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PROFILE OF A FEMALE AGRICULTURAL  
LABOURER

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### Introduction

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Narayani is a thirty five year old Pulaya, scheduled caste, agricultural labourer who lives in a squatter settlement on the outskirts of the city of Trivandrum. She lives here in a small mud hut perched precariously on a narrow strip of land with her husband and five children. She is less than 5ft. in height but well built. She is very dark in complexion but usually wears clothes of very bright colours. A deep lemon yellow tight fitting blouse with a bright red and white checked mundu are her favourite ensemble. She prefers strong colours as they do not show dirt easily. Her teeth are all stained at the edges with arecanut juice but you cannot still miss her beaming white teeth when she smiles. She always wears a warm and affectionate smile and is willing to talk and be friendly. It is her pleasant temperament that makes her very approachable to one and all.

### The Hut

Narayani's is the last of the seventeen huts which are in a semi circular row facing the metalled road that passes by the squatter settlement. Her hut is a very humble hut compared to the other huts in the settlement. You have to approach her hut from the metalled road. One has, however, to climb down a good ten feet below the road level. To do this, one goes down a flight of steps which have been paved with stones. Her husband, Venny is very good at such things and spends his spare time or the day he does not have work,

doing some renovation or the other to the house or the plot. Of all the seventeen huts Narayani's hut is the most easily approachable because of the pains taken to make the path. Once you reach the hut, you are struck by the stark simplicity of the mud house with a thatched roof contrasted by the fantastic back drop. Standing in her front yard, which is not big, you see the steep slope of the adjoining white clay hill. The lake at some distance at the foot of the hill is hardly visible, because the water hyacinth, African Payal, covers the water almost completely from one edge to the other. So all you see down below is a vast stretch of green. In the distance, you can see the coconut groves merging with the sea. You can feel the fresh sea breeze blowing past you. Standing in Narayani's courtyard, one is completely swept away by the landscape. Her simple hut, instead of looking grim and depressing, looks dramatic.

The small courtyard in front of her hut is always neatly swept and the entrance thoroughly smoothed with cow dung and water. She uses the water in the mud pot to wash vessels that she needs urgently. On the slope, to the back of her hut, there are two banana trees round which she drops all her refuse and water.

Venny, her husband is the one who built the hut with Narayani's help. When they decided to squat here nine years back they had to clear the bush and level the ground. They used the dug out earth for the walls. The roof is made of plaited palm leaves which have to be replaced once every two or three years, unless it is swept off by strong wind cum rain even earlier.

The plinth of Narayani's hut is a good 9 inches above the level of her courtyard so that rain water cannot enter the hut. The hut is really just one long room which is 14ft. long and 6ft. wide. This

length has been divided into three parts of 4 ft., 6 ft. and 4 ft. The first 4 feet of the length makes a small porch which consists of two platforms on either side with a narrow passage in between. The children use this place a great deal to relax during the day. One enters the next room, 6 ft. by 6 ft. through a bamboo door. The bamboo door is a sort of reaper door made by Venny; it has vertical strips of bamboo nailed to two horizontal wooden strips. The door has no latch, however, to lock it. All the same, it lends the room a certain amount of privacy. When you enter the room, you are struck by the fact that there are no ventilators or windows.

The room walls are absolutely bare except for the small broken mirror stuck in a corner on the wall. Narayani had picked it up long back from the road side. There is a clothes line going from one wall to the other with a few clothes neatly folded and hanging on it. It is in this room that the family eats and the women i.e., Narayani and her two daughters, sleep in the night.

Next to the main room is the small kitchen. You go to the kitchen through a doorway. The other three sides of the room have no openings whatsoever. This is the third and final part of the cul-de-sac tunnel that Narayani's hut really is. It is also the darkest part of the hut. It is so dark that Narayani and Shakuntala, her daughters, have to light an oil lamp while cooking in day time. On one side close to the wall she has her two mud stoves. Towards the back wall you can see wood shavings and twigs that Shakuntala has collected. A uri made out of arrecanut palm leaves hangs from the roof: it is a device used to store the vessel with left over rice away from rats and cats. It is easily available in the village market for 50 paise.

### Venny, the Husband

Venny is Narayani's forty year old husband. He too is quite short being only 5 ft. tall. He usually wears a rather lost look. When he is not at work, he likes to wear a striped lungi and a bush shirt and carries a small towel on his shoulders to wipe his face from sweat or tie it around his head. His hair is well groomed, showing liberal use of coconut oil. When the <sup>family</sup> first moved to the settlement, things were not so bad as they became afterwards. Venny was still the main breadwinner of the family though Narayani worked all along. Venny was working mostly loading and unloading trucks, with granite stones or sand. He had to set out for work early in the morning. He would present himself at the nearest petrol station at the point where trucks stopped by. When there was work truck drivers would come by and hire him for the day. His job was to go in the truck to the quarry along with other loaders, four or five in all per truck, load the truck with granite stones and then go with the truck to the construction sites where the stones had to be unloaded. Usually, it involved long hours. Narayani therefore never expected him till 8 in the evening. Though his working day was long, the wage his job carried was also higher, being 9 to 12 Rs. per day depending on the tonnage of stones loaded and unloaded during the day. He buys his breakfast, lunch and tea outside when he is out at work. In addition, he spends a certain amount daily on bidis and pans. Usually, he is able to give Narayani 5 rupees on a working day. This is much more than what many other men bring back home from work though it is just almost half his <sup>daily</sup> wage. Narayani was therefore able to run her house quite smoothly until one of their sons fell sick, was hospitalised and who eventually passed away.

### Venny's Sickness

Soon after her little son passed away things started taking a turn for the worse. Venny started complaining of severe stomach trouble. He not only complained of pain but also had internal bleeding. He went to the nearby Medical College Hospital. He did not show any sign of improvement as an outpatient. Eventually he had to be hospitalised. He was in the hospital first for 8 days and again for three weeks. In all, he spent a month in the hospital. Once he was hospitalised, Narayani was the only one to sustain her family.

In fact, she also had to buy Venny's medicines, and supplement of his hospital food. It was then that she decided to pledge her ration card with a friend. Pledging the ration card is quite a common practice in the settlement. She was quite aware that pledging the ration card meant <sup>that</sup> everyone would get even less to eat because then she would have to buy rice at the open market price which was much higher. Also she won't be able to encash her sugar entitlement any longer. By giving up her sugar entitlement she could easily make an extra 5 Rs. every month. She had to mortgage her card as she had nothing else of value in the house to pledge. Narayani needed the money badly and was happy that at least she had a card to pledge. She pledged it with a friend of hers who has a regular government job and borrowed 100 Rs. Being an eleven unit card, it would normally fetch a loan of Rs.110. Roughly, a unit on a card fetches 10 Rs. Though she borrowed initially 100 Rs. it was not enough. She had to borrow subsequently another 50 Rs. In all, she has now to repay 150 Rs. to get back her card. However, this loan saw her and the family through a very difficult period till Venny eventually got back once again on his feet. He took more than a month after his second hospitalisation to feel well enough to go out for work.

Venny resumed working slowly, first going back to the paddy field to plough, manure and harvest. These jobs were easier for him than lifting granite stones. Once, he gained enough strength, he started on his old job of loading granite stones. For quite some months, almost a whole year, he was not able to do the job continuously <sup>because</sup> ~~of~~ his back would hurt. Naturally, his credentials were not fully reestablished as a truck loader and he was taken on only when an extra hand was needed. Much more recently, he has started getting work regularly. Narayani on the other hand, has ~~been~~ always on the look-out for some work or the other since ~~the~~ family has come to depend on her as the principal bread winner.

### Children

#### Suren

Narayani and Venny have now three sons and two daughters. Their first born is a son named Surendran. They call him Suren for short. He is seventeen years of age but has been to school only for three years. Narayani's explanation for not sending him to school is that he did not have any decent clothes to wear to school. Suren now mostly loiters around street corners and is friendly with people dealing in illicit liquor in the settlement. Narayani does not approve of this and wants him badly to do work, like the twelve year old son of the neighbouring brick woman but Suren is still very irresponsible. If he is not loitering and is at home, it is worse, he bosses over his sister Shakuntala, without being of any help either in minding the children or housework. <sup>But</sup> (Narayani takes a very realistic attitude on this). By making life ~~un~~pleasant for him, all that will happen is

~~that he will run away like many other children of his age in the neighbour-  
hood.~~ Venny feels differently. He feels that Narayani's attitude encourages Suren to be irresponsible. Suren makes himself scarce there-  
fore when Venny is around and plays it very quite. Venny never gives him  
any money to spend.

Suren recently got into trouble with the police because of an errand he was doing for the bootlegging gang. All that Narayani heard was that he was whisked away by the police when the emergency was on. She knew that the police had become very tough and things could be rough for Suren. So she spent some very anxious moments. She went to several Devi\* temples and took a couple of vows, one to donate five rupees to the temple for a chicken sacrifice and the other to offer sweet rice to the temple when Suren came back home. Finally, Suren was found safe with Venny's parents in their village. But Narayani had to honour her temple vows.

Suren does find some work once in a while but he never shares his wages with the family. He spends it all either on movies or in eating places with friends. Whenever he has no money, and that is very often, he eats at home. However, Narayani never gets angry with him, afraid that he might do something to himself.

Shakuntala, the 12-13 year old daughter is really the day house-keeper. She too attended school only for three years. Narayani took Shakuntala out of school when one of her children, a boy, fell seriously ill and had to be hospitalised. Narayani badly needed Shakuntala at home while she herself was out at work or with her son in hospital. Shakuntala never went back to school.

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\*The Ezhavas and the Scheduled Caste families all worship mostly Devi temples. The diety is Shakti. The priest is an Ezhava and animal sacrifice is a usual form of offering.



Though more than twelve years' old, Shakuntala looks just an eight year old. Though very small, she has a gentle face. She is the one who now fetches water, collects fire wood, cooks the mid-day meal; buys the required grocery and looks after the children. She works from seven in the morning till six in the evening. Shakuntala has virtually seen no childhood. She has straightaway graduated to being a housewife. She is already acts like a little mother at that tender age.

Of all her chores, Shakuntala finds looking after the children the whole day long the most h nerve racking job. They frequently quarrel and get bruised all over. The terrain on the back is very steep and in the front is the busy road. Shakuntala feeds and bathes them and tries to keep them away from the trouble. Narayani confesses that she herself cannot stand the confusion in the house for a single day. So she prefers to be at work just to get away from all this.

A small kerosene lamp made out of a tin can burns all the time, while Shakuntala works in the kitchen. Early in the morning, she gives the children kanji, rice water, a left over of the previous evening, for breakfast. For the afternoon meal, for the kids and herself, she cooks some rice. She has a mud stove and four aluminium pots stacked in the kitchen. Next to her stove are also the other vital kitchen gadgets like a grinding stone and a coconut grater that one finds in almost all the households in the squatter settlement. There are also a few tin cans containing separately red chillies, salt, turmeric, powder and coriander seeds in small quantities and a small bottle containing coconut oil, which the family uses mostly <sup>for</sup> oiling their hair.

After Shakuntala comes Ramani who is nine years old. Ramani has never been to school so far. Actually, she is the only child of that age in the squatter settlement who is not going to school. Narayani did not send her to school because she did not have proper clothes to wear. Now that she is nine years old, Narayani plans very soon to put her in charge of the domestic chores and send Shakuntala out to work, part time at least along with the neighbouring brick worker. Already Ramani helps Shakuntala with the care of the two youngsters and also does some other small errands for her like shopping for groceries and collecting twigs.

The remaining two children, both boys, named Ajit and Anil, are pre-schoolers. One is five years old and the other three years old. Narayani plans to send them both to school if her situation improves, which, she hopes, will happen when Venny gets work regularly and Suren and Shakuntala start earning.

Narayani lost a male child four five years back. He had a severe attack of infantile paralysis. She had him hospitalised for eight months but without any result. Later, when he was discharged, she put him under Ayurvedic treatment. The child died after being an invalid for a year. His illness involved a lot of expenses for Narayani.

#### Family Planning

Except for the first two children who were delivered at home with the help of relatives, she delivered the other four at the nearest hospital. Of the six children born to her, five have survived.

Narayani is very much aware of the fact that she has a rather large family and that there are devices to limit the numbers. Social workers have visited her several times to persuade her to undergo sterilisation. Once she agreed to go to the hospital with three other women from the squatter settlement but gave them the slip out of fear. She is scared of the operation and also of its after effects. A few of her friends, she says, developed septic conditions after the operation. When pressed, however, she would not identify the friends concerned. Narayani fears she may not be able to work as well, thereafter, and she<sup>has</sup> got to be fit to keep the family fed.

Venny, her husband, has only just recovered fully from his stomach trouble and Suren has not taken to work. According to the neighbours Venny went in for vasectomy some years back but ~~went~~ admit it now because Narayani has since given birth to two sons, Ajit and Anil. Both Venny and Narayani deny this emphatically.

#### Early Childhood

Narayani's both parents were agricultural labourers living in a village called Karikotti, twenty kilometres south of Trivandrum. Their four children, all girls, were born to her mother in the house. Narayani was the third one. She lost her father when she was about nine years old. He was around fifty then. Her mother died four years later. The eldest sister, Chellamma, who was already married, moved the girls to her husband's house. The husband was a coconut plucker by profession. When he was not plucking coconuts he would do either agricultural labour or some construction work. They were living<sup>together in a hut</sup> on land belonging to some big landlord as caretakers. Narayani's second sister,

Paradi, nickname for Bhagavathy, became the second wife to Chellama's husband.

When Narayani was around sixteen years of age, they found for her a Pulaya boy, Venny, in the same village. It was a simple wedding with no jewellery or exchange of dowry. All she got was a new set of clothes. Narayani went to live in her husband's house. Venny's family was squatting on government land there. Venny, which is really a short name for Vincent, is Christian, but this was not a church wedding. Narayani did not have to change her religion therefore at the time of her marriage and she continued to be a Hindu, though only a scheduled caste Hindu. Later when her two elder sisters and their common husband moved to Trivandrum, Venny and Narayani also decided to move with them. Omara the sister younger to Narayani was also married by now and they too came to the same Trivandrum suburb.

It was here that her brother-in-law died and Chellamma and Paradi, the two sisters became widows. Chellamma, wanted to live thereafter with her husband's younger brother as his wife. So the two sisters could not any longer get along in the same hut. They were looking for a place where they could have two separate huts. It was during this time that they heard about people squatting on government land nearby. So all the four sisters decided to move there and put up separate huts. They needed to be together for so many reasons. This way they could readily help each other in times of need. Also, the children could be together. Three of the sisters found enough place to put up their huts next to each other. Only Narayani had to move slightly away from them but still she was in the same settlement. So out of the forty six households in the squatter settlement, four belong to Narayani and her three sisters. Chellamma, the eldest sister, now lives and her two children, one boy and one girl, now live

with her dead husband's brother while Pavadi is living by herself with her teenage daughter. Pavadi has been in a bad state of health. She had contracted tuberculosis and was in the sanatorium for a year. She is out of the hospital now but is not able to do any hard work. She, with the help of her daughter, earns a very meagre livelihood by collecting medicinal herbs and special kinds of grass for manufacturing Ayurvedic medicines. Like Narayani, she too has pawned away her ration card for a loan of Rs.100.

#### Narayani's work

Narayani considers herself first and foremost an agricultural labourer. Paddy cultivation is, as she herself puts it, in her marrow and bones. However, work on the paddy fields is not available throughout the year, even though paddy is raised in Trivndrum district twice a year. Both these crops, Virippu and Mundakan, are timed with the onset of monsoons. Virippu crop is watered by the South West Monsoon, it commences sometimes in April-May and lasts till August-September. Mundakan crop is watered by the North East Monsoon; it commences in September and lasts February.

Thus for three months between January-February and April-May of a calendar year there is no work in the paddy fields. Even for the nine months of the year covered by the two paddy crops, Virippu and Mundakan, work is not available to Narayani all through. This is because, as we shall see presently, (a) women are not involved fully in all stages of paddy cultivation, and (b) scheduled caste women are particularly excluded from certain operations.

Broadly, paddy cultivation can be divided into six stages, beginning with the preparation of the field which involves ploughing, clod crushing, harrowing and bed preparation for the nursery. Once the previous crop is harvested, fields have to

be ploughed and cross ploughed to bring in the required tilth. In recent years, it has become a common practice to have the land dug with 'mamatty' a sort of spade, using manual labour in place of the bullocks or buffaloes, one digging with the mamatty is considered equivalent to four ploughing by animals. Narayani's husband Venny goes for the job if and when it is available. But Narayani gets no work at that time in the paddy field. Digging and other operations involved in the preparation of the field are considered exclusively male jobs. When clods have to be crushed, this<sup>too</sup> is done by men.

The second operation is that of repairing and strengthening of bunds and redoing their surface to ensure a steady supply of water. Though this again is essentially a male operation, women like Narayani do get a day or two's job to cart basket loads of mud to and from, either to the bund or away from the bund as the case may be.

The third operation viz., manuring is done just before the last ploughing. This is again an exclusively male job from the beginning to the end. Men are employed to do basal manuring. Later when chemical fertilizers are applied as top dressing after weeding, men alone are employed. Women agricultural labourers have no role to play. Occasionally they may have to cart basket loads of cow dung to the field only after the sowing has been done.

In the fourth operation, namely sowing rice, there are two alternative methods, broadcasting and transplanting. The latter is most commonly used in this part of Trivandrum for both the Virippu and Mandakan crops. Seedlings are first raised on a small raised portion of the field where the flow of water can be maintained at a steady pace.

A nursery of 10 cents of land yields seedlings sufficient for transplanting an acre. When the plant puts forth six leaves and is about 15" in height, it is said to be ready for transplanting. The preparation of the nursery, its sowing, manuring and weeding are all done by men.

Narayani comes into the picture only when the seedlings are ready for transplanting. In this part of Trivandrum district, transplanting is essentially a female job. In fact, on the fields for which Narayani has been working, transplanting is still essentially a job done by scheduled caste and tribal women. Narayani's explanation is two fold: Firstly, it is a messy and a back breaking job which high caste women shun. One has to stand hours on end in slush and mud whether it is rain or sun and learn to move backwards while stooping. Secondly high caste women do not possess skills to do this job well because the success of crop ~~depends~~ on the way it is transplanted. Actually, however, high caste women are known to be engaged in transplanting in other parts of Kerala.

Transplanting involves ~~two~~ operations, one of pulling out the seedlings in the nursery and the other replanting them in the field. Usually, before the seedlings are pulled out, the nursery beds are irrigated to soften the soil. The seedlings are gently pulled out and after washing off the clay on the roots they are tied into small bundles and the tips cut off. The bundles are stored in open air under shade and carried to the field at the appropriate time for transplanting. Transplanting is done usually by <sup>women</sup> in groups. The number of women engaged depends on the size of the nursery and the area to be transplanted. Roughly, in order to pull out and transplant hundred bundles of seedlings two women are needed for one day.

Narayani tries to get as much work as possible during the transplanting season, going from one field to the other never skipping a day. Since transplanting cannot be spread over a longer period, there is a great demand for women labourers during this short period. Very often, the tribal women come down from the neighbouring hills looking for work during these days. Some landlords go to the nearby villages to see if women agricultural labourers would come to cope with the work. But for any one woman worker the maximum number of days she can expect to get work in one transplanting season hardly ever exceeds 21 days.

Weeding is the next operation. After transplanting, water has to be kept in the field to a depth of about 2 inches till the crop matures. Before the crop matures, however, a couple of weedings are necessary. The first weeding is done a month after transplanting. Where ten women are needed for transplanting only one is needed for weeding. The second weeding takes place after another one month or so, if it is considered necessary. Thus some fields might do with just one weeding in a season. Narayani gets between three and five days of work to do weeding each season. Narayani feels that on the fields she has been working for she herself has no problem of getting the weeding job if it is there. But there are many other women who are not assured of employment for weeding. The actual number of women days devoted to weeding depends in particular on the growth of weeds in the fields.

When we come to the next operation, namely harvesting, it is interesting that around Trivandrum district it is essentially a male operation. In many other districts of Kerala, women also participate in the harvesting of the paddy crop. Paddy harvesting is a coveted job as it is paid in kind. The wages are tied to the proportion of paddy harvested



and this is divided among the number of men harvesting. Once the paddy is harvested and bundled into 'kattas' the men transport it to the threshing floor in the cultivator's house or yard. Before leaving, the men give each of the kattas a couple of vigorous beatings on the threshing floor.

The threshing starts only after the entire field belonging to a particular cultivator has been harvested. Usually women of higher castes, do threshing in the night after finishing the household chores. The work has to be finished as quickly as possible so that minimum damage takes place. Since the bundles are generally stacked in an open yard, it is exposed to rats and other insects. Also an unforeseen rain can do damage. Women work in a group of twelve or more depending on the amount of paddy to be threshed. A team of six to eight women do the actual threshing while the other women do the job of collecting the paddy cars, removing the threshed stacks and adding on new stacks to be threshed. As women beating the paddy get tired they take over the less strenuous job from those who replace them. The whole operation is quite strenuous. Usually rice kanji (boiled rice water) is distributed among them at 2 hourly intervals, to quench their thirst and to replenish their energy.

Winnowing is done in groups of two, one woman who does the preliminary winnowing and sorts out the unripened paddy ears from the ripe ones, and the other woman re-does the winnowing operations before it is ready to be dried and stored. The chaff is separated, collected to be given to the cattle as fodder and to be sold as such. The major

operations with the paddy are then over. ~~The tasks~~ of boiling the paddy and polishing the rice are taken up mostly on a piecemeal basis as and when rice is to be sold or consumed. These two jobs are also female jobs.

Narayani, being a scheduled caste agricultural labourer, never gets the threshing or winnowing jobs. Traditionally, since threshing and winnowing ~~were~~ done in the compound of the farmer's house, low caste, particularly scheduled caste, women were not employed for the purpose. According to Narayani, somehow the old practice still persists except that Ezhava and Achari women manage to get the threshing job. She also knows of some women of her own caste getting employment for threshing and winnowing. Narayani herself has never done this so far. When questioned, if she is excluded because she does not possess the required skills, Narayani laughs. According to her, she does not get the job because, (a) it is a dry job, and therefore neat/<sup>job</sup> (b) one gets paddy as a wage and (c) the upper caste women do not like to let her in the yard and share their kanji though no one verbalises the reasons openly. As for the skill, it is easy to swing the stick in a rhythmical fashion. One acquires the skill in no time.

Thus since the paddy operations are so designed that (a) the sexes have particular roles to perform and (b) the scheduled caste women are excluded even from certain female operations, Narayani gets not more than 20 days of work every season or 60 days of work in a year. During the current year, she has taken on job on construction, on brick kilns and in collecting medicinal herbs. All the jobs outside of agriculture that she comes by, and this is not always easy, are in the nature of transporting head loads. During the three months, February to April when construction work is usually at its peak she may get as much as 15 days work every month. It has to be remembered that she is always the

extra hand when anybody fails to turn up or has to be dropped. All told, it appears that Narayani is able to get, on average, 60 days of work in a year for various nonagricultural jobs. The period that is the hardest to get job is when the rains set in but it is not yet time to transplant. There is usually a gap of a whole month between the onset of monsoon and the time when Narayani is called to do transplanting. This is the time when building activity is at a low ebb, brick kilns are staggering their work, and there is not much other work to be found.

#### A Transplanting day in Narayani's life

Narayani wakes up rather early, around 5 o'clock and goes down the hill to use any corner behind bushes for toilet. Since the bush area close to the squatter settlement has been divided roughly equally into male and female zones, she does not have to worry about male intrusion on her privacy. Still, she prefers the early dark hours to finish with this daily routine. She is back in the hut in about half an hour. She then brushes her teeth with rice husk powder. Immediately, thereafter, Narayani takes a folded beetle leaf coated on the inside with a layer of lime and containing bits of arecanut and tobacco. She always keeps one of these in reserve from the previous day. She combs her well oiled hair with a small wooden comb in front of the broken mirror on the wall. The whole family uses the same comb, but their hair is not as well oiled as hers. Narayani has a hair switch which she bought sometime back for 50 paise. She needs the switch to give her bun some body. Otherwise she would have to re-do her hair several times while transplanting or, for that matter, while doing any other kind of job. She would then go to the municipal water tap to fetch some water for the house. Before going to fetch water, she wakes up Shakuntala.

After she has brought two vessels of water, she changes into her work clothes. This is usually a checked green and white mundu wrapped on top of a knee length petticoat with a small blouse on top. The blouse is styled in the current style with a low neck line. Instead of using hooks, she pins the blouse with three safety pins. Most women in the squatter like to pin their blouses instead of using hooks or buttons. A blouse without buttons, is stitched cheaper by 50 paise. While going to the coffee shop Narayani covers her breasts and shoulders with a towel. She does not wear, or have, any footwear. Nor does she have an umbrella. Last year, she had a plastic bag which she had bought to protect her head while working in the fields during the rains, but the children tore it up. This year she has not bothered to get one. By half past six she would be at the coffee shop run by a Nair woman right in the squatter settlement itself. She buys herself a cup of tea and 2 puttus, a preparation of steamed rice powder with coconut and green chillies, served with steamed whole green gram and papadams. Often Suren too comes along and insists on having the same breakfast instead of left over rice kanji at home with his younger brothers and sisters. Though Narayani cannot afford it she feels embarrassed saying no to him. At 7 o'clock she would present herself for work. Usually, she would know the previous evening where she is needed and goes straight to nursery where she has to pull out the saplings. Narayani would be joined there by other women. Usually, there would be three to four other women with her on this job.

Before starting her work Narayani has to adjust her clothing. She folds up her mundu in such a way that it is just knee length. She ties the towel, that she otherwise uses as her upper cloth, round her head.

to protect her from the sun. She tucks her stock of beetle leaves in the small pouch she makes at her waist. Keeping her feet apart, Narayani would bend down gently pulling the rice saplings. She uses both hands, one to pull out and the other to hold the pulled out saplings. If the field has been well watered the seedlings come out easily. Every two minutes she pulls out enough saplings to make a bundle. Before making a bundle she has to dig her heel into the soil to raise her toe on which she beats the roots a couple of times to get rid of the mud. Sometimes she carries with her a coconut bark to beat the roots on that. Before tying up the bundle with a coconut palm string she has to weed out the grass and other stray plants. The first half of the day is spent thus pulling out seedlings and bundling them up.

The break comes around 11 o'clock by when each woman is supposed to have made 100 bundles. These bundles are kept in a line near the nursery bund. The break is of about one hour when Narayani and other women go to the nearby coffee shop. During the transplanting time, coffee shops serve coffee brewed with ginger which is supposed to keep of colds, and sweetened with palm sugar. Narayani does not have a rice meal but makes do with a couple of fried lentil doughnuts, called vadas. She feels she cannot digest a rice meal when she is doing transplanting. On the other working days, she buys herself a full rice meal which costs one rupee but does not take any extras like meat or fish curry so that she has more money to take back home. Around mid-day starts actual transplanting of seedlings. Narayani holds the bundle in one hand and transplants with the other, all the time bending forward. Three or four saplings are taken together and planted in a hole. You step forward after each transplant. Once she has transplanted all the saplings in her 100 bundles, her day's work is done.

Time passes fast as the women keep talking to each other, or even hold conversation with people passing by. Most of the passersby are known to the women. Amongst themselves, the conversation usually revolves around marriage proposals, the temple priest and the children. If in between they have to ease themselves, they do it right there while working so that no one even notices it except possibly the women working closeby. Since all of them tend to do it, it is the accepted practice.

But Narayani has to take time off to chew beetle leaves which, as stated above, have arccanut and tobacco wrapped inside them. If she is short of her supply she would ask somebody passing by to buy it forher. She must have her stock of beetle leaves to chew while she is transplanting.

IF a field is reasonably well puddled, the day's transplanting is over by about 4 o'clock in the afternoon. Towards the close of the transplanting season, however, when there is rush of work and not enough women to hire, transplanting may go on till 6 o'clock, in the evening. Normally, however, on transplanting days Narayani is able to return from work well before sun set.

#### Her daily shopping

Narayani collects her wage in cash, which is usually 7 rupees a day whether she is working on fields or on construction. She does all her major grocery shopping on her way <sup>back</sup> from work. Usually, the children know where she has gone to work and can guess the time when she will be back. If she has gone for transplanting or weeding she is back around 5 o'clock and if she has gone to a construction site she comes back around 6 o'clock. Ramani, the second daughter, would usually wait for her mother at the road junction near the squatter settlement where there is a small market. She carries with her a small basket for rice and groceries and two bottles, one for kerosene and one for coconut oil.

The market consists of a few

tea and beedi shops, a couple of grocery shops and one or two vegetable shops. Between 5 and 7 the evening, some 10 to 12 women vegetable and fish vendors gather to sell their wares in the open space near the junction. Mud pots are also on sale in the evening market. It is a completely female market because the buyers as well as the sellers usually are women. Working women like Narayani do their daily shopping here. Narayani's <sup>household</sup> ~~household~~ runs from day to day. She buys not only vegetables and fish everyday but also groceries, particularly rice, oil and kerosene every evening.

Since she is no longer in possession of her ration card, she has to buy all her rice requirements in the open market where the price (Rs.2.50 a kg.) is currently about 50 per cent higher than the fair price shop (Rs.1.62 a kg. for the medium variety). Two years back, the free market premium was more than 100 per cent. Since she buys one and a half kg. of rice every day, that alone costs Rs.3.75.

Her daily shopping basket also includes fish for Rs.1.00 to 1.50, coconut oil for 25 paise, raw coconut for 40 paise, onions and spices including tamarind, coriander and chillies for 50 paise and kerosene for 25 paise. The total amount she spends everyday comes to between 7 to 8 Rs., depending on whether soap has been included or not. She buys a cake of soap every other day. The days both Venny and she are out of work, she does not buy any fish. While the grocer and the coffee shop will give her credit, the fish vendor will not give her fish on credit. Most of what she buys is just enough to make the right meal for the entire family. There is always some quantity of cooked rice and rice water, kanji, leftover which the children have for breakfast and lunch. Being left overnight

in a mud pot in the uri (coir rope larder) it gets slightly fermented and is therefore not only somewhat richer in nutrients but also easier to digest. The kanji takes care of the two small boys, Ramani and Shakuntala; also Suren if he has not waken up early enough to catch with Narayani at the tea shop. The two small boys, Ani and Aji, who are under five years get a mid-day meal at the block office under the Applied Nutrition Programme run by the State Government with CARE's assistance. Ramani escorts the two little boys, each with a bowl of his own to hold upama cooked of corn flour which is first roasted in oil and then cooked with water. There are seventy other children of the neighbourhood who collect at the block office for their mid-day meal. Narayani feels that her little son, Aji, has a pot belly because the corn meal is not cooked with enough of oil. There is a general feeling that the Gram Sevika/<sup>the lady official in charge of the Programme,</sup> cheats on oil. It is also widely felt that children take time to get used to the corn meal upama. Initially, they go through a few days of loose stools.

Narayani buys tapioca only on days she is not at work. The reasons offered for not buying tapioca more often to supplement daily rice meal or for the daily mid-day meal are many. First, Venny feels that tapioca does not suit him and causes great stomach discomfort to him. Secondly, Narayani feels that Shakuntala is too small to cook tapioca properly. Tapioca has to be cooked in water and then drained completely to remove its bitterness. Sometimes, if the quality of the tuber is inferior, one has to do it more than once. Shakuntala cannot be trusted to do it carefully. Also, she is too young and frail and may get hurt while draining the hot water. The fact, however, that the family uses so little of tapioca, which yields the same amount of calories for half the price, can be said to contribute the family's, particularly the children's under-nourishment.



The coconut oil Narayani buys is <sup>almost</sup> exclusively for oiling the hair. All the family members oil their hair before bath which all ~~take~~ every day. She does not use ~~any~~ oil for cooking her food. The kerosene of <sup>out</sup> course is for lighting. Since the working members eat and the children under five get a mid-day meal, the children who are above five, particularly, Ramani and Shakuntala, because Suren always scrounges around and somehow manages, appear to go without adequate food in the household.

In the appendix an attempt has been made to work out the calory intake separately for each member of this household.

al  
out Of the daily wage of seven rupees, Narayani has got to pay 60 paise for her breakfast and 50 paise for her mid-day snack and tea. On working days when she is not doing transplanting and has a full rice lunch, she has to pay one rupee. Since she must also consume a certain quantity of betle leaves every day, that too has to be paid for. While on other days she spends 50 paise on that score, her expenses during transplanting days is almost twice as high. Thus usually she is left with ~~for~~ five rupees from her own wage for her daily shopping. The day she has to buy soap or talcum - the latter is a must even in the humblest of cottages in this part of the country for men, women and children smear themselves literally with it after bath - she must <sup>food</sup> cut down on her daily items. So, something is bound to be left out. However, the day Venny has work and give Narayani five rupees or more she has no problem. Indeed, if both of them have work everyday, the house can run very well. The problem arises because work is not available everyday for both Narayani and Venny. For ~~every~~ working day there is at least one that she spends without working, however hard she may try. When Venny was in good health, he did better in that for everyday he went without work he had two days of work. So on an average,

at least, one of the two was always working. In actual practice, there was always a lot of overlap. There were days when both were with or without work and that created problems of management, which Narayani seems to find very hard to sort out.

The past one year or so has been however a year of great difficulty because first Venny was unwell for months and then he could go to work only very intermittently, may be once in three or four days. Now, the end of the tunnel is well in sight with Venny going to work more frequently. As Narayani looks back, she considers it a miracle that the family has pulled through. Has it? The ration card remains mortgaged and the family is in refuge sharing the roof of a neighbour because its own hut is without a roof for almost two months already.

out When questioned why she spent almost two rupees and Venny about five rupees on eating out every working day even when things were not too good for the family, the only answer she persisted with has been that to be able to put in a hard day's work both of them have got to eat well. Narayani was aghast when it was suggested to her that she could have cooked the same breakfast at home for the entire family with less money than Venny and she (and now Suren) spend on it outside.

In Kerala eating out on work has become the most accepted thing. The number of catering establishments for 1000 persons is four times as high in Kerala as for the country as a whole. So eating out by working men and women must be a major source of employment.

To the more delicate question as to why Venny spends out more than twice the amount she spends (his five rupees as against her two rupees on every working day), Narayani's answer is a clear, emphatic one. Venny is a man and should have some freedom to spend his money as he likes. He does a far more strenuous job than her and does not get back

till 8 o'clock, in the evening. So he has to eat a lot more and oftener outside. Moreover, all men in the neighbourhood eat out on working days. Venny doesn't drink and only smokes bidis. ~~The whole neighbour-~~ hood considers him extremely well behaved. Still the fact cannot be overlooked that Venny spends almost half of his wage eating out. Assuming that he is by now so addicted to smoking that he cannot reduce his consumption of bidis -- which is quite large, considering that he spends a rupee everyday on bidis -- he could easily cut down his other spending by some 50%.

#### Extra cost of Open Market Rice

Of course, if Narayani did not have to pawn off the family's ration card during Venny's sickness, her daily shopping basket could have been more wholesome, and less expensive. For every kilo of rice bought on the ration card, one makes a saving currently of 78 paise. Since on her eleven unit card the weekly entitlement of rice works out to 6.160 kgs. the daily saving works out to Rs.0.69 (i.e. Rs.252 in a year). Thus if Narayani could have retrieved her ration card by paying up her debt of Rs.150, she could immediately effect an annual saving of almost twice as much. Whatever saving would then be effected in Venny's daily expenditure outside on food and snacks would have gone not only to further improve the calory intake of the children, especially the female children but also possibly to a better living standard for all the members of the household.

#### Collapse of Roof

Narayani did not have to wait long for the rainy day. It has occurred already. This year the south west monsoon came rather early in force. The first few showers of the season were so heavy that not only her thatched roof, which had not <sup>been</sup> replaced for two years, but also a part of the walled structure gave way.

The family could not stay in the house. Narayani's three sisters lived in the same squatter settlement but their huts with walls too made only of palm leaves looked equally vulnerable to the fury of the weather. Also there was no room for a family of seven to move in. Another Puluga agricultural labourer in the settlement, with only two children, offered shelter to Narayani and her family. Thangamani, a second cousin of Narayani, lives in a house with walls made of unbaked bricks which is considered stronger than a hut with mud walls. Thangamani and Narayani work sometimes for the same farmers. Moreover, Venny and Thangamani's husband work together, loading and unloading trucks with granite stones from the quarries. Venny and Narayani did not have much of choice. They quickly put up a brick stove next to Thangamani's in her back Verandah and kept their few belongings in one of her two rooms.

Narayani and Venny are naturally very grateful to Thangamani and her husband for letting them share their roof. But then there are problems of two families living under the same roof. Lack of privacy apart, when the children are together for long hours by themselves there are bound to be quarrels and conflicts. Thangamani is very accommodating but the earlier Narayani and Venny can retrieve their house the better it will be for every one.

Narayani's immediate concern is somehow to re-do the house and make it back. If she had not mortgaged the ration card already she could have pawned it off now to borrow one hundred rupees to buy new dried palm leaves and some bamboo ~~and areca~~ poles. Once the materials are there, Venny can mobilise enough help to make his roof and re-do the wall that gave way partially. Employmentwise, the position has not been very bad for both Venny and Narayani. Lately, Venny has been getting

work for practically four days in a week regularly. Narayani too got regular work in construction before the onset of monsoon for almost a whole month and then she got work as agricultural labourer when transplanting time came. All the same, there is little saving that they have together been able to lay aside to re-do the house.

### Venny's priorities

Evidently, Venny had other priorities. He felt that the family had been without clothes for over a year. They did not buy new clothes for Onam of 1976. He and Narayani were really embarrassed about the state of their clothes. So Venny bought at the small cloth shop near the squatter settlement two lungis worth 12 Rs. each and material for his shirt for Rs.15. He needed 1.60 metres for the shirt. He paid the tailor Rs.3.50. It cost Venny a little extra because of the stiff collar he wanted for his shirt. He has paid the cloth shop Rs.30 and had to clear another Rs.9 (in fact he had been making small advance payments for some<sup>time</sup>). Actually the cloth shop belongs to the grocer -- the mother runs the grocery and the son looks after the cloth shop -- from whom Narayani buys her daily grocery. Both Narayani and Venny have now enough new clothes to go ~~wear~~ in to work. The problem arose when Ramani started crying for a ~~new~~ skirt. Shakuntala is too grown up to voice her protests. So a week later Venny got another three metre of cloth at Rs.6 a metre for Ramani's skirt. He paid 10 Rs. in cash leaving a balance of Rs.8 to be cleared later. The cloth store has a 200 page note book <sup>due from different customers</sup> and all the amounts are written in ink. Venny doesn't know to read or write but remembers the total amount he now has to clear. Venny will probably soon buy a skirt for Shakuntala too for the Onam festival. At both the grocery and the cloth shops, Venny and Narayani are regarded as good customers who clear their ~~debts~~ on time. Narayani does buy on credit sometimes, particularly on days both she and Venny are out of work, but either she

herself and Venny clear the amount as soon as either gets work. Right now, while Narayani has accumulated a debt of Rs.30 with the grocer, Venny has to pay the cloth shop Rs.18.

Narayani feels bad that Venny spent his money on new clothes instead of doing something about their roof. She felt moving back to her own house was much more urgent. What can she tell Venny now? On her part she tries to take on work as often as possible, be it cutting lemon grass, collecting medicinal herbs, or carting bricks. Now that there is no job in the fields or in construction, she goes as often as possible to cart bricks. This work fetches only 4 to 5 rupees a day. She even joined one of the several chit funds run by a lady in the squatter settlement. The lady promised to give Narayani thirty rupees after he had paid her first four instalments of Rs.3 each. Narayani dutifully paid her first four instalments, but the lady could not advance her thirty rupees as some other members had defaulted. The squatter chit fund organisers face this problem of default all the time. In the meantime, Venny got flu which spread to others in the house. Narayani quarrelled with the chit fund lady and withdrew her 12 rupees, to buy up the medicines and to buy jaggery and black pepper for making a drink to ward off the cold. Naturally, the prospect of re-doing the roof receded somewhat.

However, Narayani and Venny had made the estimate. They needed at least 100 plaited palm leaf fronds, a couple of bamboo and areca poles and some coir rope. The plaited leaves would cost 70 rupees and carting them to the house would be another eight rupees. Poles and rope would cost 20-25 rupees. Thus materials alone should cost a hundred rupees. Although Venny would do most of the manual work in fixing the walls that had given away, he would still need help in re-doing the roof. He himself is no shirker. What about Suron? He is of no help and has no experience either. they must  
this help could easily cost another 15 rupees. So /have 115 rupees to re-do

the house ~~again~~ to make it livable again.

Narayani also feels that the house needs being extended so as to make two separate rooms, one for Suren and one for Shakuntala. Her immediate concern however is with re-building the roof and moving back to it.

If Venny had put all his money aside instead of buying clothes they would certainly have been closer to their objective. Now they have been able to buy only half the quantity of palm fronds needed. They must somehow raise the extra funds to buy more palm leaves and other materials and raise them soon. They have already stayed with Thangamani longer than they had expected.

#### Neighbours' Evaluation

The day Venny works he ~~has~~<sup>too</sup> to work hard for such long hours that when he comes home he is ~~is~~/tired to think about anything except sleep. He is more worried about getting a job the next day and whether the truck would come for him. He tries not to worry about the distant future but think of the next day. Venny's attitude, however, is still relaxed. Unlike Narayani, who is always on the look out for some work or the other, however illpaid, if Venny doesn't get the regular job on the truck, he is content whiling away his time in the house or at the street corner.

To the neighbours in the squatter settlement, there is little to choose however between Narayani and Venny. The neighbours feel that both of them live from day to day and do not worry about tomorrow. They feel that most of their money is spent on eating out either by themselves or with the children and that they were not concerned about the future. So when their roof fell, there wasn't much sympathy for Narayani and Venny

in the settlement. If one tries to explain that Narayani is much more concerned about the household than Vanny, the neighbours laugh it off by saying "But Vanny is not a woman." The fact remains that Narayani is the one much more harassed in everyway.

Narayani proposes to borrow, and will probably borrow, about 60 to 70 Rupees for her roof. Possibly, the people she has pawned off the ration card to will lend her this much more. So she will soon be sleeping under her own roof. However, she will have, in the process, not only increased her indebtedness but also made it even more difficult to retrieve her ration card. So the prospect of any improvement in the basic food intake in the foreseeable future will thus have receded even further.

#### Conclusion

Let me now try to pull together the principal strands of this profile of Narayani, the scheduled caste female agricultural labourer from Trivandrum.

- a) Narayani's mother and father were both agricultural labourers; so is Narayani, though with the days of work in agriculture being very few (hardly 60 days in a year) she has to constantly look for work elsewhere.
- b) Though both Narayani and her husband are working, her contribution to the family upkeep is extremely important.
- c) Of Narayani's two daughters, though the elder one went to school, the younger one was never sent to school, and the only prospect that seems to await them is that of joining the same labour market as their mother.



d) Not that the sons are likely to do any better than their father Venny, who is a head load worker for a truck that transports granite stones from the quarries to construction sites, but at least if the pare

e) The whole family is suffering; from under-nourishment but the worst affected, in relative terms, are Narayani when she is out of work and the female children in particular.

f) The prospect of improvement in food intake of the household appears remote in view of the fact that the family has no immediate hope of retrieving the ration card it had to pawn off during Venny's illness; therefore it will have to keep buying its rice requirements from the open market at a much higher price.

g) The family could still probably have reduced the present level of its under-nourishment by

i) If Narayani and Venny spent less on eating out on working days and

ii) switching over, as far as possible, from rice to tapioca, which yields, at current prices, the same amount of calories for half the price of rice but for the family particularly because of the husband's unusually strong resistance to it.

All in all, therefore, the future that seems to stare Narayani in the face is one of constant struggle to keep herself and her family alive. In this struggle, unfortunately, the children, particularly female children, seem to suffer the most.

TABLE 2: DAILY CALORIC INTAKE IN THE FAMILY (in calorie units)

Meal	Narayani		Venny		Suren		Shakuntala		Rajani		Aji		Anu	
	W/D	NW/D	W/D	NW/D	W/D	NW/D	W/D	NW/D	W/D	NW/D	W/D	NW/D	W/D	NW/D
1. Breakfast	700	-	1040	700	700	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-
2. Brunch	-	203	-	-	-	203	346	203	346	203	173	104	173	104
3. Lunch	900	-	1315	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	410	410	410	410
4.iffin	-	-	313	246	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-
5. Dinner	810	810	810	810	810	810	810	810	810	810	405	405	405	405
6. All meals	2410	1013	3477	1766	1510	1013	1156	1013	1156	1013	933	919	933	919
7. Recommended Norm (ICMR 1968)	3000	2000	3900	2400	2500	2500	2100	2100	1800	1800	1500	1500	1200	1200
8. Shortfall from recommended norm (-)	590	987	423	634	990	1487	944	1087	644	787	512	581	212	281
-do- %	19.7	49.1	10.8	26.1	39.	59.3	45.0	51.5	35.8	43.4	34.1	38.7	17.7	23.4

W/D = working day, NW/D = Non-working day.

- Notes: 1. While for Narayani and Venny, her husband, calorie intake is for their respective working and non-working days for the children the distinction revolves around Narayani. As is noted in the text, Narayani is employed only for half the days in a year.
2. For children, except Suren, on all days, and for Narayani and Suren on Narayani's non-working day, there is really one morning meal; except that the youngest get it supplemented through a mid-day meal at the Government feeding Centre.
3. The calorie intake for Suren, the eldest son, is definitely understated because (a) he eats much better on the days he himself gets work and (b) he is known to scrounge on others in the neighbourhood on days he does not get enough to eat at home, a course that is not open to the female and younger children.
4. The average shortfall in calorie intake for the family as a whole works out to 30.9%. It can be seen that Suren apart, those worst affected are Narayani herself on the days she is out of work and her daughter, Shakuntala and Rajani, in terms of deviations of their individual shortfall from the family shortfall.

## NOTES AND REFERENCES

- 1/ Pulaya, a caste of rice slaves, is the largest single scheduled caste in Kerala, accounting for one-third of the total scheduled caste population in the State.
- 2/ See Leela Gulati, Rationing in a Peri-Urban Community, Case Study of a Squatter Habitat, Economic and Political Weekly, Vol. XII, No.12, March 19, 1977, for a description of the squatter settlement in which our female agricultural labourer, Narayani, lives with her family.
- 3/ Uri, according to the Census, is a "network for suspending pots". See, Census of India, Vol. VII, Kerala, Part VIII(i), Fairs and Festivals of Kerala, p.405.
- 4/ The diety in these Devi temples is "Shakti", the mother goddess. Though these temples are run by Ezhavas, who are not a scheduled caste, Pulayas have free access to them.
- 5/ Polygamy has existed among the Pulayas. Among the Mala Pulayas, i.e., those "found in the Anjanad valley of the Devicolum taluk in North Travancore", a man may marry the sister of the first wife not only after the latter's death but even while she is still alive. (See, L.A.Krishna Iyer, The Travancore Tribes and Castes, Vol. I, 1937, pp.117 to 134.) It must be added - however, that of 16 scheduled caste households in this particular squatter settlement, this was the only case that we came across, of polygamous marriage.
- 6/ Among the Mala Pulayas, the elder brother may marry the wife of his deceased younger brother and become the guardian of his children. But in this particular case, it is the wife younger brother of the deceased elder who starts living with the younger brother along with her children.
- 7/ There are about 2000 feeding centres in the State distributing noon-day meal to tribal and slum-area children. The meal contains approximately 410 calories and 15 grammes of protein.
- 8/ The fact also that tapioca though widely consumed is still regarded as 'an inferior good' could well have played a major role in this reluctance to substitute it for rice. In this particular case at least the presumption in favour of large scale shift to tapioca among the bottom expenditure groups (See United Nations, Poverty, Unemployment and Development Policy, A Case Study of Selected Issues with reference to Kerala, SI/ES/29/1975, pp.48-9) is not borne out.
- 9/ See, D.D.Kale, Working Population in Kerala, in a volume by L.S.Kurup and K.A. George (Eds.) Population Growth in Kerala, 1966 p.270-1.
- 10/ This should be compared with the author's own earlier calculation of mortgaging a ration card (See Leela Gulati, op.cit.) That calculation was made on the assumption of an open market premium of Rs.0.40 per kg. as against the actual premium of Rs.0.70 that Narayani has got to pay.

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