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Waste, Work and Justice: Haritha Karma Sena and Community-Based Waste Governance in Kerala

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Abstract

Haritha Karma Sena has become one of the most prominent community-based waste management efforts in Kerala that connects decentralised governance of sanitation with the women's labour, local environment and public health. This chapter explores Haritha Karma Sena from a conceptual dimension using secondary literature which is built around three interrelated aspects—waste, work and justice. It contends that Haritha Karma Sena should not only be seen as a door-to-door waste collection system, but as a socio-environmental intervention, situated at the intersection of women's livelihood, community health and environmental justice. The chapter reviews literature from published studies and journal articles and available secondary sources and analyses the impact of Haritha Karma Sena on household level waste segregation, public awareness, women's employment, decentralised governance and a cleaner local environment. At the same time, it also exposes some of the remaining gaps, such as lack of infrastructure, low social status of waste workers, job insecurity and the risk of promoting women's role to low paid sanitation work. The chapter suggests the concept of waste–work–justice, where the transformative power of Haritha Karma Sena will rely on the incorporation of dignified working conditions, environmental sustainability, community involvement and gender-sensitive local governance. It finds that Haritha Karma Sena holds promise as a model of waste management that can work with the community, but the justice potential of this model can only be unlocked if women waste workers are not only service providers but also environmental agents, public health contributors and local governance actors.

Keywords: Haritha Karma Sena, Waste Management, Women Workers, Gender Equity, Environmental Justice, Community Health, Kerala, Decentralised Governance, Green Economy.

Introduction

Waste Governance and the Kerala Context

Kerala's waste problem has emerged as one of the most pressing issues on the environmental and public health agenda. With the fast pace of urbanisation, the high population density, changing consumption habits and surge of plastic and non-biodegradable materials has worsened the issue of solid waste generation. Improper disposal of any waste also helps to degrade the environment, pollute water bodies, pose health risks, cause visual pollution, and spread diseases. In this context, Kerala has tried to shift from the municipality-only system of waste management towards decentralised and participatory waste management.

One such example of this transition is the so called Green Task Force (Haritha Karma Sena). It functions with trained workers, mostly women, involved in waste collection, segregation, transport, and supporting the recycling process and raising public awareness. Previous research depicts Haritha Karma Sena as a community-based initiative which decentralizes waste management at the household level by engaging, segregating, collecting and recycling waste materials, as well as raising awareness.

But, Haritha Karma Sena cannot be considered as a technical solution for removal of waste only. It is significant because it is the only one that brings together three areas that are traditionally taught separately: waste, work, and justice. The environment and public health issue of improper disposal is waste. Work is used for the activities of women who gather, separate and organize waste, frequently in socially undervalued forms. Justice is about equitably sharing environmental responsibilities, health benefits, livelihood opportunities and dignity of those doing waste labour.

Based on this, a conceptual analysis of Haritha Karma Sena as the socio-environmental model is developed in this chapter. It queries about the linkage of women's work, community health and environmental justice in the waste management system of Kerala. The chapter is descriptive in nature and adopts secondary sources as well as theme based conceptual analysis methodology. It is not purporting to contain original field data. It rather takes into consideration the available studies and extends the understanding of Haritha Karma Sena as an example of decentralised environmental governance within a wider interpretive framework.

There is a prevalent public perception of waste management that emphasizes cleanliness and collection efficiency and disposal system. This is an overly restricted perspective that does not consider the social relations in waste management. Waste is not self-sorting and transporting; it is picked up, sorted, transported and processed by human effort. In Kerala, a large part of this labour is

done by women of Haritha Karma Sena. Thus, it is important to assess the programme not only by the question of whether or not waste can be collected, but also whether the system allows for dignifying work, gender equality, public health and environmental justice.

Haritha Karma Sena as a Decentralised Waste Governance Model

Haritha Karma Sena is a paradigm change from the centralised waste disposal to decentralised waste governance. A centralised model is typically one in which waste is generally picked up and moved elsewhere and households do not see the disposal. The decentralised model involves community involvement in segregation, payment of user fees, awareness, and local level reduction.

Haritha Karma Sena builds support for decentralised governance as it operates at the household and local self-governance level. According to the literature, HKS operates on the principles of local participation, household-level engagement and community education. This is relevant since infrastructure of itself is not enough to make household waste management a success. It demands behaviour change, public co-operation and ongoing local monitoring.

There are reports in the existing literature that Haritha Karma Sena is a part of the decentralised waste management system of Kerala. According to a study on household waste management in Ernakulam, Household Waste Segregation (HWS) is one of the key initiatives of HKS which covers waste segregation, collection, transport, recycling, composting, disposal which also names infrastructure and funding as constraints. According to the same study, the activities of the HKS volunteers influenced positively the practice of waste management and helped to minimize improper treatment of waste.

A study on Haritha Karma Sena and green economy explains that Haritha Karma Sena can be considered as a decentralised mechanism constituted to solve the waste problem of Kerala, which also can create job and income opportunities to the people by collecting and treating the waste materials. It shows HKS as a professional group of green technicians (mostly women, connected with the Kudumbashree) and local self-governments working together.

Another study describes HKS as an environmental, economic, social and operational approach which involves the community. It emphasizes door-to-door collection, public education, waste segregation, participation of women and community responsibility as key elements of the HKS model. The utility of this literature is that it is not a strictly technicist approach to waste management and acknowledges that HKS is not only a service provider but also a catalyst for change.

But much of the previous work is only descriptive. It frequently claims to improve waste management, or empower women, but doesn't necessarily examine the circumstances of empowerment. Without an increase in their income, without

their being paid more, without their being socially accepted and without their having stable jobs, their empowerment is problematic and restricted. Likewise, where communities enjoy improved surroundings but the attitude of the members towards the waste workers is poor, the environmental justice dimension is incomprehensive.

Haritha Karma Sena plays a role to bring waste visibility to the local level and thereby making waste visible in the context of decentralised governance. It is a reminder to households that waste is not just a government issue, it is a civic issue. Collection, awareness, and monitoring allows HKS to urge people to take responsibility for segregating and disposing of their trash. However, decentralisation should not be a way of delegating responsibility and stripping of resources. Decentralisation, if based on the expectation that local workers can solve waste problems with little or no infrastructure, little or no safety equipment, little or no fair wages and little or no processing facilities, is exploitative rather than empowering.

Women's Work, Livelihood and Community Health

A key aspect of Haritha Karma Sena is the pivotal role of women. HKS offers women employment opportunities to earn a living and public exposure and involvement in local environmental governance. Thus, the green economy literature defines HKS as a process of collection, transportation, processing, recycling, disposal and waste management that engages Kudumbashree women with local self-governments.

This can help achieve gender equity in a number of ways. Firstly, it offers access to paid work for women. Second, it puts women in public environmental service positions. Third, it affords opportunities for collective identity and community leadership. Fourth, it connects women's work in relation to sustainable development.

But careful use of the empowerment argument needs to be done. To claim that gender equity is automatically achieved in HKS because women work is to state the obvious. Work is not empowering if it pays little, is demeaned socially, or is unsafe. Decent wages, occupational safety, social respect, decision-making power and institutional protection is necessary to achieve gender equity. Hence, there is gender-equity potential in the case of HKS, but it requires that women workers are regarded as skilled environmental workers instead of informal sanitation workers.

Waste work is both labor-intensive and socially conscious. Collection from door to door, public communication, assistance with segregation, arranging transportation and interacting with households is common for the HKS. These tasks require skill, patience and social negotiation. Households need to be convinced of the need for waste separation, frequent collection, and dealing with public resistance. Their work is vital to public health but it may not always be recognised.

Haritha Karma Sena's public health impact is also profound. Waste, if not managed properly, can provide habitat for insects and rodents, pollute public places

and pose a risk of disease. HKS helps communities stay healthy, through promoting waste segregation, minimising open dumping, helping with recycling, and raising awareness. As well as it being physically collected, its public health significance is in changing household behaviour.

The health benefit of HKS can be explained at three levels. It promotes better domestic waste management at the household level. At the community level, it minimizes the accumulation of waste and the improper disposal of waste. At the level of governance, it helps to promote a more systematic chain of waste management.

However, the health of workers themselves must also be a part of the public health contribution of HKS. Unsafe exposure of women workers in models to waste, infection, injury, stigma or exhaustion is not acceptable and shows the model is not healthy. Hence, an occupational health dimension needs to be included in any meaningful debate on Haritha Karma Sena. Protective equipment, health insurance, vaccination assistance and regular health checks, coverage against accidents and complaints procedure should not be optional. They are key elements of a fair Waste Management system.

Waste, Work and Justice: A Conceptual Framework

In this chapter, a waste–work–justice approach is introduced to comprehend Haritha Karma Sena. The framework unites environmental sustainability, women's labour and social equity.

Waste is not only the material that is discarded but also the failures of the consumption, segregation, public responsibility, and local governance. In Kerala, waste management issues potentially impact on public places, water resources, soil quality, and community health. HKS' activities in this area include waste collection, waste segregation, support for recycling as well as awareness projects.

Work includes the work done by the members of HKS, particularly women. This work involves collecting, sorting, communicating, transportation assistance and public education. It's not just about labouring with your hands, it's about labouring with your social and environmental capital, too. HKS workers serve as intermediaries between households, the local government and waste processing systems.

Justice is the equitable treatment of labour, people and nature. Environmental justice is a question about who is harmed by pollution, who does the cleaning, who benefits from a cleaner environment, and who is rewarded and who is compensated. With HKS, justice demands that communities cannot just push the burden of waste onto women workers. Instead, responsibility must be shared between households, local bodies and state institutions via segregation, timely payment of the user fee, infrastructure support and respect for waste workers.

Haritha Karma Sena is a proponent of environmental justice through more local, more visible and participatory waste management. It poses a challenge to the

notion of waste being thrown out and forgotten. Through a household approach, HKS reminds households that waste is a matter of all responsibility. But there is a grave danger. The responsibility of improving justice becomes disproportionately placed on women workers if poorly segregated waste is given to them to process and households refuse to cooperate. In such a situation, environmental responsibility is unequal: households produce waste, women workers bear the physical and social burden of managing the waste.

Hence, environmental justice in the HKS model needs to be responsible household segregation, fair wages, safe working conditions, timely payment of user fees, institutional support and public recognition. A technically efficient system could be socially unjust if workers are paid less and/or disrespected and/or unsafe. On the other hand, an environmentally friendly justice system needs to combine environmental considerations with dignity of work and gender responsive governance.

The conceptual model may be expressed as follows:

- **Waste Dimension:** Segregation → Collection → Recycling → Reduction of dumping → Cleaner environment
- **Work Dimension:** Women's employment → Skill development → Income generation → Public participation → Local leadership
- **Justice Dimension:** Dignified labour → Fair wages → Occupational safety → Shared household responsibility → Environmental equity

The model suggests that HKS achieves its strongest impact when all three dimensions operate together. If waste is managed but work is undignified, justice fails. If women are employed but communities do not cooperate, sustainability fails. If environmental outcomes improve but workers remain vulnerable, the model remains incomplete.

Challenges, Policy Directions and Conclusion

Although, it is important, Haritha Karma Sena is confronted with a number of hurdles. These include poor infrastructure, lack of funding, logistics issues, public resistance, lack of social recognition and variable community involvement. If the material collection facilities and waste transportation systems, along with the sorting centres, recycling linkages and scientific processing units are weak, waste collection alone is not enough. If there is no infrastructure, HKS workers could collect wastes without making sure of effective downstream processing.

Another significant issue is low social recognition. Waste workers do a vital public health job, but don't get a lot of respect. It's not just a management issue, it's a justice issue. In any discussion on environmental governance, the dignity of waste workers should be at the heart.

There is also high gendered labour burden. The importance of women workers in the labour market for HKS makes for the risk of celebrating women symbolically, while maintaining their economic and employment status. The empowerment of women as environmental agents can only be addressed as incomplete if they are not paid fairly, given safety, and granted decision-making authority.

The programme is also impacted by public non-cooperation. The effectiveness of HKS decreases if households do not separate waste, or refuse to pay user-fees. Community involvement is thus not a matter of choice, but rather an imperative. Workers' responsibilities for waste management are insufficient for HKS to be effective.

The strength of occupational health and safety needs to be reinforced. Sharp objects, biomedical waste, spoiled materials, hazardous substances and social hostility can be potential hazards for waste workers. Gloves, masks, uniforms, vaccination support, periodic health check-ups and accident insurance and grievance mechanisms are all essential elements of a serious HKS model.

Several directions in policy are required to build a model of Haritha Karma Sena, a model that has a justice focus. The HKS workers should be recognized as a skilled waste collectors of the environment, instead of simply a waste collector. This should be acknowledged through training, salaries, safety gear and public communication. Infrastructure for storage, transport, sorting, recycling and scientific processing should be enhanced at local level of self-government institutions. Leadership training, social security, health insurance, grievance redressal and opportunities for women workers to participate in decision making should be incorporated into the programme to achieve gender equity.

Household segregation should be made a civic responsibility through public awareness campaigns. Households must be aware that communities can't fully perform their role in HKS if they responsibly give away mixed or hazardous waste. Primary data from the employees, households, local bodies and health officials of HKS needs to be collected to validate the proposed conceptual model in this chapter in future research.

Haritha Karma Sena is an important case study of decentralised, community-based governance of waste in Kerala. It's a wonderful integration of environmental management, women's livelihood and local public health, one that should be academically studied. But it has to be more than just a waste collection system.

The chapter has posited that the understanding of HKS needs to be tackled in terms of conceptual linkage between waste, work and justice. If waste management does not help to minimize the damage caused to the environment, it is of no use. Labor is empowering, only when it offers dignity, safety, fair wages and

recognition. Justice is only actual when the costs and benefits of environmental governance are fairly distributed between households, workers, communities, and institutions.

Haritha Karma Sena has considerable potential to become a model of Gender sensitive Environmental Justice. However, this potential is not guaranteed. It relies on the ability of the waste governance system in the state of Kerala to go beyond the rhetoric of engaging women as stakeholders and to make it a matter of providing them with a dignified job in green jobs, public responsibility as well as institutional support and ecological sustainability.

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