

Women's grassroots network drives Kerala's community kitchen plan

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IT'S NEARLY 1 pm and the municipality community hall in Kakkanad neighbourhood of Kochi is a hive of activity. Inside, a wooden desk blocks the passage to the hall. A wash basin, complete with handwash, is on the left. On the desk is a bottle of hand sanitiser. Around eight women in white aprons and tennis caps and cloth masks covering half their faces are working behind the desk.

The menu is simple: *ney-choru* (ghee rice) and chicken curry. The cooking's done. One set of women are filling plastic pouches with the chicken curry and the others are tending to the rice.

As soon as they are ready, a couple of men bring the pouches to the desk from where they are scooped into little bags by volunteers and delivered to homes nearby.

At a time when Kerala and the rest of the country are under a lockdown to tackle the coronavirus outbreak, these little food packets from this makeshift community kitchen in Thrikkakara municipality are central to the LDF government's pledge to let no one starve. And powering this kitchen and scores of others is Kudumbashree, a powerful self-help network of 43 lakh women.

On Wednesday, when Chief Minister Pinarayi Vijayan spoke of opening community kitchens to feed migrant workers and destitutes, councillors of Thrikkakara didn't have to think hard on whom to rely on. They dialled the grassroots units of Kudumbashree and their members immediately jumped on board. The kitchen opened Friday morning.

Kudumbashree, meaning 'prosperity of family' in Malayalam, was born in 1997 as a three-tier community network aimed at empowering women and making them drivers of change at the grassroots. Over the years, their success,



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due in large part to their enterprising abilities, have challenged male hierarchies. From driving taxis to running Metro ticket counters, and operating paper mills to orphanages, they have done it all.

"Kudumbashree's success was that it was able to discover these women who want to function as public servants. More than improving wages, they have shown an inclination to volunteer and do something for the society," said Manjeesh, a district programme manager with the network.

At the community kitchen, as the last of the food packets get bundled up, the cooks have some time to rest before they start preparing dinner.

"We distributed 380 packets of chapathi and vegetable curry in the morning. Lunch and dinner are for 500 people. Tomorrow, we are expecting to cook for nearly a 1,000 people, a majority of which would be migrant workers," said Nazar, an independent councillor who helped set up the kitchen.

The process to identify beneficiaries for the meals is

straight-forward: local pan-chayat ward members/councillors, ASHA workers and anganwadi teachers comb through every home in their jurisdiction, making a list of those who need food.

They add a few dozens, keeping in mind the destitute and the homeless. The state government has already started signing up volunteers who have private vehicles for transporting supplies and meals.

Riyaz, a computer technician, is among those who have signed up as volunteers. Asked if such welfare programmes could turn out to be a burden for the government, he replied, "There's no burden at all. There are so many young people like us waiting to see how we can support the government. All that we spend is on fuel, it is practically nothing."

There's optimism inside the kitchen too. Nisha, one of the cooks, understands the demand for cooked food will go up, but she is not worried.

"During the floods, we helped cook for 2,000 people. This is nothing," she says.