Food for thought: do Attappady community kitchens serve the needy?

Amid criticism from SC/ST panel, experts say project must continue

Now in her late twenties, Veeramma Selvan of Thekkekadampara tribal hamlet in Sholayur gram panchayat of Attappady has reasons to believe that her gods have stopped smiling. It was in January last year that she lost her five-month-old, underweight son Balu — her fourth child — allegedly due to milk aspiration. (a medical condition in which the mother's milk goes down the windpipe and enters the infant’s lungs).

“I don’t want to get pregnant again. Despite getting nutritious food daily from the community kitchen scheme of Kerala government, my health continues to remain poor. Mentally and physically, I am unable to bear yet another trauma,” said the young Irula woman, who rears a cow to support her husband, a daily wage worker.

Pregnancy and childbirth evoke traumatic memories for Veeramma and her husband Selvan. They lost three children — a daughter and two sons — before Balu due to health complications resulting from poverty and malnutrition.

It was the death Veeramma’s 14-month-old daughter Kaliyamma on April 12, 2013 — the first in a series of 45 infant deaths in Attapady — that turned national attention on Kerala's impoverished tribal heartland in Palakkad district. The district lies in the rain shadow area of the Western Ghats.

Under collective care

The infant deaths and pervasive malnutrition prompted the then UDF government to set up community kitchens to ensure at least one complete meal a day for children below six years, adolescents, pregnant and lactating women and those above the age of 60 years. Though initially operated through anganwadis, the kitchens were handed over to the tribal women’s Kudumbasree collectives in 2014 and are supported by Central government’s National Rural Livelihood Mission (NRLM).

“Community kitchens across Attappady have been successful in reducing the number of infant mortality cases. Without them, the situation may have been much worse,” said Veeeramma. Though the State government has claimed that the welfare measure is a success in ensuring minimal nutritional security to tribal people of three panchayats of Attappady, it has come in for harsh criticism from the Kerala State Commission for Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes, which has termed it a complete failure in achieving the desired objectives.

The ruling Left Democratic Front (LDF) remains deeply divided over the continuance of the facility presently operating in 193 tribal hamlets. The rethink had pushed the scheme to a crisis in February this year with the Kudumbashree units owing the Kerala State Civil Supplies Corporation ₹6 crore. It took Chief Minister Pinarayi Vijayan’s intervention following an appeal by
Kudumbashree activists during his visit to Attapady in February this year, for the funds to be released.

Ironically, the debate in Kerala comes even as States like Jharkhand and Chhattisgarh are sending experts to Attappady to study the project with a view to replicating it in their tribal areas.

‘An alien intervention’
The Commission said it has demanded a thorough review of the project based on the feedback from the tribal community. Speaking to The Hindu, Commission member S. Ajayakumar said 154 among the 156 tribal promoters working in Attappady under SC/ST Department were highly critical of the project.

“Most of the community kitchens now remain only on paper. We found that all the functioning kitchens provide a menu different from traditional tribal diet. In most cases, local non-governmental organisations are diverting money from the funds for community kitchens. The project requires a complete overhaul by including tribal menu and liberating it from the clutches of NGOs,” Mr. Ajayakumar said.

“Whatever the critics say, the project must be continued for at least two more years in Attappady given the impoverished condition, specially of women and children. At present, it is ensuring nutritious support for 14,172 women, children and elders. Among the tribals here, only a minuscule who own land and have a livelihood are opposing the project,” said 39-year-old Shyni Murthi, a tribal woman of Choriyannur hamlet in Kottathara, who coordinates the operations of kitchens in her locality.

“I am quite astonished by the allegation of the Commission that NGOs are diverting funds from the community kitchens. It may have mistaken the NRLM for an NGO. The tribal Kudumbasree units are operating the kitchens and we are just facilitators. Every deal is transparent,” said Dr. Seema Bhaskar, coordinator for NRLM in Attappady. Government sources said ₹28 crore has been spent on the kitchens so far.

“The priority must be on empowering the tribal people by restoring their alienated land, revitalising their livelihood and supporting them with health, education and agriculture-related interventions. Food security and bridging the nutrition demands require complete overhaul,” insists Mr. Ajayakumar.

Success in numbers

“Those who are highly critical of the community kitchens forget that children with severe acute malnutrition (SAM) has reduced from 613 in 2013 to 26 in 2018. We never considered them as long term solutions. [But] They must be allowed to continue till restoring their [tribal] lost land and livelihood,” said Dr. Bhaskar.

“The kitchens have made Attappady tribals beggars,” said K.A. Ramu of the tribal voluntary organisation Thambu. “They are forced to become part of a long queue in the evening for the free supply of a meal with a menu fixed by non-tribals. It would be easy for the government to focus on such schemes while ignoring the tribal demands for land, livelihood, irrigation, drinking water and health facilities. This scheme was launched after stopping supply of raw food packets containing ragi, green gram, and rice through ration shops.”

While rice, pulses, millets and various beans have become part of the menu, there is a strong criticism against not supplying eggs and milk among the beneficiaries. “Egg is not part of the tribal diet in Attappady,” pointed out Dr. Bhaskar. “We have told the government to continue the
kitchens for the next two years as community centres for ensuring supplementary nutrition for deserving tribals. By that time, there must be key interventions in productive sector to ensure food security of the tribals. Lack of irrigation is preventing many interested tribals from taking up agriculture,” she said.

Because of the lack of proper land ownership documents, a number of tribals have failed to become beneficiaries of government schemes to promote cultivation of pulses and millets.

Though the kitchens are mainly operational in evenings, some are providing breakfast to tribal children who have dropped out of school and joined bridge courses conducted by the NRLM.

“There may be shortcomings. But the kitchens operated by tribal women Kudumbasree units have scripted several chapters of women emancipation in Attappady. The women collective Thaykula Sanghom was formed using the workers and beneficiaries of these kitchens to fight free flow of illicit liquor. Microcredit became a huge success in the region through these women. The women have also contributed significantly to reduced dropout rates among tribal students,” says K. Vanchi, a tribal Kudumbasree activist from Kottathara.

“As land alienation and change in agricultural practices have adversely affected tribal nutritional security, the NRLM is now promoting cultivation of pulses, cereals, millets and vegetables on a large scale. At least 150 units are supplying pulses and vegetables to community kitchens. Prominent among them are Kadukumanna and Paripputhara,” said Dr. Bhaskar.