

MIZORAM



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UPLIFTING THE DOWNTRODDEN

A STORY OF TRIUMPH

Before joining Kudumbashree, I was scared to step out of my home. Now, I can travel across the country in any vehicle – Beena Kuriakose

Beena Kuriakose firmly believes that strength comes from doing things we thought we couldn't. Beena hails from the famous Ernakulam district of Kerala. In 2007, at the age of 32, she joined an 'Ayalkootam', a local Self-Help Group (SHG) in her neighbourhood. Within no time Beena went on to become the Chairperson of Cluster Development Society (CDS). During the 5 years which followed, she actively conducted various welfare programs and worked with large groups of people.

Upon completing her tenure as the CDS Chairperson, in 2015, Beena was posted as a Mentor in Odisha. She says that working in Odisha offered her some of the most challenging experiences. Beena worked in a Gram Panchayat that was predominantly Schedule Tribe (ST) populated. People lived amidst extreme poverty. She was supposed to work with seven Local Resource Group (LRG) members. However, only two of them used to turn up for work as the rest used to work as daily wage labourers. Beena recollects, 'One cannot imagine the poverty experienced by those people. Women would cut one saree into two as they wouldn't even have proper clothes to wear.'

Beena spent most of her time talking to the SHG women to make them understand the importance of

female participation in the Gram Panchayat activities. Beena firmly believes that one needs to be emotionally sensitive in order to work with communities. Most of the tribal communities in Odisha are victims of abject poverty. While mentoring the SHG women, Beena offered them the necessary emotional and mental support. She would often visit their homes and lend a listening ear to their problems. As most women struggled to meet even their basic needs, Beena would offer clothes and groceries whenever she could, to help them overcome tough situations. Small relief like this also gave many women the required bandwidth to focus on things Beena was trying to teach them. They soon started participating in the Gram Sabhas and Gram Panchayat activities. She is happy that the tribal women (SHG members) of Odisha today work in collaboration with the Gram Panchayat. In spite of their busy routine, these women make it a point to keep in touch with Beena. A beaming Beena says, 'Last year, they even arranged a surprise birthday party for me!'

“Odisha ke sudoor gaon mein rah rahe pichde tabke jis garibi mein jee rahe hai uski hum kalpana bhi nahim kar sakte hai”

(One cannot imagine the poverty experienced by backward communities in the interior villages of odisha)

After working for more than a year in Odisha, Beena worked in Chhattisgarh for one and a half years, following which she was posted in the North Eastern state of Mizoram. In Mizoram, apart from the hectic and long travel schedules, unfamiliarity with the local language was a challenge. Only one of the LRG members knew English. However, since the Mizo script is similar to that of English, Beena managed to communicate with the villagers. She says, 'When I meet the LRG members, I try to speak in their mother tongue and learn to pick up the local language as soon as possible. Communities tend to trust us when we speak the local language.' With consistent efforts, the SHG women in Mizoram now work in tandem with the local village authorities. They are well aware of their rights and entitlements.

Beena is extremely happy with the experience she has gained over the years in her association with Kudumbashree. She is proud of her journey – from a simple homemaker in a small town to a development professional who mentored many aspiring women across the country. She says, 'Initially, I was very scared to work. My husband encouraged me to take up this work and I'm glad I did. I have experienced India's rich cultural diversity because of this job. I would love to continue working!'



BEENA KURIAKOSE
Mentor Resource Person
Serchhip Block
Serchhip District
Mizoram

BREAKING PERSONAL LIMITS

A STORY OF EXCELLENCE

“Jab hum unse unki bhasha mein baat karte hai, phir who humpe vishwas karte hai, aur humari batein sunte hai”.

(When we speak to them in their local language, they (the villagers) trust us and also start listening to us”.

MINI VARGHESE
Mentor Resource Person
East Lungdar Block
Serchhip District
Mizoram

If I get another place to go and work, I would love to do that! I know I'll get to learn more! – Mini Varghese

A cheerful conversation with Mini Varghese is a gentle reminder of the fact that age is indeed no limit for learning. Coming from a troubled family background, Mini proved hard work and perseverance can keep up the learning spirit of an individual.

When Kudumbashree started its operations in Kerala in the year 1998, Mini joined an 'Ayalkoottam', a local Self-Help Group (SHG) in her village. It is this decision to join Kudumbashree that changed Mini's course of life forever. She used to carry her younger child to the SHG meetings as she had no one to look after the kid. She put her heart and soul into the SHG activities and was quick to learn the know-how of government functionalities. She initially got elected as the Secretary of Area Development Society (ADS) and then as the Chairperson of Community Development Society (CDS).

Mini's commitment to work got her immense popularity within the community. In the year 2010, she won the local body elections with a thumping majority and became the ward member. Subsequently, Mini became the vice-president of the Gram Panchayat. In

five years' time, Mini learned the functionalities of a gram panchayat in atomic detail.

After continuing to work for Kudumbashree in Kerala for another 5 years, in 2015, Mini got selected as a Mentor for the state of Rajasthan. She worked with women in four Gram Panchayats of Udaipur district and spent many of her working hours encouraging and motivating women to step out and become aware of their rights and entitlements. Given her robust understanding of the government functionalities, in the year 2018, Mini was posted in the North-Eastern Indian state of Mizoram.

Mizoram was unlike any other place that Mini had worked earlier. Difficulties with transport facilities coupled with the language barrier did not stop Mini from mobilising the local community to work in tandem with the Village Councils (VC). Mini emphasises that it is important to pick up the local language to work in different places. 'When we speak in their local language, people trust us and also become eager to listen to us', says Mini.

While many people in Mizoram knew English, it was still very difficult for Mini to communicate with the villagers. Mini found that it was the differences in

accent that made communication difficult. In order to address this issue, she would carry a laptop to the field and request the villagers to type down whenever they had something to say. As this eliminated the problem of accent, Mini could communicate with the villagers effectively.

From an intense struggle to pursue her education to working in the remote corners of North Eastern India, Mini has come a long way. Being an avid reader of history and language, Mini feels education and literacy have helped her in developing a holistic perspective towards her work.

An excited Mini recalls, 'Initially, I was very scared to travel alone. Now I go alone anywhere. I even travel alone changing three flights when going to Kerala from Mizoram'. Before marriage, Mini says her family wouldn't allow her to step out of the house. However, she feels it's her husband's progressive mentality that helped her step out of her comfort zone to realise her dreams.

A cheerful Mini says, 'If I get another place to go and work, I would love to do that! I know I'll get to learn more!'

“Agar mujhe doosra kuch jagah kam karne ke liye bheja toh, main khushi se jaungi, kuch naya seekhne ke liye milega”.

(If i get another place to go and work, i would love to do that! I know i'll get to learn more)!







“Main bhi ek gareeb parivaar se hu, ek gareeb parivar ki takleef kya hoti hai, yeh mein acchi taraf janti hoon”

(I too come from a poor family, I know the hardships of poor families)

SUMA S DHARAN
Mentor Resource Person
Serchhip Block
Serchhip District
Mizoram

MAKING CHANGE HAPPEN

A STORY OF DILIGENCE FROM ALLEPPEY

It is important for men to understand why a female wants to step out of her home and work – Suma S Dharan

‘When I work in the field now, the poverty and vulnerability of people reminds me of my childhood,’ recalls Suma S Dharan. Having worked across many Indian states, she is acutely aware of her roots and is unafraid to expand her horizons.

Early years of marriage were extremely challenging for Suma. Her husband’s meagre earnings were insufficient to run the family. To make ends meet, she used to work day and night. Suma describes this phase of her life as the most challenging and painful.

Suma joined an ‘Ayalkoottam’, a local Self-Help Group (SHG) in her village in the year 1996. Subsequently, after the formation of Kudumbashree network in 1998, she worked her way up to become the Chairperson of the Area Development Society (ADS). In the year 2014, Suma was posted as a Mentor in the state of Maharashtra. As there was no one to take care of her children at home, Suma convinced her elder daughter to take care of the family. ‘I pushed myself hard and decided to leave,’ recalls an emotional Suma.

Suma had worked in many states including Maharashtra, Sikkim, Goa, Jharkhand and Chhattisgarh. Her initial

years in the field (in Maharashtra) shaped her as a strong and independent woman. She succeeded to learn and communicate in Marathi. She managed to mobilize women to become active participants in SHG activities and the village welfare programs. She recalls, ‘It is important for men to understand why a female wants to step out of her home and work. They (men) should know more about our work.’ While working in the villages, Suma would often talk to men to create awareness around the idea of women empowerment. She also encouraged men to be part of the SHG meetings. She proudly says, ‘Slowly their tendency has changed and they have become sensitive towards the idea of women coming out of their homes to work.’

Suma began working in Mizoram in the year 2018. She visited each and every household in the villages to invite women for the SHG meetings. Since women were busy working during the day and Suma had to mentor the meetings during night. She recalls, ‘Women felt that if I have come all alone from Kerala to their village to work, it is important they turn up for the meetings and listen to what I had to say.’ Owing to the consistent efforts of Suma, women in Mizoram now are far more aware of their rights and entitlements and are actively working towards achieving them.

Suma says, ‘Being a Mentor I feel we should also

do things that benefit the village community. For instance, I have sponsored an orphan child’s education in Jharkhand. Apart from sponsoring the education of such children, I also make it a point to educate the school staff and teachers to be sensitive and attentive towards children coming from underprivileged sections of society. I am grateful that Kudumbashree has allowed me to serve the communities in ways that I can.’

Today Suma is proud that her work allowed her to become educated and aware of her surroundings. It has also helped groom her personality. She recalls, ‘Back in Kerala, people are obsessed with gold. If we have to attend any kind of gathering, we would dress up in gaudy gold ornaments. However, after working across the country and having met women from various backgrounds, I have realised that it is not gold ornaments that make a woman look beautiful, but the confidence to be comfortable in her skin that makes her beautiful. I must confess my taste and habits back then were gaudy,’ she giggles.

Suma’s children are now educated and well settled. For her, joining the Mentoring programme of Kudumbashree National Resource Organisation (NRO) is the best decision she has ever made.

