

# **EWR Sunitha S's Journey from Margins to Governance: Embodying Rajiv Gandhi's Vision for Local Governance and Women's Empowerment**

Submitted by:

Anu Jain, Research Scholar

Department of Adult and Continuing Education and Extension (DACEE)

Jamia Millia Islamia, New Delhi

Email – [anu2500469@st.jmi.ac.in](mailto:anu2500469@st.jmi.ac.in)

[anujain2026@gmail.com](mailto:anujain2026@gmail.com)

## **Abstract**

This case study explores the transformative journey of Sunitha S, an Elected Woman Representative (EWR) in the Thiruvananthapuram District Panchayat, Kerala. It highlights how her grassroots experiences, particularly through the Kudumbashree Mission, and unwavering commitment, enabled her to embody Rajiv Gandhi's vision for decentralized governance and women's empowerment, as envisioned by the 73rd and 74th Constitutional Amendment Acts of 1992. The study examines her pivotal role in driving community development, fostering women's economic empowerment, and enhancing participatory governance, thereby showcasing the profound influence of empowered women in local leadership. Through qualitative, case study using in-depth interviews, this Paper details Sunitha S's journey from a rubber tapping laborer to a Standing Committee Chairman, analyzing her challenges, resilience, and the broader implications for achieving Sustainable Development Goals, particularly SDG 5 (Gender Equality) and SDG 16 (Peace, Justice, and Strong Institutions).

*Keywords: Elected Woman Representative (EWR), Panchayati Raj Institutions (PRIs), Kudumbashree, Women's Empowerment, Local Governance*

## **Introduction**

The 73rd and 74th Constitutional Amendment Acts of 1992 was a watershed moment in India's democratic journey and governance championed by Shri Rajiv Gandhi. These amendments enshrined decentralized governance and mandated significant reservation for women in Panchayati Raj Institutions (PRIs) and Urban Local Bodies (Government of India, 1992). This bold move aimed to empower Indian women to lead and transform their communities from the grassroots, embodying Gandhi's vision of power truly residing with the people.

This compelling Case Study illuminates the journey of Sunitha S, an EWR from the Thiruvananthapuram District Panchayat, Kerala. Her story uniquely embodies Rajiv Gandhi's vision, demonstrating how an empowered woman, operating within decentralized governance and leveraging initiatives like Kudumbashree, can profoundly impact society. Born into economic hardship, working as a rubber tapping laborer since age 15, and now serving as Chairman of a Development Standing Committee since her 2020 election, Sunitha S represents the resilience and commitment of grassroots leaders. This study unpacks her instrumental role, showcasing how the empowerment of one woman radiates outward, transforming lives and fostering a more equitable society. Sunitha S's work directly aligns with several SDGs, particularly those focused on empowering marginalized populations and strengthening governance.

## **Literature Review**

Since the implementation of the 73rd Constitutional Amendment, research on the Elected Woman Representatives in India has extensively documented their contributions and challenges faced in Local Self Governance. Chattopadhyay and Duflo's research conducted in 2004 highlights obstacles like patriarchal resistance, proxy representation ("Sarpanch Pati") and capacity deficits faced by the EWRs. However when women hold leadership positions, research findings indicate positive policy changes that proactively address women's needs and problems.

Studies on EWRs in District Panchayats reveal that being larger constituencies they have more complex bureaucratic environments demanding greater political acumen (Narayana, 2005). Capacity-building initiatives and women's networks significantly empowered EWRs across

states, enhancing their participation, leadership, and solidarity in local governance despite prevailing social constraints (UNDP, 2012). Women's education strongly correlates with increased political participation, though institutional structures also influence engagement (Sahu et al. 2018). The role of self-help groups and women's collectives in Community Based Organisations (CBOs) like Kudumbashree in Kerala, has been identified as a significant enabling factor for women's effective political participation in Local Self Governance (Venugopalan, 2022; Pandala et al., 2023). These networks provide crucial social capital and leadership trainings. However, challenges persist in managing dual responsibilities (household, livelihood, political), navigating party dynamics, and overcoming societal prejudices (Kumar & Ghosh, 2024). Barodawala et al. research in 2025 investigates the concept of 'empowerment' in a political context, focusing on its definition as the capacity to access opportunities, exert influence, and make informed decisions. The case study 'EWR Sunitha S's Journey from Margins to Governance: Embodying Rajiv Gandhi's Vision for Local Governance and Women's Empowerment' builds on this literature by offering an in-depth, contemporary analysis of an EWR with the following research objectives.

## **Objectives**

- To document EWR Sunitha S's Case Study and Kudumbashree's role in her socio-political journey.
- To understand the strategies used by the EWR for leveraging women's empowerment and local development.
- To identify the challenges faced as a catalyst for change.
- To explore the process of integration of Sustainable Development Goals as a resilience strategy for community transformation.

## **Methodology**

This research employs a qualitative case study approach (Yin, 2018), allowing for rich, in-depth insights into Sunitha S's socio-personal trajectory, political career, and community contributions.

Research tools comprised of in-depth, semi-structured interviews, telephonic interviews and direct observations conducted between June 10 - July 27, 2025 with her, family members and

Panchayat members, Kudumbashree functionaries from State Mission Office, Thiruvananthapuram and local community members from the villages of Anad, Panavoor, Peroorkada, and Madavoor in her district, Kerala. The schedules were used to collect primary data related to her demographic profile, challenges faced in balancing multiple roles, Kudumbashree experiences, specific initiatives undertaken for community development, future endeavours and outlook for leadership.

Prior informed consent was obtained, and the anonymity and confidentiality of others were maintained. The study adheres to the ethical guidelines, ensuring both privacy and accuracy.

### **Kudumbashree - An Introduction**

Decentralisation in Kerala through Panchayati Raj gained impetus due to the 73rd Constitutional Amendment (Narayana, 2005). Kerala prioritizes devolution of powers to its Panchayati Raj Institutions, making its local bodies highly active participants in development.

Kudumbashree Mission launched in 1998 became an enabler of women's participation leading to poverty eradication and women's empowerment programs in the state of Kerala. This program is driven by its unique three-tiered Community Based Organization (CBO) network: Neighborhood Groups (NHGs) at the grassroots, federating into Area Development Societies (ADSs) at the ward level, and culminating in Community Development Societies (CDSs) at the local government level. This structure aims at fostering economic independence through microfinance, community action, building social capital, leadership capabilities and preparing women for formal political roles ([Kudumbashree.org](http://Kudumbashree.org)). Kerala, with its robust decentralization and Kudumbashree Mission, has been a pioneer in transforming women's role in Local Self Governance. During the 2020 local body elections 7071 Kudumbashree members were elected (LSGD, Kerala, 2021).



### **Rationale of the Case Study**

This case study focuses on Sunitha S., an Elected Woman Representative (EWR) from Kerala, due to several compelling factors:

- **Unique Personal Background:** Her transformation from a rubber tapping labourer to a District Panchayat Chairman offers a rare and inspiring lens into the lived experience of EWRs.
- **Demonstrated Impact:** Initial data indicates her success in integrating women's priorities into development plans, advocating for rights, and influencing local governance.
- **Association with Kudumbashree: Kerala's Pioneering Model:** Kerala's robust decentralization and strong Kudumbashree network make it an ideal setting to examine Sunitha S's empowerment through grassroots governance.
- **Kudumbashree Roots and Leadership Growth:** Her sustained engagement with Kudumbashree at various levels (NHG, ADS, CDS) illustrates how collective women's action incubates political leadership.
- **SDG Relevance:** Sunitha S's work directly aligns with several SDGs, particularly SDG 1 (No Poverty), SDG 5 (Gender Equality), SDG 8 (Decent Work and Economic Growth), and SDG 16 (Strong Institutions) and focus on empowering marginalized populations and strengthening governance.
- **Alignment with Rajiv Gandhi's Vision:** Her journey epitomizes the spirit of the 73rd Amendment and embodies the vision of participatory democracy and inclusive governance.

### **Case Study: Sunitha S's Journey from Margins to Governance**

Sunitha S, a Nair woman from Thiruvananthapuram, embodies the transformative power of the 73rd Amendment and Rajiv Gandhi's vision for grassroots democracy. Her journey from a rubber tapping worker to District Panchayat Chairman is a powerful narrative of resilience and public service. Her early life was shaped by hardships. Born in 1980 into a very poor family in Panavoor Panchayat, her father took care of their family well until he had an accident and was bedridden for life. Her mother went to domestic



labour work to replace the earnings of the father after the incident and she was brought up in tough conditions. Sunitha's sense of responsibility to survive the family came when her mother too met with an accident and could not go to work. In the 90s, rubber cultivation was growing in Kerala and there was huge demand for rubber tappers. As a young 15 year old, she took others' help to learn the tapping skills and has been tapping rubber since then even today. Since childhood, even though born in an upper caste Nair family, she witnessed many injustices and bias towards her family from everyone in the village due to their poverty. They were at the mercy of others for survival. She saw that the condition of a poor Dalit and a poor Nair family were almost the same.

After completing Pre-Degree, she married into a similarly poor family; her husband was also a rubber tapper. I lived in a "house without proper shelter, to be honest, a hut, and supplemented my tapping income by raising cows and goats," she said. The couple has two daughters. She is an inspiration for her daughters, "My mother's strength, independence, and dignified parenting inspired me. Despite hardship, she raised us proudly. I'm her grateful daughter," shared Sunitha S's eldest daughter with the researcher.

Her strong aversion to patriarchy and the existing distinctions between the rich and the poor propelled her into social engagement. At the tender age of 18, in 1998, she joined a SHG called Kudumbashree's in its inception year in Ajayapuram, finding a path to social engagement.

In Kudumbashree, she rose rapidly: promoted as ADS Secretary in 2001, CDS member in 2005, CDS Chairperson in 2006, and Kudumbashree trainer. Her 19-year association with the mission allowed her to engage deeply with participatory planning, poverty alleviation, livelihood generation, and women's issues. "It gives me great joy that, through Kudumbashree activities, I was able to engage socially and bring various demands of women into the panchayat plan."

Losing a Gram Panchayat election in 2010 became a turning point in understanding political dynamics and public expectations. She returned as CDS Chairperson, demonstrating her resilience. In 1915, her international exposure in South Africa further broadened her worldview. She observed that women there struggled with access to basic rights such as education, healthcare, and bodily autonomy. The experience deepened her appreciation for Kerala's achievements and reaffirmed her commitment to preserving and enhancing grassroots democratic

institutions. This global-local perspective enriched her understanding of development and resilience, and further aligned her work with the spirit of SDGs. She also served as an 8-month Micro Enterprise Consultant (MEC) mentor in Rajasthan, and traveled to Gujarat, Chhattisgarh in the year 1916-17 enriching her insights into women's development. Sunitha remains a dedicated CPM Local Committee member and active trainer. Have trained at least 50,000 women SHG members and EWRs till now and wishes to impart her knowledge to women across India. She finds language as a barrier in interacting with women from outside Kerala and wants to learn more languages especially Hindi and English to go outside Kerala and impart the SHG training and financial independence to women.

During COVID in 2020, she spearheaded "Janakeeya Hotel" (community kitchen) initiatives. In October 2020, aged 40, leveraging her extensive Kudumbashree work, she won the District Panchayat election, steadfastly continuing her tapping and training. Post-2020, as a District Panchayat member, she allocated funds for women's livelihood projects. She continues her profession as a tapping worker and Kudumbashree trainer alongside her public duties. Each Sunday and on other holidays, she goes to meet women and understand their needs and issues if any.

### **Strategies for Empowerment and Local Development**

Sunitha's political journey began with her involvement in the CPM in 1999. At the age of 18, The first issue she took to the streets in her area was to turn a part of the library into an



Anganwari. As there was no Anganwari for children there. After her stint she was noticed by CPM and she was appointed to run the Anganwari. She taught children as well as cooked food for them and after the day's work, she would walk to the nearby town to procure the ration needed for the Anganwadi. It was a tough yet learning time for her in terms of social activism. She says her experience with the Anganwadi and the parents made her more focussed

to take up political work as her future. In 2020, she contested for District Panchayat election and

won from the Anad Division. "I agreed to contest, stating that even if I won, I would continue my profession as a tapping worker and Kudumbashree trainer," she stated.

As Chairman of the Development Standing Committee in the Thiruvananthapuram District Panchayat, she utilized her Kudumbashree insights to direct resources effectively. She prioritized women's micro-enterprises such as food processing units, fishing, coir, and traditional occupations etc., advocated for joint house registration, pushed for the inclusion of mothers' names in children's official documents, and increased funding for skills development. Her policies directly supported local development and empowered self-help groups. "Sunitha Teacher knows our struggles because she lived them," said a Kudumbashree member from Karumkulam.

Her daily schedule—3 AM rubber tapping, followed by a 35 km commute to the Panchayat office by scooty and work until late evening—demonstrates her unmatched dedication. This dual commitment kept her grounded while ensuring administrative presence.

Sunitha also cultivated a strong alliance with junior staff and colleagues in the Panchayat office. Her leadership style emphasized respect, inclusion, and mentorship. Rather than maintaining a hierarchical distance, she encouraged open dialogue, empowered younger staff to take initiative, and shared credit for collective achievements. This collegial environment not only improved work culture but also built trust and motivated staff to work toward common development goals. Her juniors often described her as both "accessible and inspiring," someone who nurtures leadership in others rather than monopolizing it.

As a Kudumbashree trainer, Sunitha has been instrumental in shaping the journeys of many other women across Kerala. Several women entrepreneurs started their own Janakeeya Hotels (People's Hotels) after observing how she and her team successfully implemented the initiative in her region. Her influence goes beyond enterprise: many women who are now serving as Kudumbashree Resource Persons consider Sunitha their role model. With a clear vision of strengthening Kudumbashree's internal structures, she played a key role in developing training modules and programs for both Area Development Societies (ADS) and Community Development Societies (CDS). These efforts aimed to transform these platforms into sustainable social institutions, capable of delivering lasting change.

## Challenges Faced as a Catalyst for Change

Sunitha's journey was not without obstacles. She faced:

- **Balancing Dual Roles:** Maintaining her labor work while holding public office required discipline, family support, and strong time management. Her family's support is especially crucial in helping her balance responsibilities.
- **Patriarchal Attitudes:** Despite Kerala's progressive image, women leaders often encounter traditional mindsets. Though not always overt, such resistance exists subtly. Her early statement about disliking patriarchy hints at a deeply rooted awareness and resistance to gender norms. This rejection of patriarchy was not a casual remark—it revealed a conscious critique of male-dominated decision-making and a desire to redefine leadership from a feminist perspective. Her rise through Kudumbashree was, in many ways, a counter-narrative to the gendered silencing of women's voices in both private and public spheres. Sunitha not only resisted patriarchal control within her household but also challenged broader structures of exclusion by occupying positions of authority and advocating for other women.
- **Political and Bureaucratic Complexities:** Her 2010 defeat and later success taught her to maneuver within party and administrative structures. Her Kudumbashree training gave her the tools to negotiate these spaces with clarity, purpose, and confidence.
- **Resource and Capacity Constraints:** Despite lacking formal administrative education, her practical experience and on-the-ground learning enabled her to manage projects and public funds efficiently.

## Integration of SDGs and Community Resilience

Sunitha's work aligns closely with multiple Sustainable Development Goals:

- **SDG 1 (No Poverty):** Her intimate experience with poverty shaped her approach to housing schemes, livelihood generation, and micro-enterprise support.
- **SDG 5 (Gender Equality):** Her advocacy for women's rights, leadership promotion, and increased funding for women-led initiatives directly fostered gender inclusion.

- **SDG 8 (Decent Work and Economic Growth):** Through Kudumbashree, she helped strengthen rural employment for women and ensured access to skill development.
- **SDG 16 (Peace, Justice, and Strong Institutions):** Her approach to participatory governance, grievance redressal, and field visits contributed to transparency, trust, and responsive public institutions.

She also tackled critical issues like menstrual hygiene among adolescent girls, alcohol and drug abuse in families, and the social impact of men marrying multiple women. Her policies aimed at systemic change, while being rooted in lived realities.

### **Discussion and Analysis**

Her early life hardships, including family accidents and extreme poverty, forced Sunitha into labor at 15 and instilled in her a deep understanding of class-based injustice transcending traditional caste divides. This direct experience with marginalization profoundly shaped her perspective and resilience.

Sunitha S's journey is a compelling case of understanding how Kudumbashree can shape an individual's socio-political trajectory. Her early life hardships and labour work starting at 15 and traditional caste divides. Her association with Kudumabshree provides her with invaluable practical governance skills to transform both individuals and communities. Her personal resilience helped overcome structural barriers, and her role as Standing Committee Chairman allowed her to scale up change. She has trained at least 50,000 women SHG members and EWRs till now and wishes to impart her knowledge to empower women across India. Her visit to South Africa and to Rajasthan, Gujarat and Chattisgarh was a rich experience to her.

Her leadership model is marked by accessibility, humility, discipline, and consistency. Her choice to continue rubber tapping despite holding a key office not only symbolizes solidarity with working women but also breaks the stereotypical image of a politician. Instead of detachment, she offers empathy; instead of rhetoric, she delivers practical solutions. Her voice is often seen as the collective voice of marginalized women who otherwise go unheard in formal decision-making spaces.

Importantly, her work is deeply intersectional—addressing gender, poverty, governance, and sustainability together. Whether improving market access for self-help groups or resolving a community water crisis through direct field intervention, Sunitha exemplifies how responsive governance rooted in local realities can bridge policy and people.

## **Conclusion**

Sunitha S's case provides an inspiring model for inclusive, resilient, and participatory governance. Her story demonstrates how institutional support like Kudumbashree, combined with personal grit and public trust, can translate constitutional ideals into real-world impact. Through her work, Sunitha contributes not only to local development but also to global goals, embodying the promise of a more just and equitable society.

Her leadership resonates beyond her panchayat—offering a replicable framework for how EWRs, backed by community structures, can transform governance. She shows that political leadership need not be detached from lived reality. Rather, it is most effective when it emerges from the people and remains anchored in their everyday struggles and aspirations.

Her journey aligns with Rajiv Gandhi's vision of empowering marginalized groups through decentralization. Her work exemplifies how constitutional mandates (like the 73rd Constitutional Amendment) can materialize through capable, dedicated leadership. Her motivating journey shows that decentralization, when coupled with capacity-building organizations like Kudumbashree, solidarity networks, and supportive institutional mechanisms, has the power to produce transformative women leaders. Sunitha S emerges as both a product and a champion of this ecosystem—a grassroots trailblazer, a policy actor, and a resilient public servant.

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**Courtesy: photos have been taken from:**

1. LSGD, Thiruvananthapuram District Panchayat, LSGI Election -2020.
2. The Hindu, Thiruvananthapuram, November 24, 2020.
3. Sunitha S with the investigator while taking an interview in her District Panchayat Office on June 11, 2025.

Tagline: “In the Footsteps of Rajiv Gandhi: Empowering Women, Empowering India”