Such associations had also led them to become a part of the most intense and widespread network of women called Kudumbashree. Thus was a huge leap in their capability of forming social networks. Along with this, the driving force which motivated them to become a part of such an enterprise was their tendency to accumulate capital which enabled them to overcome a state of poverty. As noted above, the work schedules were in contrast to the conventional working pattern as they followed flexible working periods which could be adapted easily by women. It also allowed them to alter work day start and finish times. These women entrepreneurs gained significant status amongst their family members, as they could contribute to the material needs of the family members, and hence participate in the decision-making process of the household.

It was mainly after 2006 when most of the issues started occurring in the form of structural deficiencies. It was during 2011 that a major downfall took place in the strength of KITEs. It 2007 Vidyashree IT enterprises were shut down due to substantial protests from school authorities. This was in an attempt to employ IT professionals in order to coordinate IT training for students. There were a lack of payments and of data entry assignments which led to the further deterioration of their circumstances. As a result, they were reduced to 59 from 101 in their numbers all over Kerala. Presently, there are 63 KITEs in existence in Kerala, representing 280 women entrepreneurs from all 14 districts of Kerala.

## Shortcomings

Almost all the IT units identified their inability to obtain adequate work for their survival as the prime hindrance in the path of development. This was even recognized as the major cause for the destruction of most of the KITEs. It was during 2006 when the hardware units, Vidyashree and data entry units saw an upward movement and rose to the maximum of 254 units in total. As discussed above, the Vidyashree IT enterprise members who were working in the government-initiated IT@school project were asked to withdraw from the same project due to the termination of their bond which was meant to be for five years. But some of these Vidyashree

IT enterprises managed to continue as data entry units, escalating the expansion of KITEs to number 101 units in total. Soon after 2007, certain administrative and structural issues led to the obliteration of most of the units. These led to the foundation of an inconsistent mode of production. A study by Duncombe et al. (2005) illustrated similar problems associated with women's IT enterprises but other studies from Prasad and Sreedevi (2007) and Arun et al. (2004) did not mention such a hurdle. Another issue which led to work deficit was the computerisation of several government departments which caused a huge reduction in the availability of raw data for them to digitize. Also, they were not highly efficient to compete with the private sector where exclusive assignments on web-designing and colour printing were handled. Duncombe et al. (2005) viewed this as a major hindrance in the path of KITEs. Such a development of private sector specialized services added to the already existing competition where these women were already in a disadvantageous position. Hence, apart from the shortage in data entry assignments, there was rising insecurity and uncertainty linked to capital accumulation. Even though this problem was the concomitant of the work deficit, there were certain other issues which led to the further destruction of KITEs.

These loans were lent to them by mortgaging the subject's assets or property which were mostly gold ornaments followed by land and in some cases even houses. Hence the enterprises which struggled from the beginning to acquire data entry work could not repay their loans and were closed down. Along with this financial responsibility, they were also supposed to pay their phone bills, electricity bills, internet bills and room rent. The payments were made by the government departments after the completion of the work. Initially, these women entrepreneurs received a specific portion of the payment in advance but such a system was stopped by the Kudumbashree Mission after some years. It was mainly after 2007, when a drastic drop of these IT enterprises was observed due to immense delays in payments and data entry work. It was during this period that the number was reduced to 68 from 101. Although it was clearly observed that as these women entrepreneurs were "free proprietors" of their own labour, they had to use a part of their wages to maintain unobstructed production of digitized forms of data. But in reality they were forced to sell because they could not exist without selling their labour power. They also lacked any access to the relations of production and could not sell products without the intervention of the

Kudumbashree Mission. These women entrepreneurs also seemed to have no other way than selling their labour power as they voluntarily involved themselves in debt unaware of its consequences. Another problem was unskilled labour which was increased by the limited skill set and experience with the IT occupational environment when compared to the highly thorough and efficient professional employees of the IT sector. This factor hampered their customer base and the lack of professionalism added to the already existing set of drawbacks. Due to financial problems, they could not upgrade their infrastructure and technical tools like computers, software, and printers which hindered their process of production.

Family conflict was another problem which depicts the reinforced social, political and material inequality faced by women constituted by the difference in power. The information obtained draws attention to the underlying and encompassing structures of gender. Major issues arose when these women deviated from the already existing traditional roles and responsibilities assigned to them by the societal arrangement. They faced certain hurdles in balancing their work with the family role. Overworking was the key issue which resulted in the formation of a system of wages which exploited these workers. They were not getting paid for their surplus labour. Along with the above-stated hindrance, the wage system followed by the agency caused a huge lag in getting paid for the finished task. The dominant members of their family demanded a steady flow of enough financial capital at least every month in exchange for the surplus labour consumed in the process of production by the women entrepreneurs. This lack of steady flow of "indemnity" resulted in conflicts in the case of women working in KITEs.

Political interruptions formed another factor that affected the effective working of these women entrepreneurs. The problem was mainly identified not with the politicians but with some of the heads of certain government departments who usually gave preference to other sources for data entry work. According to these women entrepreneurs, they were labelled as leftist due to their historical context which links them with the LDF-led government of Kerala which initiated the formation of such a gender focussed programme.

One of the women entrepreneurs stated:

*"We cannot give any definite examples of such incidences because it may harm our goodwill. There were certain rare incidences where they did associate us with the LDF party."*

Whereas certain other women who belonged to KITE answered ambiguously without discussing this particular issue in detail:

*"It is difficult to say whether we have faced any problems due to our association with the LDF but there were certain instances where we presumed that the occurrences of some complications in obtaining enough work for our survival might be due to the political factor."*

Such setbacks were not very frequent but it manifested itself in the form of delay in obtaining remuneration and even affected their customer base in various departments of local self-governments (LSGs). In most of the cases, political hindrances were limited to a few utterances or statements which generated apprehensions or concerns in the minds of these groups of women entrepreneurs working in KITEs.

It is essential to have an underlying structure for any social system or society. A structure defines a particular "territory" for any organization. It also explains and shapes the rules, work, labour, resources, duties and relations. Hence another set of problems showed an improper catalogue system, unclear working hours, and leisurely behaviour from some of the group members, unresolved wage form, insufficient monitoring, lack of overall unity and discipline associated with the unstructured nature of KITE. Some of the units which were found to be highly organized belonged to the districts of Kozhikode, Thiruvananthapuram and Thrissur whereas in case of Malappuram, Palakkad and Ernakulam, only some units were found to be ordered.

Geographical location also paved the way to create problems for some of the KITEs. Some of the IT enterprises were in a highly disadvantageous situation due to their location. In the case of some other IT units, they were supported by their location because of their closeness to certain prime government offices or market places. Table 1 shows the distribution of KITEs in Kerala based on geographical region.

From this table, it is clear that eight IT enterprises out of 63 are in the rural region and most of the KITEs in the Idukki district are sustained in rural areas. The survival of such IT units were found to be difficult and some of them were even at the point of closing down. These KITEs were usually located at a distant place, away from any markets or government offices and the local people were also not aware on the presence of IT units. Such units typically concentrated on other activities apart from data entry like photocopying and the scanning of documents. They had hardly any customer base. These situations were not limited to those IT units

Table 1. Distribution of KITEs based on Region

| No. | District | No. of KITEs | Region | |
|-----|----------|--------------|--------|-------|
| | | | Rural | Urban |
| 1. | Kasargode | 2 | 0 | 2 |
| 2. | Wayanad | 2 | 0 | 2 |
| 3. | Kannur | 7 | 1 | 6 |
| 4. | Kozhikode | 3 | 0 | 3 |
| 5. | Malappuram | 6 | 1 | 5 |
| 6. | Thrissur | 6 | 0 | 6 |
| 7. | Palakkad | 5 | 0 | 5 |
| 8. | Ernakulam | 9 | 0 | 9 |
| 9. | Kottayam | 4 | 0 | 4 |
| 10. | Idukki | 4 | 3 | 1 |
| 11. | Alappuzha | 3 | 0 | 3 |
| 12. | Pathanamthitta | 1 | 0 | 1 |
| 13. | Kollam | 5 | 2 | 3 |
| 14. | Thiruvananthapuram | 6 | 1 | 5 |
| | Total | 63 | 8 | 55 |

Source: Field work

situated in rural regions alone, but some of the units which were located in urban regions also faced similar issues. A few of the units in almost all the districts were in a poor state because of their geographical location. During the initial years they were allotted offices near government buildings, but later they were forced to leave such spaces to other locations without attaining any support from government officials in those regions. Such IT enterprises shifted to commercial complexes to acquire good customer bases but because of severe financial instability, some of the units were forced to settle for spaces usually at a remote corner of shopping complexes which did not help them in obtaining much work from customers. In contrast, those IT enterprises near government offices achieved huge profits because of their visibility and nearness to prime places where most of the local people gathered for procuring government to citizen (G2C) and business to consumers (B2C) services. The best examples for such units were found in the districts of Kozhikode, Idukki, Palakkad and Thiruvananthapuram as the majority of the units were situated in favourable locations when compared to other districts.

Another factor which prevailed amongst them and constrained their production process was poverty. In absolute terms, poverty refers to a state in which the individual lacks the resources necessary for subsistence (Scott and Marshall, 2009). The prime reasons for the development of such a state was financial instability and work deficit. These two factors had a major impact on the financial state of these women entrepreneurs. In some cases, these women were the major breadwinners in their households and as a result, it became very difficult to sustain their domestic affairs due to the problems above. The problem began when they started to face huge delays in acquiring wages for the work done. The increased debt affected their sustenance and led to the closing down of most of the KITEs. An entrepreneur from Malappuram said:

> *"It is very difficult for us to survive under such circumstances because we are answerable to our family. My husband is working as a sweeper in a private hospital and he also has certain ailments which is making it hard for me to sustain the family alone."*

Mostly women from underprivileged KITEs with low income backgrounds suffered from such problems. As discussed in the previous sections, the main concerns associated with these women were work deficit and financial instability. Along with such structural noncompliance, there was a severe lack of association and integration between the professionals who worked for KITEs. The reason for the generation of conflicts amongst these groups was the subjective distinctiveness they associated with the experience of poverty in relative terms and they also began to compare their deprivation of resources to the standards enjoyed by other groups. They considered such a difference in material resources as an inequality and most of these definitions were subjective feelings of poverty. It acted as a latent factor and manifested itself as internal conflicts.

Religion defines a set of beliefs, symbols, practices and rituals based on the idea of the sacred and aids in uniting the society into a socio-religious community (Scott and Marshall, 2009). It also creates a normative structure which governs the social functions of individuals and explains the various duties associated with them and values to be followed based on the gender of each individual. Malappuram is a Muslim-concentrated region where some authoritarian and inflexible norms are found, mainly for women. It affected them, as they were forced to comply with the power of the dominant member of the family. In some cases, these women were allowed

to work in places near to their home and upon recommendation from any senior woman belonging to their family. Such problems were not limited solely to Muslim women. Some Hindu women also faced such issues. There was gender differentiation observed in these cases as it was demanded that they act and perform the idealistic role of a woman, a wife and a mother. But these women succeeded in upholding the objectives of their actions. It has to be understood that all these religious norms and values became strong and powerful when these women were found incapable of generating financial capital through their data entry work.

## Reconstitution

As an answer and solution to some of the above discussed impediments, the formation of the Unnathi IT Consortium took place during the year 2012. As part of renovating and unifying the entire KITEs in Kerala, on January 17, 2012, a consortium called Unnathi Society of IT Enterprises was inaugurated by M.K Muneer, former minister for Panchayaths and Social Welfare, headquartered at Thrissur, a central district in Kerala state. Through the formation of this agency, the Kudumbashree Mission intended to mobilize the whole IT division under a single entity having its own spokesperson. The objective was to exclusively deal with big data entry assignments that required a pan-Keralan presence, mainly that of government departments, private and public sector banks and IT companies. It led to a hierarchical arrangement where the executive members from KITES would divide and assign the work between the participating enterprises, monitor the quality and timeliness of execution, take corrective measures as and when required, deliver the output to the clients and ensure collection and disbursement of money. Executive members were elected from all of the 14 districts of Kerala which illustrates a step taken to construct a structured system for the proper functioning of KITEs. All these indicate a two-fold advantage of constructing such IT-enabled enterprises. The government benefitted from this venture as it was the most simplified manner of arranging, organizing and digitizing such old documents. This entry was done in the local language Malayalam at a very cheap rate (Rs. 2 per document). If these assignments were given to other private data entry agencies, then it would take a huge amount as remuneration for these entries. In simple terms, the enormous government files were getting both organized and digitized. This supports the argument

by Cordella and Tempini (2011) on the possibility of automation which increased the effectiveness and efficiency associated with tasks handled by bureaucrats. ICT was institutionalized through the innovative attempt by the government to seize the opportunity and undertake the construction of enterprises.

Despite the construction of the Unnathi IT Consortium aimed at building a concrete structure and overall integration of these IT units, a lot of discrepancies were found in the working pattern of KITEs. A founding member of the Kudumbashree Mission stated:

*"The Kudumbashree which we intended to form and built is not present anymore. The political influences were manifested in the form of transforming Kudumbashree into a commercial activity deviating from its foundations."*

According to the bylaw of the Unnathi IT Consortium, elections are supposed to be held every year to unanimously elect the president, vice-president and secretary of KITEs who would represent these women in all the official meetings with the authorities. But such elections were held only once. Such an unstructured state of the Unnathi IT Consortium can be considered as the prime reason for the helpless state of women entrepreneurs. It has to be noted that those KITEs which were monitored continuously by the district mission coordinators (DMCs) of the respective regions exhibited a dedication to uphold the already set standards of the Kudumbashree Mission. But still, an overall motivation to upgrade the organized functioning of this government-initiated programme was lacking both amongst the group members and the authorities. The sudden withdrawal of the Kudumbashree Mission from the role of caretakers also deprived them of the required essential supports in the form of consultancy and monitoring, which led to a further disintegration of KITEs. The formation of Akshaya, according to the women respondents, which was conceived as a landmark ICT project by the KSITM to bring the benefits of ICT to the entire population of the state, also disrupted the market of KITEs. The popularity of Akshaya attracted the customers of KITE which forced some of the women entrepreneurs to close down their enterprises. The initial aim of this establishment was to provide e-literacy which became functionally operational in the spheres of citizen services. The project became a catalyst in creating massive economic growth and the creation of direct and indirect employment in the state by focussing on the various facets of e-learning, e-transaction and e-governance.

## Conclusion

The fact of giving more thrust to technological programmes and services can be described as the foundational build-up of techno-culture in Kerala. According to Kellner (1989), it represents the configuration of mass culture and the consumer society in which consumer goods, television, mass images and computerized information become the dominant form of culture in the developed world and increasingly penetrates developing countries as well. The rising discourse on information technology envisages that the ability to use and adapt to information technology is the critical factor in generating and accessing wealth, power and knowledge (Castells, 2010). New gender-specific ICT interventions have been introduced in Kerala State to be the first of its kind of a public-private partnership social enterprise to develop a network of trained women entrepreneurs. The project named "Sandesh One" was launched by chief minister Oommen Chandy on January 12, 2015. It will be a network of 1000-plus women to generate mass employment at grassroots level by promoting various micro-enterprises. It is an idea conceived by the Kerala State Women's Development Corporation (KSWDC), an organization under Kerala's Department of Social Welfare. The presence of only one gender specific programme currently in the functioning stage also shows the ignorance of government planning agencies. The Kudumbashree ICT enterprises initiated for the empowerment of women through ICT will be further recognized in the coming chapters. Serious strategies need to be developed by the officials to strengthen the opportunities for KITEs. If this is not done, then there is a real possibility that such ground-breaking and pioneering gender-focussed projects will be lost.

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