



New skills, new lives: Kerala's women masons

Thresiamma Mathew

The Jeevapoorna Women Masons of Thrissur have revolutionized local expectations of what women can and cannot do. What's the secret of their success — and are the men happy?

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The Jeevapoorna Women Masons Society (JEEWOMS), an offshoot of Socio-Economic Units, Kerala, was formed in 1989, becoming a registered charitable society in 1995.

SEU itself was established in 1988 as a result of a bilateral agreement between the Dutch, Danish and Indian governments in implementing W&S projects in Kerala, its main responsibility being to ensure that people participated in projects fully, from planning to monitoring. Water-supply activities were carried out in close collaboration with the Kerala Water Authority, but the sanitation programme was launched independently. As we write, SEUs have been involved in the construction of 53 763 household latrines, 253 institutional latrines, and two pay-and-use latrines, with full community-group (ward water committees), local government (*panchayat*), and user participation.

It soon became the norm to see women assisting skilled male masons in all construction works, especially the building of low-cost latrines. The Programme Officer (Health Education), based at the central unit, decided that the next step was

to initiate masonry training for these women. At first the women were highly sceptical, but gradually they began to believe that they could do it. One woman said 'If, madam, you will give the training, I am ready to learn'. Soon others were expressing their enthusiasm.

Supply and demand

SEU faced a shortage of skilled masons, so the idea was welcomed. The first batch of 12 women began in 1989 but, as they began to marry outside their villages, they dropped out. So in 1990, when the second group of 14 began, they had to meet the following criteria:

- women had to be married, below the age of 45, and from below-poverty-line households;
- the intensive years of child-rearing should be over — their children should be more than three years old;
- widows, deserted women, and single parents — in greater need of extra income — were preferred; and
- all candidates should have previous experience as a mason's helper.

The training comprised: cement-block making; mortar and cement proportions; mortar constituency; cement-block quality; and curing and strengthening. The women then learned the practical skills of bricklaying, level-checking, plastering, floor construction, making and fixing concrete slabs, reinforcing steel work, using moulds to construct rings for latrines and wells, and how to construct low-cost twin-pit latrines.

The women started by learning to make solid cement blocks which, after three days, they could make on their own. A cement mixture of 1:9 (for latrines) is poured into a 3" x 6" x 12" mould in the middle of which are placed three stone chips, both to add

Training in progress — these JEEWOMS trainees are preparing steel for the roofs of latrines in construction.



gender and water — six years on

strength, and reduce costs.

Once they'd gained some confidence with the blocks, the women started on more complicated areas: slab-casting, foundation works, and superstructure. For a month they used only sand and mud to fix the blocks, so that, by doing and undoing again and again, they learned the right techniques.

Social pressures

What proved really difficult was persuading the women that they could learn masonry. Some shook their heads saying, 'Madam, how many years after a boy has worked with a master, that he learns; how can we think of learning the skills in two months?' Others feared violating the cultural norm: 'Will others accept us? What will happen to us?' They were concerned that they might end up losing their helper jobs. So a participatory training programme was developed to:

- build up the women's confidence that they could become skilful masons;
- strengthen team building — solid bonds are very important, and only as a team could they face the men's jeering, neighbours' criticism, and the culture shock; and
- awaken the women's obvious but latent potential.

Various participatory techniques — including songs, slogans, and games were used; and the trainees and facilitator formulated the 'ten commandments' (see box). The training also touched on savings and money management, and hygiene, so

that the women can be agents of change within their communities.

Male master masons provided the construction training. After a month of intensive training on a single site, the group was sent out, in twos, with a mason to work on household latrine construction. This enabled them to gain experience in different *panchayats*. Later on, two to three women worked together in allotted *panchayats*.

As helpers, these women earned between Rs25 and 35 per day. During their first month as trainees they received Rs35; in the second and third months this went up to Rs25 plus a real market wage — so, from the beginning, they earned equal pay.

Reactions

Over the next few years, the Thrissur women became a crucial component of SEU's sanitation programme — producing cement blocks and concrete rings, or building latrines.

Nevertheless, the women masons faced constant problems and opposition. On one occasion, they were turned away from constructing latrines in a particular ward, because they were women. But during the second phase of the programme, they got their revenge; they did all the building work in the very same ward, and won over the opposition.

There was publicity and appreciation too — from, among others, the local MP and the Dutch Ambassador; while

The JEEWOMS trainees' 'Ten Commandments'

- Have a definite aim, for example, 'to become an efficient mason'
- Participate eagerly and attentively
- Be determined: 'I will become a clever mason, whatever the hurdles and struggles'
- Be confident: 'I can do it'
- Persevere: 'even if at first I don't succeed, I will still go on trying'
- Co-operate: with co-trainees and trainers
- Unity: 'together we can do it'
- Work hard and win
- Be tolerant: accept, respect and support one another
- Be honest and loyal

Real women — real experiences

- JEEWOMS President, Omana, a 45-year old widow, has the confidence of her members. She can now speak to any gathering. A timid woman has blossomed into an outstanding leader.
- The progress that Geetha, the Group Secretary, has made is incredible. A tiny, quiet woman, she has acquired amazing managerial skills. She does all the bookkeeping, organizes work arrangements, and visits members in various *panchayats*. Her husband, who is generally out of work, has become her 'helper', making ornamental plant-pots, and preparing moulds.
- Ms Mani, a deserted mother of two says, 'I had to work very hard [as a helper] the contractors would shout at me; and the pay wasn't that good. Now I can build a latrine and earn up to Rs150 a day. I also learned to construct houses. What is more, I am master of

myself. I have more dignity, my family gives me more respect, and I am known in my neighbourhood. I am proud of my improved status in the community.'

- Another woman mason, Fathima says, 'My husband cannot work. I have three small children. Now we can buy milk, fish, meat, and eggs, and my children have better clothes. We lead a prosperous and happy life'.
- Lalitha, a 40-year old mother who participated in the sanitation programme, remembers the two women coming to build her latrine. 'My husband had already left for work, and I did not know whether to let these women work or not. I doubted the skill of these women whom I had known as helpers. Once the work was over and found to be really well done, I breathed a sigh of relief. Nowadays, when the women masons arrive they are treated as important people'.



Preparing hand-made, solid bricks for latrine construction.

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about the author

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national newspapers printed headlines such as 'Breaking male bastion brick by brick'.

In 1996, with support from the Women in Development section of the Dutch Embassy, JEEWOMS ventured into machine-operated hollow-block production, which developed their skills and boosted their earnings. Nine women can now operate the power machines, and are supplying hollow blocks for latrines in the Kadappuram *panchayat*.

Twelve masons completed one-month training courses in house construction; they immediately won a contract to build 12 houses for a charitable society.

And the trainees soon became trainers

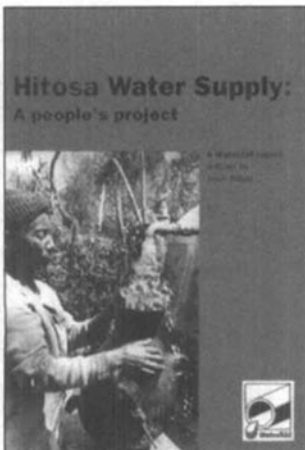
themselves. At the moment, two of the women are instructing 50 trainees at Alleppey District, on a Unicef-supported programme, while a further two are training male masons in the two-pit technology, which they demonstrate with model latrines at Trivandrum.

Now the idea is catching on — more of Kerala's district *panchayats* are training women in masonry as a main plank of their women's-empowerment initiatives.

JEEWOMS is now Thrissur's official agency for training women masons, and is well on the way to establishing a training centre. Society members are rapidly acquiring further skills in other low-cost technologies.



books



Beyond Big Dams: A new approach to energy sector and watershed planning
Edited by Juliette Majot
International Rivers Network, Berkeley, 1998. 126pp. Pbk. US\$20 (plus shipping and handling).

This 126-page report sets out to consider a world in which new large-scale hydropower is not a preferred option for electricity generation. It describes the world energy situation, current planning processes, and why they favour projects like large dams; how to improve energy-planning priorities; and alternatives to large-scale dams. 'With an estimated 78 per cent of the earth's hydropower potential yet untapped, proponents continue to promote hydro as an important source of electricity, even as the days of vastly expensive and environmentally devastating large-scale dams come to a close,' Juliette Majot writes.

Adding to the urgency is slow growth in 'non-hydro' renewables, and a global push to rely less on fossil fuels: a potent combination that could lead to a call for more large dams. Thus, the need to explore the use of rivers to generate power in a more sustainable way, specifically small-scale hydropower, is a key focus of *Beyond Big Dams*. Small-scale hydro (that is, anything less than 10 megawatts) offers a less destructive energy option to meet growing energy demand, though it has its own set of potential problems.

The report explores the pros and cons of this approach, in part through valuable case studies from countries that have experience with small-scale hydro, including Norway, Nepal, China, Sri Lanka, and Peru. Majot

writes that the crucial element in a sustainable energy future is in creating energy planning approaches 'that consider the social, environmental and political economies of appropriate energy' and involve communities in the process. An entire chapter examines thoroughly how to create such a planning process. Available from IRN, 1847 Berkeley Way, Berkeley, CA 94703, USA. Fax: +1 510 848 1008.

Hitosa Water Supply — A people's project
Trish Silkin
WaterAid, London, 1998. 26pp. Pbk. FREE. ISBN 0 9513 4663 6.

For a copy, contact: Julie Jarman, Advocacy Manager, WaterAid, Prince Consort House, 27-9 Albert Embankment, London SE1 7UB, UK. Fax: +44 171 793 4545. E-mail: wateraid@compuserve.com

This, the second in a series of reports analysing WaterAid's experience in integrated water, sanitation, and hygiene-education projects, assesses a community-managed gravity scheme in Ethiopia which provides water to more than 60 000 people living in 31 communities. The water runs through 140km of pipeline to 122 distribution points — how has such a large-scale scheme been managed successfully?

WaterAid contends that the report 'challenges the orthodoxy that large-scale necessarily equates to complexity. Hitosa demonstrates that gravity water-supply schemes, even one as extensive as this, are technically simple and can be operated, maintained and managed by people *without* specialized skills.'

The IT Bookshop

Unless stated otherwise, all priced publications reviewed here — and those listed in the resources guide on pages 27-28 — can be ordered direct from the IT Bookshop, Europe's leading specialist stockist of development titles. 103-105 Southampton Row, London WC1B 4HH, UK. Fax: +44 171 436 2013. E-mail: orders@itpubs.org.uk