

Asraya: Does it Create a Destitute Free Kerala?

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Abstract

Kerala is entering into a distinct phase of development where it can claim itself to be a place free of destitution which would leave other developed countries behind. Decentralised planning and poverty eradication programmes by the State of Kerala implemented through the Kudumbashree Mission reached the grassroots level, playing a significant role in the reduction of poverty. In 2003, an innovative project named Asraya was designed to find out the destitute population of the State and in 2017 it was redesigned to achieve the target of a Destitute Free Kerala. The paper tries to make an in-depth evaluation of the Asraya project implemented in the Anchuthengu Grama Panchayath, which is the smallest panchayath in the State of Kerala, focusing on the beneficiary awareness of the services available to Asraya families, the services rendered to them so far and the manner in which the basic survival, infrastructural, developmental and psychological needs of the Asraya families are met. The study throws light on the impact of this initiative and provides recommendations for its better and efficient implementation.

Keywords

Asraya, destitute free Kerala, Kudumbashree, sustainable development goals

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Introduction

The first among the 17 Sustainable Development Goals (SDG) adopted by the member States of the United Nations in 2015 as the '2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development' is ending poverty in all its forms. Poverty is a multidimensional concept. SDG urges all countries to create pro-poor, gender sensitive sound policy frameworks at national and regional levels and implement policies and programmes to end poverty in all its dimensions. These development strategies call for equal rights to economic resources, access to basic services, control over land and property, natural resources, inheritance, new appropriate technology and financial services including microfinance to all (UN, 2020).

The Kudumbashree Mission was started in Kerala in 1998 with the twin objectives of the eradication of poverty and empowerment of women (John, 2009). The challenge raised by poverty in the overall human development is enormous. Although there have been programmes to empower the poor since independence, there still exists marginalisation and social exclusion of the poor. Destitution, like poverty, is a multidimensional concept (Cheriyian, 2018) and the Kudumbashree Mission is addressing this. Devereux and Sharp (2006) define destitution as the inability to meet basic needs, a lack of key productive assets and dependence on transfers.

The destitute population forms the lowest socio-economic strata in any society and includes beggars, migrants, abandoned children, senior citizens, unmarried mothers, widows and those who live under conditions of extreme economic deprivation. This group is highly vulnerable to the various risks of living and is unable to lead a normal life without external support mechanisms (Nair et al., 2017). In South Asia, over 420 million people are destitute and India is home to 343.5 million destitute people which is 28.5 per cent of the population (Alkire et al., 2014). In Kerala, the destitute population has been identified to be about 2 per cent of the total population of the State. (Cheriyian, 2018). Looking at the Kerala model more deeply and analysing it through a variety of disciplines, meaningful answers about the causes of its successes and failures reiterate the significance of dealing with and resolving the issue of destitution in a broader world context (Anonymous, 2013). Land reforms, universal public distribution systems, diverse social security schemes and higher budgetary allocation of resources

for welfare measures played a crucial role in raising the status of the poor. However, socio-economic deprivation still exists in Kerala.

Background of the Asraya Project

Asraya is a project designed and proposed by the Kudumbashree Mission for identification, rehabilitation and monitoring of destitute families who are left out of the decentralised planning and the poverty alleviation programmes of the State. The first phase of the project was started in 2003 in 179 Grama Panchayaths and later in 2007 it underwent restructuring. In 2009 it was modified as a continuous services programme incorporating additional members into the project. The second phase was approved in 2013. The Asraya project was universalised from 11th Five Year Plan and currently it is implemented in 1,042 Local Self Government Institutions (LSGIs) across the State (Pragabhaldas, 2017).

Destitute Free Kerala

The Asraya project was restructured into a more comprehensive project called Destitute Free Kerala (Agathi rahitha Keralam) in 2017. The Destitute Free Kerala (DFK) project followed the same procedures as the Asraya project. The DFK is designed to address multidimensional features of poverty. Along with the Asraya beneficiaries, different Government departments steered by the LSGI are the stakeholders in the project. It focuses on basic, developmental and psychological needs of a DFK beneficiary family. Public distribution systems and other government departments like LSGIs and Health collaborate as part of the convergence schemes. The major sources of funds for DFK are from Kudumbashree, LSGIs, philanthropic institutions and individuals. The Basic Need Fund, also called the Challenge Fund, which is exclusively used for meeting basic needs is allocated by Kudumbashree. For general projects it is 40 per cent of the total project costs, subject to maximum of 4 million rupees, whereas 5 million rupees is separately apportioned for Scheduled Tribe projects (Kudumbashree, 2020).

The destitute identification, one of the main challenges of the project, is done as per the socio-economic structure of Kerala. Nine criteria points were used to assess the basic survival, infrastructure, developmental and psychological needs. Basic survival needs include accessibility to food,

medicines, clothes and pension. Infrastructure included shelter, drinking water, toilets and sanitation. Developmental and psychological needs were education, vocational training and counselling. The criteria were designed in a flexible manner with provisions for inclusion at anytime and even families who do not have jobs for even 10 days a month could be treated as exceptional cases and included in the project (Kudumbashree, 2020).

The Process of Selection of Asraya Beneficiaries

The three tier structure of Kudumbashree is made use of for the selection of Asraya beneficiaries. This includes Neighbourhood Groups (NHGs) at the grassroots level, the Area Development Society (ADS) at ward level federating all NHGs and the Community Development Society (CDS) at the LSGI level. Beneficiaries of the DFK project should be identified by the ADS in each ward with the support of their NHG.

The Kudumbashree Mission prepared a special mobile app and the guidelines on how to operate it for enrolling the identified beneficiaries from the grassroots level. The list prepared by all the ADS in the LSGI should be forwarded to the CDS chairperson who then has to present the consolidated draft list to the president of the LSGI. The draft list should be published by the CDS on notice boards of the LSGI and the Anganwadis. When the list is published, the person who suggested the name of the beneficiary (Secretary of the NHG, ADS, CDS, Ward member and officials) also has to be identified along with the name of the beneficiary. Complaints about the draft list can be directed to the CDS chairpersons and the appeal has to be forwarded to the secretary of the LSGI in writing. All the complaints should be reviewed by the Village Extension Officers who are authorised by the LSGI to take the necessary steps in all the appeals after a proper investigation and review. The draft list of the beneficiaries should be approved by a separate destitute Gram Sabha of the LSGI. At the LSGI level, the CDS is the implementing agency. The monitoring of the project is done at various levels starting from NHGs to ADS to CDS. DFK is a multi-year project which initially had a three year duration but is extendable through projects for continued support to the needy. At the completion of the project, a social audit should be conducted to evaluate the services received by the Asraya families (Kudumbashree, 2020).

Anchuthengu Grama Panchayath: An Overview

The evaluative study of the implementation of the Asraya project was conducted in the Anchuthengu Grama Panchayath. Anchuthengu, formerly known as Anjengo (five coconut palms), is a coastal Panchayath situated in the Chirayankeezhu Block Panchayath of the Thiruvananthapuram district in Kerala. It is situated between the Arabian Sea and the Anchuthengu backwaters extending to 3.34 sq. kms and it is the smallest Panchayath of Kerala. There are 14 wards in the Anchuthengu Grama Panchayath with a population of about 23,614 with 11,098 males and 12,516 females. The Anchuthengu Panchayath was the second last Panchayath identified for spending by the Asraya project fund in 2016-17 and it was the first in 2017-2018.

Methodology

The general objective of the study was to make an evaluation of the Asraya project in the Anchuthengu Grama Panchayath. The specific objectives include the beneficiary's awareness of the services they are entitled to receive through the Asraya project, the services rendered to Asraya families so far and the manner in which the basic survival needs are rendered. The study also covers the basic, infrastructure, developmental and psychological needs of the families that are identified in the resurvey of Asraya families. Permission for the study was obtained from the Anchuthengu Grama Panchayath authorities and the State Kudumbashree Mission. Data was collected in March 2017 as part of a seven-day rural live-in camp conducted by post graduate students. The Census method was adopted for the data collection. There were two beneficiary lists: the old one comprising 67 families was prepared based on the scheme for the rehabilitation of the destitute (2010-2012) and the new list comprising 127 families prepared in January 2017. Data was collected from 194 Asraya families residing in the 14 wards of the Panchayath using an interview schedule which was designed by the State Mission of Kudumbashree. Besides this, in-depth interviews of key persons were conducted. Observation was also used as a tool for data collection.

Results and Findings

1. Awareness of the Services Available in the Asraya Project

The Asraya project is entitled to give a list of services to the destitute families

like the purchase of land for homeless families, the construction of houses for families without houses, the maintenance of houses, toilets, electricity, safe drinking water, clothes, food, pensions, education, medicine, counselling, income generation programmes and any other services such as palliative care (Table 1).

Table 1: Awareness of Asraya families about the services available

Services	Not aware of the services of Asraya (N=194)	
	Number	Percentage
Food	23	11.86
Houses for homeless	190	97.94
Maintenance of houses	191	98.45
Toilets	98	50.52
Electricity/Education	189	97.42
Pension	16	8.25
Medicine	186	95.88
Clothes/Counselling	194	100.00

Out of the 194 families, the majority did not have an awareness of the services an Asraya family is entitled to excepting for food and a pension. Almost half of them were aware of the provision for toilets. This may be because of the Open Defecation Free Campaign that was conducted. After conducting surveys of each family, the student volunteers team gave them detailed information about all the services the Asraya families are entitled to get on a one to one basis.

2. Survival Needs Rendered to Asraya Families

Survival needs envisaged under the Asraya project are food, health (medicine) and minimum financial resources in the form of a pension and education. It was applicable to only 67 families who were part of the project from the beginning and has been so since the remaining 127 families were added to the project in January 2017. As the data collection for the study was done in March 2017, there was insufficient time to identify the survival needs (Table 2).

Table 2: The survival needs of Asraya families identified

Survival Needs	Number of families (N=67)	Percentage of
Families		
Food	40	59.70
Medicine	67	100.00
Education	15	22.39
Pension	66	98.51

i. Food

There are provisions for food grains, nutrition kits, distribution of cooked food and expenses for the distribution of food products in the project. Even though 59.7 per cent of families are listed as the beneficiaries of the Asraya project for food, only 35 per cent received food kits. As per the scheme, the food kit should contain pulses, grains, oil and spices; but most of the kits received by the beneficiaries contained only grains such as rice and some pulses. The panchayath is supposed to raise its own funds for helping Asraya families along with the Challenge fund provided by Kudumbashree.

ii. Health

Preparing health records, conducting medical camps in Primary Health Centres (PHC) /other government hospitals (Allopathy/AYUSH-Ayurveda, Yoga and Naturopathy, Unani, Sidhaand Homeopathy), providing medicines which are unavailable in PHC/ other government hospitals, Rashtriya Swasthya Bima Yojana insurance premiums, equipment for treatment, wages for the home nurses, travelling expenses for the journey to referral hospitals and rent for ambulances are the provisions under Health. As per the project, health cards should be provided for all beneficiaries for treatment and free medicines. All the families (100%) were in need of medical help, but none of these services reached any Asraya families as the medical officer was not willing to take responsibility for drawing the money. Several Asraya families were unaware of the services of palliative care units.

iii. Pension

The expense of preparing documents for the purpose of applying for different pensions is included in the project. About 99 per cent of the

Asraya families received a pension except for an elderly lady who had lost her Identity Card and other proofs of identification. But it was found that it was difficult for bedridden beneficiaries to reach banks to withdraw their pensions due to the distance. Bus services were not frequent in the Panchayath so they needed to pay for other modes of transport which consumed a major portion of their pension. Families with differently abled persons were more concerned about this.

iv. Education

There are a number of services available under the heading of education like identification of students who have dropped out from schools, facilitation of services for continuing their education, linking of hostel facilities if needed, providing study material, clothing and food through sponsorships, facilitation of academic support teams consisting of graduates, college students, service minded teachers voluntarily teaching in Panchayat schools and organising the services of Saksharatha Prerak at LSGIs. Besides these, there are provisions for providing a stipend, educational materials, uniforms, scholarships, fees for education according to the standard of government school and expenses for sports and arts training and educational materials for the physically and mentally challenged that neither the social security mission or the running project could provide. None of these services reached the beneficiary families with school going children. Families with differently abled children were not bothered much about their education and treatment as they thought that giving them an education 'will not make any difference in their lives.'

3. Social Work Interventions and Outcomes as a Result of the Study

Based on the survey findings, the Social Workers had a series of meetings and discussions with Panchayath authorities and CDS members of the Kudumbashree to initiate certain interventions. The major interventions were:

i. Resurvey and preparation of an Individual Customised Plan for each Asraya family

A fresh survey was conducted by the Social Workers for the identification and preparation of an Individual Customised Plan for each Asraya family. Most of the families from the given beneficiary lists were recognised as

eligible families as per the criteria. It was found that some families had moved their residence from Anchuthengu, some members on those lists had passed away and some families were not eligible for further services. The Social Workers identified a few more families who deserved the benefits of the Asraya project. Based on the study, those families which were not eligible for the project were removed from the list and some eligible families were included which increased the total number of eligible families to 155. Individual Customised Plans for each family were prepared and submitted to the Panchayath.

ii. Profiles and needs of the new beneficiaries

From the 155 new Asraya families identified in the second phase of the survey, 80 per cent belonged to the other backward community category, 10.97 per cent were scheduled castes and 9.03 per cent belonged to the general category. There were 718 members in 155 families in the new list of Asraya project beneficiaries (Table 3). The average family size was 4.63

Table 3: The survival needs of new Asraya families identified during intervention

Needs Identified	No. of families (N=155)	Percentage of Families
Food	122	96.06
Education	15	11.81
Treatment	38	29.92
Toilets	13	10.24
Land & Housing	15	11.81
Maintenance of House	61	48.03
Medicine	51	40.16
Pension	4	3.15
Electricity	3	2.36
Counselling	12	9.45
Income generation support	14	11.02

iii. Approval of the renovated list of Asraya families and their needs

After presenting the renewed list of families and their needs at the joint meeting of the Panchayath and CDS, it was approved in the Gramasabha conducted for this purpose. These families and their needs were included

in the priority list of the convergence programme of the Panchayath.

iv. Converting the eligible APL Ration Cards to BPL

Some families who were eligible for Asraya services have been included in Above Poverty Line category of the Ration Card. This was brought to the attention of the authorities and they were later included in the Below Poverty Line category and in the Antyodaya Annapoorna Yojana scheme.

v. Educational needs

The educational needs of the families were identified and action plans were prepared. Identified children from these families were given educational help. A list of school drop outs was prepared and they were connected with the appropriate schools in the neighbourhood. The differently abled children were enrolled in special schools.

vi. Rehabilitation of senior citizens

Two senior citizens from the list were rehabilitated in an old age home as the family members were not able to take care of them.

vii. Increase in the amount of money for food kits for a family

The Asraya project provided Rs. 200 for single member families, Rs. 250 for three member families and Rs. 400 for families with more than three members for food kits. Since it was not enough to meet their needs, it was suggested to increase the money to Rs. 500, Rs. 700 and Rs. 750 respectively.

viii. Medical camps

Medical camps were organised once every three months on a regular basis as a consequence of the study. Families that need counselling support were assisted by the District Mental Health Programme.

4. Suggestions

1. Among the many aspects of the Asraya project, the most highlighted one was the convergence of the existing schemes and services in various departments. But this was not taking place in the field. Laxity in the effective utilisation of the earmarked funds for the destitute and the lack of effective involvement by the elected representatives were found

to be the problems. For instance, the provision of housing and electrification can be realised by the convergence of the LSGI and schemes like the Prime Minister's Avas Yojana and Rajeev Gandhi Vidyutikaran Yojana. It is suggested that the elected representatives at the LSG level are needed to oversee the materialising of the convergences highlighted in the Asraya project.

2. Most of the destitute families depend on the Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Scheme for their livelihoods. It is suggested that the LSGI should ensure a minimum of 100 days employment for them as it is their only source of income.
3. Almost all of the people living in the Anchuthengu area faced with the problem of the lack of clean drinking water. The absence of proper drainage systems and the lack of proper waste disposal mechanisms contaminate the existing water source, especially in the rainy season. Economically well to do families in the area were buying safe water that is brought from outside. Most of the Asraya families depend on the Panchayath pipeline and public wells for drinking water, but they were not able to fetch water from there because of health issues. It is suggested that the existing schemes of the Kerala Water Authority are made use of to provide safe drinking water to the below poverty line families.
4. On the one hand, the dedication and earnestness of the elected representatives, charge officers and the NHG members are appreciable, but on the other hand the differences in the political affiliation of elected representatives and CDS chairpersons are found to be a hindrance to the effective implementation of the Asraya project. It was found that the preliminary assessment report of the Asraya project was missing and therefore auditing could not be done. This hindered the movement of the project from the first phase to the second. Without completing these projects, they were given special permission to prepare a new list of beneficiaries of the Asraya Project and it has been sanctioned by the State government. This is due to the irresponsible actions of the CDS chairperson. It is suggested that there should be mechanisms to ensure that soft copies of all the documents related to Panchayath projects are made available in the Panchayath and they are accessible to the public.
5. It was found that the Anjuthengu Grama Panchayath had not received

the Challenge Fund from Kudumbashree for the last three years (2017-2019). Although there were 147 Kudumbashree NHG units registered in the Panchayaths, only 97 were active. In the first phase of the Asraya project only 25 out of 67 families were members of NHGs. Measures should be taken to include these families as members of Kudumbashree units and the proportionate Challenge Fund should be made available to the Panchayath.

6. Pensioners from Asraya families find it difficult to travel long distances to collect their pensions. There should be mechanisms to inform them when it is credited to their account. Arrangements could be made to deliver pensions to the doorsteps of those who are very old and/or sick and also for persons with profound disabilities.
7. The funds for various schemes are given at the end of every financial year. Hence, the Panchayath does not have sufficient time to implement the projects in an efficient way. It would be ideal if an assistant engineer is appointed on a deputation basis for supervising the implementation of the new project and is retained until its completion.
8. The Anjuthengu Panchayath had about 500 metres of seashore but currently this has reduced. Thus, awareness programmes should be organised to convince the people of this situation and to make them understand the need for rehabilitation. A population of more than 25,000 is living on 3.3 sq. kms. of land. Measures may be taken to buy land in the Kadakavoor Panchayath in order to solve the land issue. While doing so, care should be taken to create proper transportation facilities, as the people need to reach the seashore as their livelihoods are closely connected with the sea.
9. The Panchayath applied to the World Bank for a special grant for underdeveloped Panchayaths. 40 million rupees and 20 million rupees have been sanctioned to deal with the problems of the scarcity of safe drinking water, housing, rehabilitation at times of surges and toilet facilities. It was found that there is a delay in receiving the funds on time and a compulsion to spend the given funds before end of the financial year, which affected the quality of work done. The absence of technical experts also affected the quality of the work. It is suggested that the authorities take measures to release the funds on time and to appoint the necessary personnel for the effective implementation of the project.

Conclusion

The study shows the benefits and challenges of the Asraya project at its implementation. The Destitute Rehabilitation project under study was a process oriented one and Kudumbashree as a State agency was found to have played a moderate role in identifying and coordinating the beneficiary families. Through the Asraya project an adequate level of customisation for the destitute families could not be achieved as envisioned until an intervention of this scale was initiated. Therefore an effective convergence programme, proper beneficiary identification, prevention of duplication of funds and community participation were the real outcomes of this study. Ensuring transparency from the identification of beneficiaries until the implementation of the project is the real challenge to the local administration. The project if continued would be ideal to create a destitute free Kerala model in Anchuthengu. A well-conceived social work intervention effectively implemented would strengthen the poor and destitute if fresh sources to overcome the lack of funds can be found.

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