

## **Dynamics within the Gendered Space: The Role of Kudumbasree in Kerala**

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**Abstract:** *The notion of space as a physical idea or a static social structure has changed over the years. It is no more a fixed geographical place; instead, it is understood more in terms of its link with the social sphere. Space is also experienced as a form of control for groups like women, limiting their outward mobility. Nevertheless, this paper argues that the same space is also used as a site for women's actualization, breaking free of gender constraints, and achieving power. Applying the spatial perspective in gender studies and linking it with the architectural realities of spatial location, the paper examines how the idea and practice of space could be a source of advantage for men and disadvantage to the rural women of Kerala and attempts to capture the women's efforts to subvert such disparities, with reference to the Kudumbasree programme.*

**Keywords:** Social structure, Kudumbasree, empowerment, space, gender constraints.

### ***Introduction***

The notion of space as a physical idea or a static social structure has changed over the years. It is no more a fixed geographical place; instead, it is understood more in terms of its link with the social sphere. According to Ranadae (2007: 1519), space is no more

seen as a neutral setting since the socio-spatial categories play a constitutive role in the production and reproduction of social space. Postmodern theorists also suggest that social structure and space are not mutually exclusive concepts but continuously interact in a dialectical relationship, turning the space into a constant state of becoming. This is a radical departure from earlier ideas of a static and structuralist idea of space.

According to Wegner, space is "...both a production, shaped through a diverse range of social processes and human interventions and a force that, in turn, influences, directs, and delimits possibilities of action and ways of being human in the world" (Wegner 2002: 181). Sociologists connect it to themes such as inclusion and exclusion, centre and periphery, public and private, and in-group and out-group. In gender studies, feminists have contributed significantly with investigations on the relationships between public and private space, patriarchy and perceptions, conceptions, and uses of both. Spain, for example, has pointed out the role of space, the notion of gendered space, and other variables such as cultural, religious, and socioeconomic factors in analysing and understanding women's status (Spain 1993: 137). He argues that the physical separation of women and men contributes to and perpetuates gender stratification by reducing women's access to socially valued knowledge at home, schools, and workplaces by reinforcing and reproducing prevailing status distinctions that are taken for granted.

Spatial confinement to the private sphere is, in fact, one of the roots for circumscribing women's lives and destinies. The 'gendered space' could be perceived to exist both on the architectural and the geographic scales. Distinctions within dwellings represent architectural segregation when the front space refers to males and the backyard to women. Such conventions of housing design and differentiation in the usage of space within the home were pointed out by architectural historians such as Muthesius (1982) and Worsdall (1979). They have drawn attention to the symbolic differentiation of front and back, or public and private, as a recurrent feature of nineteenth-century speculative housing. The front of the house represents the 'public' face with a formal entrance and higher quality finish, which is the male domain. At the same time, the back always had a more utilitarian character, representing the private, domestic sphere: the preserve

of subordinates, such as women, children, and servants (Chapman 1999: 62). Such physical housing design reflects the character of the household's relationship and the household's connection to the outside world.

In other words, we have to problematize home space, considered the most feminine of all spaces, not just in terms of geography but also in terms of its sociality. The home contains architectural segregation - literally and symbolically divided into feminine and masculine halves. This traditional home design has broad implications for producing and reproducing the gendered social order. In his study of Haryana's gendered spaces, Choudhary defines masculine spaces "*as spaces where traditionally men have congregated more commonly than women and where men are at a distinct advantage in terms of deployment of power*" (2014: 4). All these show an urgent need to deconstruct the household space and begin to look at the different experiences of family life primarily on a gender basis. As it has a long-lasting influence on the constructs of gender identities in the larger social structure, these exclusive and segregated spaces underline fundamental inequality between the genders. What is gravely annoying is that these spatial exclusions are making things unmanageable for women. The women striving to fulfil their newly acquired roles beyond the space of 'home' find it seriously constraining. Therefore, attempts to redefine such spaces are occurring in different settings. Wrede (2015: 10), for instance, has argued that space, on the one hand, is a form of control, of limitation of women's mobility - on the other hand, it works as a site of women's actualisation, of breaking out of gender constraints, and of achieving power.

This article deals with such an initiative in the State of Kerala - the Kudumbashree programme (Ks) - aimed at empowering women in the backdrop of their homes and neighborhoods. Kudumbashree is a programme aimed at poverty eradication and empowerment of women implemented by the State Poverty Eradication Mission (SPEM) of the Government of Kerala, launched in 2000. The name Kudumbashree in Malayalam means 'prosperity of the family.' Kudumbashree has a three-tier structure for its women's community network, with Neighbourhood Groups (NHGs) at the lowest level, Area Development Societies (ADS) at the middle level, and Community Development Societies (CDS) at the local government level.

### *The Kudumbashree programme*

The Kudumbashree Mission, the official authority, looks after the overall implementation of the poverty eradication and women empowerment programme across the State of Kerala. It provides guidance and direction to the programmes as per the government policy. Kudumbashree has three strategic domains in which programmes are formulated and rolled out through the community network. They are Economic Empowerment, Social Empowerment, and Women Empowerment. (<https://www.kudumbashree.org/>). The coverage network has 2,91,507 NHGs affiliated with 19,489 ADSs and 1064 CDSs, with a total membership of 43,93,579 women by 31st March 2019. Kudumbashree membership is open to all adult women, limited to one membership per family.

This programme's manifest and latent outcomes are widely understood in line with the claims of empowerment and development (Kannan and Jagajeevan 2012; Arun, Arun & Devi 2011; Reed and Reed 2013). The present article attempts to factually analyse such claims and deconstruct them with a new reading of the inside stories of those spaces, which revealed that the process behind this journey was never a space of equity or freedom. Based on qualitative data gathered from Kudumbashree women in connection with a broader study held among them over one year, the article argues that this movement has not evolved linearly in its contribution to women's self-actualisation; the trend remains a long way to go. Listening to their stories makes it very clear that neither this space is totally under their control, nor do they have any independence to redefine such spaces, devoid of their traditional roles. The paper examines how the idea and practice of space advantages men and mostly disadvantages the rural women of Kerala, despite their entry and stay in the Kudumbashree programme.

There is, however, marginal transformation in the uses of space, both within the 'home space' and in the neighbourhood. The fact that they can now bring their community into their home space and enter their neighbouring home through the front door is worth mentioning, although the struggle is still incomplete. Kudumbashree women, through their everyday mundane interactions, have made several attempts to enter those spaces

considered the male areas, which they have been traditionally excluded either by visible structures of partition or by invisible walls of cultural and social norms. Their attempts to negotiate, subvert and appropriate these forbidden spaces have not brought much success. In reality, they are still bargaining with the rules of patriarchy, which are not so flexible to break open. However, these spatial struggles within their homes are still worth capturing and documenting. Otherwise, the myths of empowerment and women's development would make these struggles invisible and unnoticed. Information for the present study was gathered in narratives and processed within the thematic analysis framework. A significant part of collected information comes from two prominent sources - Natural Focus Group Discussions held in weekly NHG meetings of MGNREGS worksites and Microenterprise sites and detailed, in-depth narratives of selected participants. Focus groups and informal chats showed how they experienced the village and family as newcomers (as a young bride). On the other hand, the in-depth individual interviews brought out their lives' specific events and experiences while participating in the programme.

The study was placed in one of the villages of Central Kerala, covered by Kudumbashree. A cohort-wise clubbing of data and understanding these women's general background is crucial in understanding their experiences and the emic perspective on their spatial world.

### *Cohort-wise clubbing of women*

The age, year of marriage, and year of joining Ks are significant in understanding their pre-and post-Ks lives. The participants in this research belong to three cohorts. The eldest ones are those who got married during the eighties aged 18-21 then (1983-1989) who are in their late fifties or early sixties. The mid group, composed of the highest concentration of Ks members, got married between 1990-1999 and are in their late forties or early fifties. The youngest are those who got married after 2000 and are now in their late thirties or early forties.

Those who belong to the eldest category (who are few) are the ones who came to this village around 10-15 years before Ks was introduced and led their lives without any membership in

voluntary organisations. Their narratives are an excellent source for understanding what life was like for women during the eighties. They were the generation that took the lead in introducing, popularising, and establishing NHGs in the village and formed the first generation leaders of Ks- as Resource Persons, Volunteers, NHG President, Secretaries, and first CDS members. Any women who have crossed sixty years are shifted from Kudumbashree to 'Thanal'- the elderly NHGs of Kudumbashree, for both men and women.

Most present Ks members came to this village during the 90's - mainly between 1994 and 1999. Their experiences are very significant in understanding the role of Ks in their lives because they joined Ks eight to ten years after their arrival and settled in the village. They were in their mid and late twenties when they joined Ks and are now in their early and mid-forties. Being young and relatively new to the village, they were the ones who took the risk of moving out of their families. They also faced the out-and-out brunt of the community in daring to do so. They were the generation who took the pain to join new NHGs and form new ones. They are the ones who create a significant portion of present NHG/ADS/CDS office bearers and Microenterprise owners. Perhaps their experiences compose the crux of Ks's evolution over the years.

The youngest NHG members married more or less the same period when Ks was introduced in the region, about 2000-02. They were in their twenties, and by the time they got married into the village, NHGs were almost established and started functioning regularly.

### *General background of women*

Members of Ks are women above 18, and most of the respondents of this study were women married into this village from outside. Of the Ks units this research covered, no member was born in this village.

These women were the 'brides of this village'- who came and settled here through marriage. For them, this village was initially their 'husband's village,' and, in due course, it became 'their village.' Patrilineality and patrilocality are the driving force for such a shift. The general condition common to all these women is that they all belonged to and married to lower-class families of daily wage

labourers. Except for two or three, most have educational qualifications of the 7th to 10 standards. The highest qualification of all is Degree. In addition to it, many had also undergone stitching and typewriting courses. Only a few had exposure to wage employment before marriage. All were subjected to an arranged marriage at ages seventeen and twenty-five years.

The coding and categorising of the data on the pre-Ks phase experiences – as a young bride in the new village; brought to light the many running themes across the individual experiences and the underlying patriarchal character. Beyond the personal realities, some commonly running threads and themes are apparent. The following section deals with those emergent themes along with their behavioural narratives. All the informants came to the concerned village through marriage; they are exposed and moulded to more or less the same gendered norms and values and belong to more or less similar socioeconomic and cultural backgrounds, notwithstanding the religious and caste differences. Patrilocal and Patriarchal extended family system and its repercussions formed the central portion of the Pre-Ks phase narrations.

### ***Brides of the village: Beginning from a marginal space***

Most members of Kudumbasree came to the village under study after marriage from an outside region. That makes the area an entirely unfamiliar social space, to begin with, for these women. This unfamiliarity also coincides with the surveillance of everyone around, beginning especially with that of the in-laws. Every act she engages in will invite the scrutiny of all, and any minor flaws would get much notice.

They would never get any sense of belonging or have to always live with a sense of 'otherness.' This primary identity as 'coming from outside' has a lasting impact on their access to the open spaces and, more specifically, closed or restricted before them. In many ways, this outsider status makes their entry to the public area a mounting task as they would first have to contest for a space at their 'new home,' the atmosphere of which is never so favourable. The masculine or male-only areas within the home would make their lives more and more inward rather than outward-oriented. The general title applicable to all women who

get married into any of the village's families is 'ladies who got married into this village' ('kettikonduvannapennungal'). That forms the primary identity of all married women. Almost all the informants of this study fall into the category of married women. The kind of social distance that this status conveys (as women from elsewhere) is reflected in the retrospective autobiographical narratives of these women on their lives. Married into an unknown family, socialised and re-socialised, again and again, to meet the in-laws' expectations, subject them to strict moral control and restrictions, and the resultant dependence and powerlessness were all common to the life histories of all these young brides. The village's marriage and kinship systems are making this condition more anti-women. Wharton (2005: 90), while analysing patriarchy, has established that Western Asia, South Asia, and East Asia have the most marked forms of gender inequality in the region associated with regimes of extreme conditions of patriarchy, characterised by terribly specific rules of kinship systems accompanied with particular marital and descent practices. Kinship structures in these regions are dominantly patrilineal. The descent and property are traced and transmitted through the male members. In other words, these women are relocated into a 'new home,' with so many physical and cultural boundaries that they cannot cross over. Therefore, they quickly become the 'other' in their 'new life.'

### ***Homes with an in-built segregation of spaces: Entry and exit through the back door***

The architecture of houses is characterised by in-built segregation of male and female space. There is a front and back region in all the homes, intentionally meant for the men and women separately, as a practice of sexism. Establishing their claim over the house's entire space was a struggle unnoticed by anyone. The movement beyond the home for the women has been possible only because they have won a battle, although through an effort stretched over two decades. Like most other struggles of women, there were also several other hurdles to overcome, more social than physical, predominantly in the form of ridicule and stigmatisation. Jumping over these hurdles was almost like the war half won because this win made their entry to the neighbourhood (crossing the limits of



the household) possible, even though it was also an exit and access through the back door.

The irony is that this was made possible only because they did not violate those rules of architecture. They walked out and walked in through the back door. That was the general feature of the bargain that the NHG women entered throughout their struggles to violate space rules. They always had to start from their built-in weaknesses. They hardly had any other weapon to fall back on rather than these weapons of the weak. Very often, their route to the neighbourhood was longer than that of their male counterparts, as the women always had to take the invisible way starting from the backdoor of their house.

In this way, they had to raise their voice without making much sound, argue with the in-laws without arguing and look beyond without looking straight for over one or two decades.

### *The centrality of front space*

The woman had nothing to do with the front space of the home – the window to the outside world, which the male members occupied, wherein discussions, decision making, and reception of the guests take place. While women stood behind the doors, carrying out instructions like serving tea and snacks, welcoming guests was also a men's domain. They were never invited to the forefront while being relegated to the backyard.

It was supposed that the front space is meant for serious discussion by men who are 'knowledgeable,' aware of social happenings, and have a voice and opinion on public matters. For centuries, the above masculine qualities are portrayed starkly opposite to the feminine ones- being 'ignorant,' unaware of social milieu and happenings, and naturally having no idea about public matters. All these added to their marginalisation from the 'Verandahs' (front space of a house) of their own (husband's) house, again and again making it a men's area.

The architectural separation of the front and back space is also well reflected in those who visited these spaces. While men from the neighbourhood came straight through the front gate to the veranda and met the men, the neighbouring women and women vendors went to the backyard, if possible, through some other way other than the front door.

### *The gendered world of duties*

Women are socialised into gendered activities at the patrilocal home of their husband's design and assigned their spaces within the home. Herein the caring and nurturing responsibilities shouldered by them and catered to the elderly and children of the household, in turn, determined their spaces like the inner, private rooms of the houses.

The living space next to the veranda is where the women's work at home begins. Looking after children and the elderly and catering to their needs demanded much of their time and energy.

Moving even to the house's interior – is the kitchen- almost at the other end of the veranda, where the women are, especially if they are the young brides of that home. The never-ending cycle of cooking, cleaning, and washing goes on here. Very rarely are the men seen in these spaces and, if at all, are more likely to deal with some repair or maintenance kind of work and never as a helping hand to the daily chores.

### *Even a well matters*

It was evident that ownership of a well can also restrict the spaces opened before women of that family. A well in the neighbourhood is a public space wherein the women meet and chat while gathering to fetch water. Usually, collecting water for household needs is a woman's responsibility, so men will not be found near the well, which often makes it an all-women space. Hence, those women who did not have well in their compound could use this 'little public space' to meet others and breathe fresh air. However, this is denied to the upper caste women, who often have a well inside their property. Having a well or not thus, defined the space for the women.

### *The contested space*

This 'exclusionary' identity finds reflection in the immediate space of the physical home. However, it carries its weight well beyond the boundaries of home. Not only that, the women have to engage in a lengthy bargaining process, starting with her husband, in-laws, and sometimes even relatives. The irony is that no one considers this aspiration expected, and often, they show their

rejection accompanied by sarcasm and ridicule. The women who come out are confronted with many trials from within their own families and in the neighbourhood. The space where they conduct their weekly meetings is also subjected to severe surveillance as such meetings are easily seen as abnormal and against the norm. Twenty years of such efforts have, however, brought them some dividends. NHG meetings held in the front space of the house were perhaps the first move of women occupying the men's space so far. It brought them closer to the public space and exposed them to the locale and happenings, which were cut off for them earlier.

Naturally, this has created many murmurs. This was not welcomed by most men and older women who clung to the age-old tradition. The saying is that women's sounds shouldn't be heard beyond the kitchen. Thus the initial NHG meetings were held with much caution, wherein they tried to maintain the decorum, mainly fearing the men and elderly of the house where it was held. They faced much criticism and comments when many feared seeking permission to conduct NHGs in their homes. The men's response was, 'this is my house- I will decide who can come here and sit here. 'how dare you conduct a women's gathering here? 'Is this your property for you to invite women'? These point out the patrilineal nature and patriarchal attitude of property ownership and the resultant reality of male-only spaces.

Even in the case of the Micro enterprises, supported and encouraged by men, even now includes those which encourage limited travel outside the home but bring in income simultaneously. The most popular MEs of KS are those of rearing hen, cow, or goat; catering, tailoring, and food production- all of which go with the existing age-old gender roles and keep them homebound.

Over two decades, the NHG meeting has become normalised, and the women are not very concerned about the criticisms and comments. The trend now is that the women conduct their NHG business with much confidence. Thus, at least for some time, the front portion of the house becomes a female domain, unlike before.

### ***'The Front Door is Ours as well': Claims for an Entry and Exit with honour***

During the pre-Ks and the initial phase of Kudumbasree, the women always used the back door and courtyard to move out of home and get back in, as it was the gendered norm. Over the period, slowly and steadily, the women now have many reasons to move out of home- to attend NHG meetings, attend classes, visit Panchayath, bank, Village office, and MGNREGS work. The spatial use of architecture also started to change due to all of these. Hence, as they moved out more often, they also started to get better social acceptance, which opened the front door and gate of their own houses before them.

Similarly, as the NHG meetings became a regular event over the years, and the women started to visit the other women in the neighbourhood, such gatherings became regular. In the process, the ownership of wells also became insignificant. Hence, the front doors are now open, rather than closed, before the Kudmbasree women at present. This is a significant spatial change that Ks has brought forth in the architecture of households.

### ***Guests and Hosts: Having tea together***

Welcoming guests was another domain exclusively dealt with by only men. Herein the female members had nothing to do except serving tea and such items when asked for. Women were neither invited nor were expected there until now. They were supposed to be unfit for such conversations, as they had no idea about the outer world or the happenings therein, which were mainly discussion topics. However, membership in Ks has brought about some changes in this aspect. The women became aware of their neighbourhood, surroundings, and village as they started to mingle with many and became aware of the local happenings. That naturally gave them the knowledge base to be part of the discussions, and also, they have secured the confidence to present themselves before others in the 'front space of their home' and have tea with their guests.

***NHG meetings at home: Bridging the private and public spaces***

The kind of work that the women carry out within the home has also changed through Kudumbashree. None of their 'own' domestic works has changed, but they now have to do some additional work. The members of Kudumbasree who occupy a leadership position in any of the three tiers - NHG, ADS, or CDS - have to do a lot of formal duties, such as maintaining record books, attendance, minutes, preparing statements, reports, proposals, and so on. These are, in effect, new additions to their traditional household responsibilities. At the same time, they are not relieved from the burden of their domestic chores, which overloads their lives. In this context, we need to find out how these women adjust to or catch up with such an overload of work? Hence, their experience of moving out becomes one of crossing the visible and invisible spatial walls imposed upon them by tradition and patriarchy. Because all these new responsibilities were a part of the public space that the Kudumbashree women could not reach out to until then, they can cross over this boundary now, and they feel liberated to combine the architectural space of the 'private domain' with that of the formal world of the social. That is, in a way, a restructuring of the private and public spheres almost simultaneously. Still, equitable redistribution of household responsibilities is yet to happen.

Though these are rays of hope-still quite an aspiration, there are households where the women do not have the freedom to convene NHG meetings. Herein the other members volunteer to conduct it at their homes on a rotation basis and help their co-member. The researcher observed the difference in the responses these women exhibited when the men were at home and when they were not. The presence of men silences them, and their absence frees them.

***Conclusion***

The experiences of the Kudumbasree members establish that the space, inside and outside the home, is gendered. This gendered space impacts the lives of those who dwell therein - prescribing and proscribing, conferring, and defining opportunities. The way the patriarchal social order defines the architectural areas within the home is very well visible from the experiences of the Kudumbasree women of Kerala.

Beginning their marital life in the husband's village as a stranger, these women are often relegated to the back spaces of the home-kitchen and courtyard - and have very little exposure to the outside world. They use the invisible route, the backdoor of their house, for outward movements, as they know well their space in the husband's home and village.

Kudumbasree came as a breath of life for the married women who have to live in a confined space of tradition and culture; the programme brought them reasons to challenge and change these gendered architectural spaces within and outside their homes. True, Kudumbasree has not reversed the gendered definition of space altogether. Still, it has opened up opportunities for women to bargain and make some silent yet significant changes without prompting contestations and confrontations. The women have carved out spaces for themselves- the front space for conducting 'our Kudumbasree meetings'; now, they use the front door and gate to move in and out. Unlike before, they visit neighbouring houses through the frontal space, welcome guests, and participate in chit-chat. They shoulder the formal responsibilities of holding positions in the Kudumbasree three-tier system as Secretary and President bringing in those role-related responsibilities such as preparing minutes and maintaining accounts to the private sphere of homes. The role change is reflected in how the personal space is used and for what. As gender is a social construction, change is possible through concerted efforts, manifest or latent. Moreover, this is evident from these women's evolution in the use and experience of space. They have fought a silent battle, bargained with patriarchy, and succeeded in redefining the social spaces through negotiations and subversions.

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