



Achieving Organic Agriculture through Women Self Help Groups Initiatives: A Case Study in Kannur District, Kerala - India

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ABSTRACT

This study intends to analyze the organic agriculture practises of Kudumbashree in Kerala. The study is both empirical and descriptive, using primary and secondary sources of data. The primary data were collected via a well-structured interview schedule. The sample size of the study comprises 50 respondents from Kannur District. The samples were taken from 7 Kudumbashree units. From each unit, only those who engaged in organic farming were selected. The details about Kudumbashree Mission and organic farming practices were assessed with the help of secondary data which were collected from published sources like economic review, books, journals, magazines, newspapers, and internet sources. The study shows that the SHGs are very familiar with organic farming practices, and they receive a favourable return from such practices. The organic farming methods provide a favourable yield and return than the inorganic methods of farming. Since people prefer organic products that are toxic free and contain more nutrient, and thus protect their health, they are ready to consume organic products at any cost for their good health. However, organic farming practices are not successful in attracting all the farmers even though Kudumbashree adopts organic farming and provides more employment opportunities to women. Therefore, the government should promote organic farming practices among rural farmers to enhance their income and thereby the status of the farming community has to be improved.

KEYWORDS: Self-Help Groups (SHGs); Organic Farming; Food Security; Rural Development; Sustainable Agriculture.

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INTRODUCTION

Attaining development is the most addressed goal of every developing country in the world. Development depends upon economic self-sufficiency, higher standard of living, per capita income, foreign exchange, growth rates, women empowerment, literacy, employment and so on. India has been developing fast, but the development experience is not that always equitable or inclusive? Many development efforts have taken up to make India a developed nation. The eradication of poverty is the core of all developmental initiative, which has remained a very critical and complex concern in the country. The experience of India clearly reveals that many of the poverty alleviation programs failed to achieve the desired targets. Notwithstanding impressive improvement in the status of women, they actually stay as the largest segment of the denied population. Empowerment of women is considered as perhaps the main method of poverty alleviation [1]. Lack of investment is a serious limitation to the improvement of helpless women in rural and urban areas who discover restricted admittance to credit. By considering every one of these, the government executed special programmes and missions through which the credits are made accessible very easily. Furthermore, this will assist women with undertaking cultivating and partnered exercises like keeping mulch, steers, poultry or independent small enterprises, cause them to respond to the chances made by the cycle of development. The formation of Self-Help Groups (SHGs) and the provision of microfinance has become one of the milestones for pulling women out of poverty and empowering them. Kudumbashree in Kerala is one of the best examples of that. It was introduced by the government of Kerala with the help of the government of India and National Bank for Agriculture and Rural Development (NABARD) in 1998 for clearing out absolute poverty from the state [2]. Through concert community action under the administration of local government by working with the association of the poor women for

brushing self-improvement with requests drove assembly of accessible services and assets to handle the destitution comprehensively Kudumbashree was started. Ensuring food security is considered as the initial step of poverty eradication. For this, a well-sustained agriculture sector is required. Agriculture provides food to the whole population but in these days, people are losing interest in the agriculture sector for many reasons. In terms of land use and cropping pattern, Kerala's agriculture system is unique and distinct from that of other states [3]. The most common crop producing in the state includes food crops, plantations, cash crops and homesteads. Kerala produced 97 percent of the country's pepper and has 85 percent of the country's natural rubber. Coconut, tea, coffee, cashews and spices all contribute to the state's agriculture sector. Rice is the most important agriculture crop, with over 600 types farmed in Kerala's paddy fields. Tapioca is another major crop that is grown primary in arid regions. Home Gardens, on the other hand, accounts for a considerable share of the agriculture sector. Animal husbandry is also an important tool for women, the poor and the landless to alleviate rural poverty and unemployment. Kerala has been experiencing labour shortage in agriculture for a long time, mainly because of its distinct socio-economic status [4]. Hence, to set up a sustainable agriculture sector to ensure food security, a program called collective farming is implemented with the active participation of Kudumbashree. Due to increasing health consciousness and environmental concerns among the people, Kudumbashree took up organic farming practices among SHGs. Kudumbashree initiated several projects with the active participation of women. Some of these include Samagra, Collective Farming, Asraya, Bud's school, Balasabha, special tribal project, Special SC project, gender self-group, etc. All of these have become tools for social and economic integration, ushering in a new era of social interactions by giving women a collective voice. Collective farming is one of Kudumbashree's most important intervention areas in the livelihood sector [5]. A typical agricultural organisation formed under this scenario has 410 members. These organisations are now formed as Joint Liability Groups (JLG) to provide institutional credit and to ensure proper oversight. Increased financial returns and long-term career chances have provided them with a sense of security and much-needed optimism. The organisation cultivates one of three types of land: its own, leased, or government owned. The majority of women's organisations lease land to cultivate. All of the convergent partners provide help to those who qualify. Over 2.3 lakh women have taken up agriculture as the result of this programme, with rice and vegetables being the primary crops. So far, 36120 JLGs have been founded, with approximately 1500 JLGs receiving loans. In 27270 hectares, paddy, bananas, and vegetables such as bitter melon, snake gourds, cowpeas, ladies' finger, spinach, ridge gourd, and small gourd were grown. The simultaneous benefits of poverty eradication, food security, and financial rewards through agricultural production are sought to be achieved by the collective farming programme. Agriculture in Kannur District is passing through a very difficult period because of a steep fall in the prices of most of the farm products. The most significant change in the agricultural sector of the Kannur District is the shrinking area under food crops. To make the agriculture sector sustainable, collective farm practises and organic agriculture are introduced under the leadership of Kudumbashree in Kannur District. In general, the system of organic farming is not spreading at a larger scale in India in general and Kerala in particular. There are a number of interrelated issues responsible for this scenario. Against this backdrop, it is important to explore the organic farming undertaken through the civil society- Kudumbashree initiative in the Kannur District. It is necessary also to analyze the performance of working of the different Kudumbashree units in the Kannur District.

MATERIALS AND METHODS

The study is of both empirical and descriptive type. Its data consists of primary and secondary data. The primary data have been collected from 50 women SHGs members from the Kannur District. The sample comprises seven Kudumbashree groups from Taliparamba municipality. These groups have more than five members in each. From each group, only those who engaged in organic farming are randomly selected for the study. A well-structured interview schedule was prepared to collect primary data from the respondents. Personal interviews with the officials concerned are also conducted to get the needed information for the analysis. The details about Kudumbashree Mission and organic farming practices are assessed with the help of secondary data, which are collected from published sources like economic reviews, books, journals, magazines, newspapers, and the internet. Primary data acquired from respondents through a prescribed schedule was used to examine the general information and performance of the Kudumbashree group. Similarly, primary data was used to examine the socio-economic and personal circumstances of SHG members. Garrett's ranking technique is used to identify the most pressing issue in the implementation of organic farming practises. As per this method, respondents were asked to assign the rank for five problems of carry forwarding organic farming. Therefore, the respondents gave a rank from 1-5 for each problem. Moreover, the outcome of such ranking has been converted into percent position with the help of the formula provided by Garrett.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The study is mainly aimed to examine the organic farming practices among the members of the SHGs, would contribute to the existing field of knowledge with new evidence about organic farming practices by the Kudumbashree members in Kerala. This paper would also throw light on the factors for adopting organic agriculture and the constraints related to the adoption of organic agriculture. Such a production of knowledge would help the policymakers and executives at different levels and the farmers. Thus, the study encompasses academics, policy-making bodies or government organizations, executives and the farmer Kudumbashree groups have undertaken so many productive activities where farming, animal husbandry and cottage industry are the most important productive activities carried under the selected Kudumbashree groups. By undertaking such activities, they can earn income and become economically self-sufficient. The activities are classified into three categories: (i) farming: this category consists of respondents who are engaged in only farming activities; (ii) farming and animal husbandry, which is farming plus animal husbandry, and (iii) farming and cottage industry: this category includes the cottage industry with farming. All respondents in the study are engaged in farming activities (Figure 1). The majority (48 percent) of people have an interest in farming and cottage industry. The cottage industry covers activities such as bakery units, pickle units and garments units. Only 4 percent of people have animal husbandry along with farming. It is inferred that farming is the major productive activity undertaken by the Kudumbashree members in the study area.

Figure 2 shows the distribution of the Kudumbashree members based on the total investment they made to start the farming activity. Out of 50 respondents, the majority of the respondents (56%) invested an amount ranging from Rs.1000-2000. Only 18 percent of the respondents invested more than 2000 rupees to initiate organic agriculture. The rest, 26 percent of members, invested an amount of below 1000 rupees. Farming is the most important activity undertaken by the respondents. They produce a variety of vegetables, cereals, pulses, fruits through organic farm practises. In this study, the respondents are mainly concentrated on the cultivation of vegetables and cereals. The distribution of the type of plants under cultivation is depicted in figure 3. The large majority (88 percent) of the respondents from the group grow vegetables. Only 12 percent of people are interested to cultivate cereals together with vegetables. It is clear that vegetables are the major product produced by the group members under organic farming.

Profitability is an important factor that influences one person to adopt a new method of farming practice. Here, the respondents are categorized on the basis of their opinion about the adoption of organic farming practices. Among 50 respondents, majority (72 percent) of members opines that adoption of organic farm practises is profitable. Such practices can contribute to their livelihood expenditure through directly spending money (selling in the market) or using the farm products they produced (self-use). 28 percent of members have an opinion that organic farm practises are not profitable.

Table 1 shows the area of homeland possessed by each member and the size of own land cultivated by them. From the table, it may be stated that each respondent possesses at least 5 cents of homeland. It is noted from the table that 34 percent of respondents have an area of homeland ranging 30-40 cents. Only 12 percent of members hold 1-10 cent of the land, and 32 percent of sample respondents occupy land holdings ranging 20-30 cents. In the case of own land under cultivation, majority of respondents (70 percentages) hold more than 1 cent and less than 10 cent of the area. It is clear that 18 percent of respondents have no own land for cultivation. In these circumstances, they used to hire land or take leased land for cultivation. Only one respondent has more than 30 per cent of own land for cultivation, and 8 percent of the members occupy their own land under cultivation ranging from 20 to 30 cents.

Marketing of the farm products is an important challenge faced by the members of the group. They cannot approach the wholesale market for distributing their products because all of them cultivate relatively smaller amount of output that they sell in the nearby retail market and the rest are distributed among the nearby households and some amount, they use themselves. The figure below indicates the different channels for distributing the farm products by the respondents.

Figure 5 shows that 38 percent of respondents sell their products through the retail market and a portion of it is taken for self-use, 22 percent did not sell their product to anyone, they use it by themselves, and 20 percent of members sell their products to households and the rest of the output is disbursed for self-use.

The most important productive activity undertaken by each Kudumbashree group is farming. Vegetables are the major plants they cultivated. Thus, Spinach, Cucumber, Tapioca, Bitter guard, ladyfinger, tomato, snake gourds, chillies pears, and brinjal are the major plants produced under organic farming by the group members, which get sufficient yield from farming, and thereby a sufficient income too. The distribution of income from vegetables is interpreted in the figure 6. It could be inferred that 30 percent of respondents earn more than 4000 rupees from vegetable cultivation; 20 percent of respondents generate income between Rs. 2000-3000 and 12 percent of respondents earn a minimum of 3000 and a maximum of 4000

rupees by selling vegetables. It is clear that except for one member, rest of the members are earning more than a minimum of 1000 rupees from vegetable cultivation.

Dung, biofertilizers and ash are the most preferred organic inputs by the respondents. In fact, about 26 percent of group members use dung, biofertilizer and ash, about 34 percent use the combination of dung and biofertilizer, and 36 percent prefer only dung.

Like every method of farming, the organic method may also have some problems in carry forwarding. To identify them, the group members were asked to identify the problems and rank them. Based on the data mean/average score and ranks, the major problems in carrying forwarding organic farming method are assigned by using Garrett's ranking technique. The results are presented in table 2. The result shows that input supply is the major problem respondents face when adopting organic farming, followed by the marketing of organic products, then the lack of information. Sufficient input supply and wider marketing opportunities are required to solve the problems in carry forwarding organic farming.

Organic farming is the most widely identified alternative farming system to the traditional system of farming. Conventional farming is more preferable and economically beneficial [6]. The demand for organic products is increasing mainly because of its high nutrient value, good taste and grown with organic nutrients. Organic farming has some role to play and the Non-Governmental Organisations (NGOs) have a significant role in the certification of organic farming under the World Trade Organization (WTO) regime. The market returns from organic vegetable production can potentially contribute to local food security by increasing family income [6].

The monthly income of the recipients improved significantly after the SHG programme was implemented successfully. A vast number of organisations had evolved into mini-banks, eliminating reliance on moneylenders. It has also improved their sanitation and nutritional standards. Women's networking, homogeneity, and self-esteem were all strengthened since of the group dynamic process. The programme also allowed women to meet together and discuss and share long-standing issues, as well as seek common solutions through sympathetic cooperation and guidance. As a result, the organisations serve as both a pillar of support and a source of information (Venkata, 2004). Organizations working with the SHGs generally felt that social issues pertaining to women are not addressed effectively by the SHGs. It is very essential that under the banner of SHGs, awareness programs on legal education need to be undertaken. Women need to recognize the freedom to decide the use of money. Besides, the agencies working with the SHGs should have sound philosophy of development and social justice specific to women [7]. The study has supported that the organic farming has been improving the income of the cultivators.

SHGs provide improved infrastructural support in the form of market complexes, work sheds, good roads, and better transportation, as well as better backward and forward linkages and institutional assistance. In general, SHGs follow five market channels: the local market, institutional arrangements, exhibitions/ melas, distributors/ vendors/ traders, wholesalers/ retailers, and distributors/ vendors/ traders. Skill up grading in the non-farm sector would equip SHGs for improved competition and boost marketing prospects in the Liberalized, Privatized, and Globalized (LPG) age. Within the existing working environment of SHGs, technology interventions are almost non-existent, and a technology action plan is critical for Self Help Group Promoting Institutions (SHPIs) operating in the field. Numerous variables aided or hindered Kudumbashree's expansion. Kudumbashree serves as a venue for political involvement while also expanding access to entitlements. However, the program's design does not include an effect evaluation [8].

Figure 1: Productive activities undertaken by SHGs (in numbers)

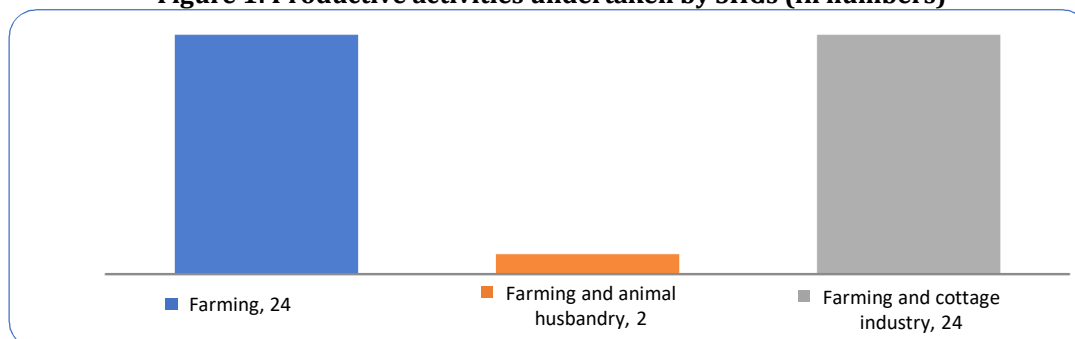


Figure 2: Total investment of SHGs, in %

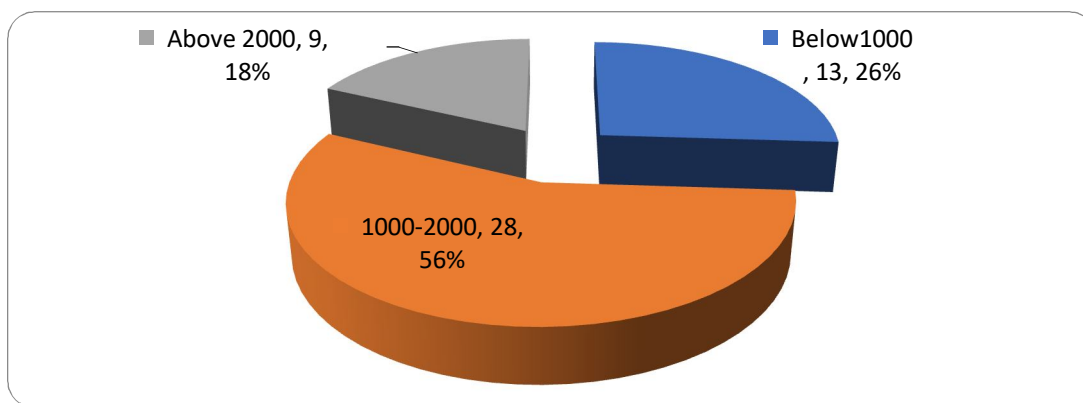


Figure 3: Cropping pattern (in numbers)

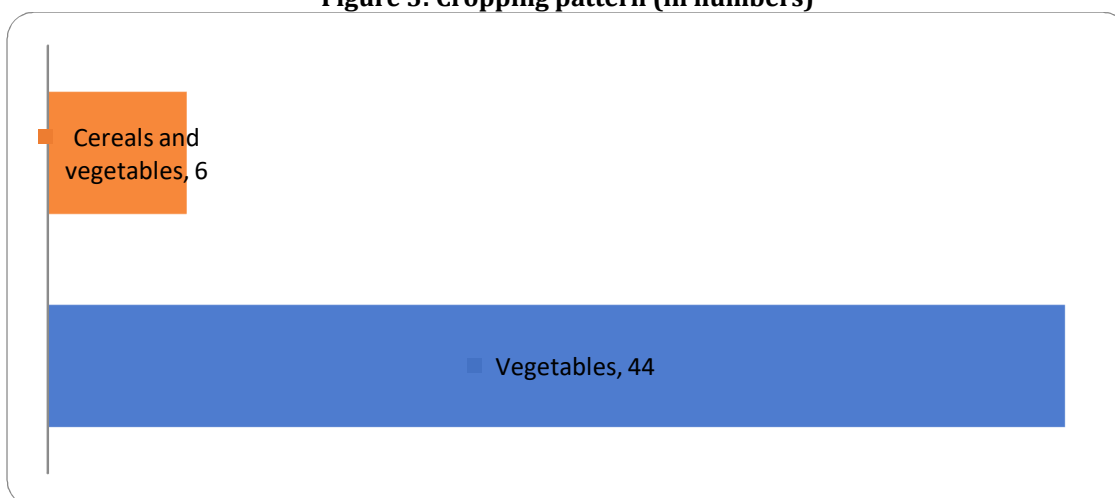


Figure 4: Profitability of Organic Farming (in numbers)

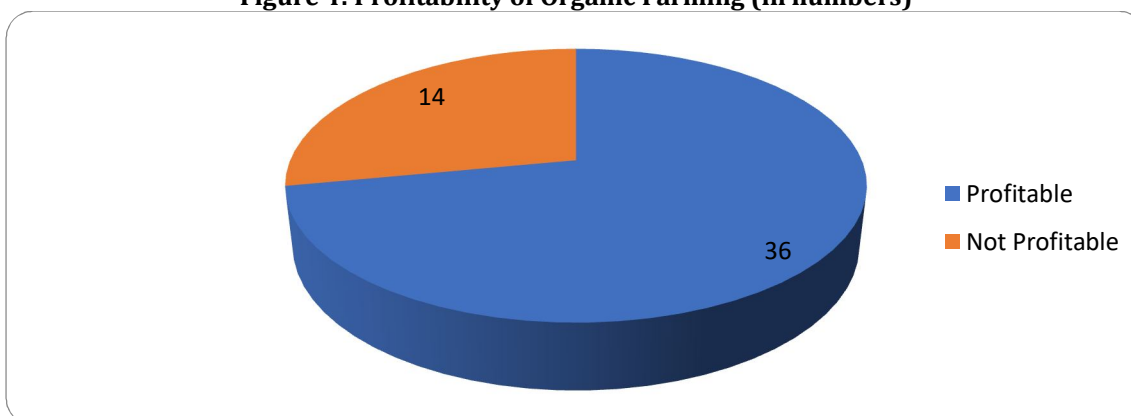


Table 1: Size of homeland and own land under cultivation

Size (in cent)	Area of homeland		Own land under cultivation	
	Respondents	Percentage	Respondents	Percentage
No land	0	0	9	18
1-10	6	12	35	70
10-20	11	22	1	2
20-30	16	32	4	8
30-40	17	34	1	2
total	50	100	50	100

Source: Survey data

Figure 5: Distribution of farm products (in numbers)

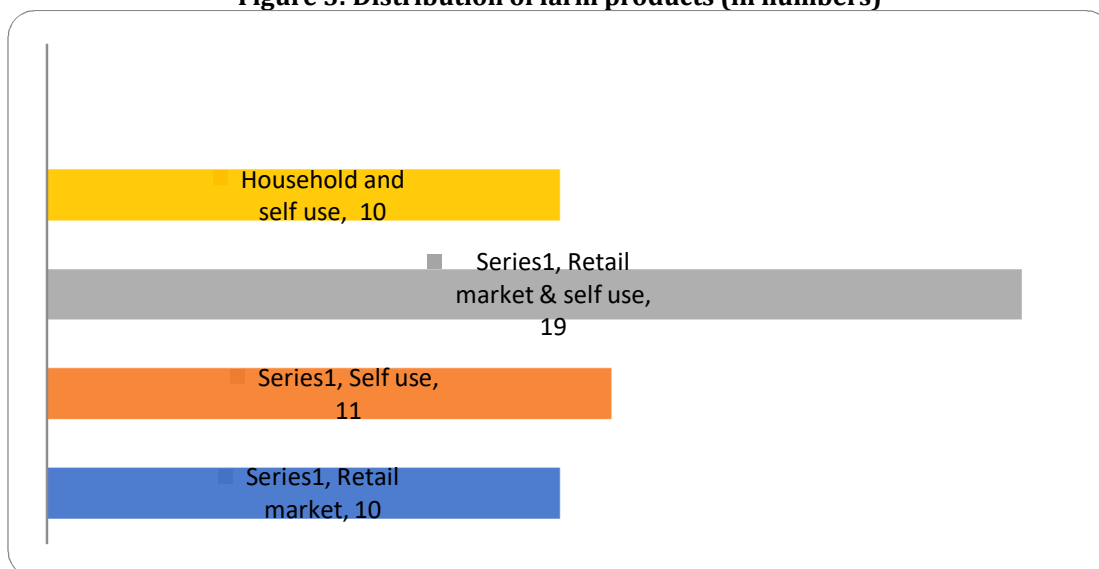


Table 2: Problems in organic farming

Problems	Average score	Rank
Input supply	66.12	1
Marketing of organic products	51.92	2
Lack of information	43.28	4
Competition from inorganic products	41.14	5
lack of infrastructure facilities	45.54	3

Source: Average score and rank obtained from Garrett’s Ranking Technique

CONCLUSION

The study finds that the SHGs are very familiar with organic farming practices, and they get a favourable return from such practices. It requires less expenditure, and the government and banks provide subsidized financial assistance to them. The inputs such as seeds and fertilizers are made available through Krishibhavans at free of cost. It is also clear that the organic farming methods provide a favourable yield and return than the inorganic methods of farming. Since people prefer organic products, which are toxic free and contain more nutrient and protect their health, they are ready to consume organic outputs at any cost for their good health. However, organic farming practices are not successful in attracting all the farmers, even though Kudumbashree adopts organic farming and provides more employment opportunities for women.

The study suggests that the adopting organic farming practises will assist to improve vegetable production while reducing the amount of land under cultivation and at a lower cost. Kudumbashree’s Harithashree might be deemed a beneficial farming venture because of the community’s involvement. Furthermore, given the major challenges with farm loans in Kerala and other Indian states, Harithashree is a solid example of microcredit agriculture finance with a good repayment track record. Considering the small scale of operation and limited coverage, there is a need for its expansion. Certain problems faced by the lease land farmers need to be addressed. Therefore, it is recommended to popularize organic farming with community participation and to improve access to microcredit.

CONFLICT OF INTEREST

No possible conflict of interest has been declared concerning the publishing of this paper.

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