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THE ROLE OF WOMEN FROM FISHING HOUSEHOLDS:
CASE STUDY OF A KERALA FISHING VILLAGE

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Introduction

The physical geography of Kerala is such that it is ideally suited for fishing. The fishable areas in Kerala is as large as that of the land surface of the State. Kerala's marine fish landings alone currently account for 30% of that for the country as a whole, though Kerala commands only 10% of the coastline and 7% of the continental shelf of India. The combination of a long sea coast in the west and a network of rivers and internal water areas, usually referred to as backwaters, has made it possible for several households in the State to take to fishing from a long time. Today, not only is fishing a major occupation but also fish is an important source of food for the people of Kerala.

According to the 1971 population census, the total fishing population of Kerala consisted of 550,841 out of total population of 22 million. The 1979 estimates show a population of 650,000. Of this, only 130,000 are active fishermen. Spread over some 590 kilometres of Kerala's Arabian Sea coastline are about 250 fishing villages. These villages vary in their religious and caste compositions.

By and large, each village tends to be homogenous. Fishermen belong to three main religious groups: Hindus, Christians and Muslims in the broad ratio of 40:35:25. The representation of these religions in the total population of Kerala State is in the ratio of 62:21:17 respectively. In the State's Northern districts, these villages are largely Muslim in composition, while the Hindus predominate the South. The Christian fishermen belong almost entirely to the Latin Catholic Church and are to be found largely in the Central districts. The Hindu fishermen belong to Araya and Valan castes. Both these are considered as backward castes.

qualify for certain reservations in the matter of admission to educational institutions and government service.

Although quite some effort has been made, particularly in recent years, to know about traditional fishing and fishermen we know very little about women in these fishing households. Part of the reason for this omission could be due to the fact that women do not go out fishing. Compared to the dangerous, adventurous activities that men undertake during fishing in the open sea, women's activities which are shore-based are certainly less dramatic. Therefore what happens before and after the expeditions does not seem as important as what happens during the expedition. Another important factor to be borne in mind is that all the fish-related activities that women participate in bring such low direct returns that they are hardly considered work in the sense of gainful occupation. Thus what is considered work and what is not considered work, both by the women themselves and others (including us academics) may have played its part in the neglect of fisherwomen.

Our purpose and approach

The purpose of this paper is to make an effort towards filling in the gap that now exists with respect to knowledge of fisherwomen's work participation. For this purpose we have chosen a fishing village by the name Puthenthura in the district of Quilon in the State of Kerala. The village also happens to be one of the three villages which together formed the compact area chosen under the Norwegian Aid Programme to introduce mechanised deep sea fishing. It was felt that by choosing this village not only we study the role of women but also the changes that have been introduced in their lives due to the aforesaid development project. Some data on interest in this regard were available for the year 1953, i.e., the year

in which the project was started. At the same time, however, it has to be borne in mind that the village chosen by us cannot be taken as a representative village. Firstly, it is a predominantly Hindu village, with the Hindu households constituting 90% of the total number of households. Secondly, though the village has stuck to traditional fishing in spite of the switch over to mechanised fishing in the neighbouring villages, it has not remained completely unaffected by the radical technological transformation that has taken place in its neighbourhood.

About the village

Puthenthura is a small fishing village consisting of 464 fishing households situated some 15 kilometres north of the city of Quilon. A National Highway cuts right through the village, dividing it into two halves: the West and the East sides. The West side is a narrow strip of sandy land lying between the sea and the highway, whereas the East side lies between the highway, interlaced with backwaters and lagoons. Fishing villages in Kerala generally tend to be of the cluster type. Possibly, in Kerala unlike other villages in the State where the huts are more spread out, togetherness was important for the fishermen to strike an entirely different pattern of housing. On the West side village, the huts are huddled close to each other. Along with this the terrain in the West side is hardly inviting with virtually no vegetation whatsoever. In the blazing afternoon sun the sand gets heated up and only the thatched huts can offer some shade and protection.

On the Eastern side, the landscape is more inviting because of trees and lush green vegetation in between stretches of backwaters and lagoons. Moving from the West to the East side was always considered an upward movement by the fishing households. Some two to three years back the State Government moved 101 needy fishing families from the West side to a well

laid out housing colony. This was part of the Government programme for providing improved housing to economically backward groups including fishermen in the State. These houses are neatly laid out, each with proper access. There are street lights and water taps which are within easy reach of every house. Therefore, they stand out in contrast to the huts on the Western side. Still there is little ill-feeling between the households on either side of the road. This is possibly so because every household on the West side has a very close relation living on the East side. One's own son or daughter may be living across the road.

The village is self-sufficient in the sense that for its day to day needs there are grocery and other shops selling items of basic requirements. Under the Norwegian Aid Programme, a hospital was put up to cater to the requirements of the three villages covered by the project. This hospital is located at a distance of only half a kilometre from Puthenthura. The village has its own primary school where children between the ages of 5 and 11 go to study. The school is funded and administered by the Government. In recent years, a private ice factory has also come into existence and so also a boat building yard.

Sex ratio

As stated earlier, Puthenthura consists of some 464 fishing households; of these 91% belong to Hindus, all belonging to the Araya caste. Table I gives us the age and sex distribution of the population at two points of time, 1953 and 1979.

TABLE I - Distribution of Population According to Sex & Age in Puthenthura village

Age in years	1953			1978		
	Male	Female	Sex ratio	Male	Female	Sex ratio
0 -14	337	267	792	431	420	974
15-64	393	348	885	871	896	1029
65+	19	28	1473	26	14	538
Total	749	643	858	1328	1330	1001

The figures for the year 1953 refer to the period just before the project for introducing mechanised fishing started. It can be seen from the table that the overall sex ratio in this village was very unfavourable for women, in that there were only 858 women to every 1000 men. This was less favourable than the sex ratio for both rural Kerala and rural India according to 1951 census. This is particularly interesting to note because Kerala is the one State in India with a persistently favourable sex ratio since 1901. On the other hand, for India as a whole the ratio of women to men as a whole has been declining over the past fifty years and this phenomenon has already attracted considerable notice in recent years.

It is generally accepted that the sex ratio tells us a good deal about the prevailing status of women, particularly their relative health status and that substantial disparities between regions and communities in sex ratio deserve to be looked into carefully. For our limited purpose, however, it should be sufficient to note that while in 1953 there were only 858 women to 1000 men in Puthenthura, in 1978 there were 1001 women to 1000 men. Whatever be the factors behind this significant improvement in sex ratio, it points, in our opinion, to a very considerable alteration in the relative as well as absolute health status of the fisherwomen in the village of Puthenthura.

It can further be seen that the improvement in sex ratio is particularly marked in the age group of 0-14. At the same time, it cannot be left unremarked that for the age group of 65 and above, there is a significant decline in the sex ratio.

Work participation

According to the 1953 survey, only 26 women were returned as self-earning out of total female population of 643, thus giving a work participation rate of just 4% as against the corresponding work participation rate of 50% among men. In 1978, out of a total female population of 1,330 in 464 fishing households, as many as 582 women were returned as workers, thus yielding a work participation rate of 44%. The corresponding work participation rate among men worked out to 61%. All this is given in Table II.

TABLE II - Male & Female Work Participation total for 1953 and 1978 and by age groups 1978, in Puthenthura

Age group	Males			Females		
	Workers	Non workers	Total	Workers	Non Workers	Total
<u>1953</u>						
Total	373 (50%)	376	749	21 (4%)	622	643
<u>1978</u>						
0-14	25 (5.8%)	406	431	17 (40%)	403	420
15-64	778 (89%)	93	871	553 (62%)	343	896
65+	7 (27%)	19	26	12 (86%)	2	14
Total	810 (61%)	518	1328	582 (44%)	748	1330

What can additionally be seen from the table is that while work participation among women in the age group of 15-64 is now 62% as against the corresponding work participation by men of 89%, the scales are reversed when we come to the age group of 65 and above. While 80% of the women of 65 and above participate in work, only 27% of men of that age continue to work. Clearly the pressure of existence is much greater on women. Could that be one reason why the sex ratio at that age has not only not improved over the years, but deteriorated?

In comparing work participation rates between 1953 and 1978, a word of caution is necessary to enter with respect to the possibility that the definition of work might have been different. It is not known what exactly was the definition adopted for 'self earning' in the 1953 survey. But for the 1958 survey, work was defined to include all activity inside or outside the house undertaken during the course of a day or week with a view to earning money income. It is possible that this latter definition is more liberal than the one that was perhaps adopted in 1953 to identify self earning men and women. However, there is reason to believe that between 1953 and 1978 women's participation has improved considerably in the fishing village. This comes out in our discussion later on of the occupational distribution of the working women of Puthenthura.

An aspect of female work participation in Puthenthura that the 1953 survey brought out was that of the 21 women self-earners as many as 14 (66.67%) were widows and 5 (23.8%) were unmarried women. All of these latter were found to be "daughters of single female family supporters". This naturally led the author of the 1953 Survey Report to observe that "among the Hindus in Puthenthura there are practically no self-earning married women". How does the current situation compare in this regard with the situation which obtained in 1953?

Table III sets out the distribution of self earning working women by civil condition in 1978. It shows that 70% of the working women are married.

TABLE III - Distribution of Working Women by Occupation and civil condition in 1978 in Puthenthura

Occupation	Married	Widow/di- vorced/ Separated	Unmarried	Total
Net making	334	28	39	401
Peeler for wages	41	16	82	139
Coir-making	9	3	-	12
Shrimp business	3	-	-	3
Shrimps peeler at home	1	1	2	4
Mat making	1	-	-	1
Fish business	2	1	-	3
Others (Tailors, teashop owners, nurse, etc.	8	3	8	19
Total	339	52	131	582

Occupational distribution

Of the 21 women identified in the 1953 survey, as self earning, 17 (81%) were occupied in coir making and the balance four were engaged in fish trade. Presumably, the latter were headload fish vendors, selling fish from house to house in the neighbouring habitations. Of the 582 women found to be engaged in work in 1978, coir making accounted for only 12 (2.1%). Also, four women were engaged in head load fishing vending. Thus coir making and fish vending together account for less than 3% of the women currently engaged in work. On the other hand, 69% of these women are engaged in net making. The next biggest group is that of women working for wages as peelers of shrimp. This group accounts for 24% of the working women in the village.

Omission of Net making

A doubt immediately springs to mind concerning the omission altogether of net making as an occupation open to women in 1953. Traditionally, all fishing folk, men, women and children, are supposed to know the art of net making. However, it is possible that net making was not being returned as an occupation of women. One reason could be that whatever net making women were engaged in was only for the household itself. At the same time, the possibility cannot be ruled out that net making was not returned as an occupation by even women engaged in it for the monetary remuneration from outside the household because the work fetched them very low income. A 1968 survey of fishermen of Quilon city showed that though as many as 64% of the working fisherwomen were engaged in net making "even if a women is engaged in net making right from 6 a.m. to 10 p.m. what she can earn at the most from works only 50 paise or 60 paise". The going wage of a woman agricultural labourer in 1968 was Rs.3 a day. Possibly the return on net making was no less pitiful in 1953 as in 1968.

In the detailed in-depth household studies undertaken in the wake of the 1978 survey, it has been found that net making in Puthenthura is now organised on commercial lines. There are two enterprising households in the village itself who get nylon nets made in the village on a put out system. They supply the various households with nylon cord and collect the netting. Payment is made by them on the quantity of cord that has been processed by a household at the current rate of Rs.17 per kg. On an average a housewife is able to do one kg. of netting in one week. Thus, average daily earning from net making can be put at Rs.3, in current prices, or Rs.1.50 in 1968 prices. Thus, real earnings from net making now appear to be much better than they were a decade or so ago. But they are still very meagre. Nevertheless, what women possibly hesitated to return as

their gainful activity in 1953 is now returned as such without any hesitation.

Fish peeling

As for peeling of fish, this is an entirely new activity that has been generated by mechanised fishing in the neighbouring two villages. With the introduction of mechanised fishing boats, there has been a several fold increase in the quantity of shrimp caught in the Puthenthura neighbourhood. The accompanying expansion in peeling activity which is a purely female activity has not only created new employment opportunities in the villages directly involved in mechanised fishing but also in the neighbourhood, including Puthenthura. A number of peeling sheds have now come up in the village in recent years. There existed none before. There can thus be no question whatsoever that peeling is an entirely new gainful activity which has opened up for women since 1953. For a full day's work in a peeling shed, a women ordinarily makes Rs.6.50 in current prices.

A reference to Table III also shows that peeling for wages is taken up largely by unmarried women. Almost 60% of the women working in the peeling sheds are unmarried. Only 30% of them are married. Evidently, married working women prefer (or their men want them) to take up such work as e.g., net making that can easily be combined with household chores within or close to their residences.

Concluding Remarks

There can be no doubt that in the fishing village of Puthenthura certain significant changes have taken place over the past 25 years with regard to women in terms of not only their demographic but also economic status.

In the past, women from fishing households were mostly involved in either household chores or activities such as net making which fetched them very meagre earnings. A very small proportion of the women were engaged in what were even then considered extremely low status occupations such as headload fish vending, defibring coir husk, and occasionally shell collection and drying of fish. All these activities were not only low paying but also unpleasant and/or strenuous.

In recent years, with the opening up of work opportunities, fishermen of Puthenthura are involved in gainful activities in much larger proportion. Earlier, net making was not considered worth recording as a gainful activity. Now earnings from net making seem to have improved. But it is still an activity that women are able to combine with their household chores. At the same time, quite a large proportion of women go out to work for wages in the shrimp peeling sheds which have come up in recent years in the wake of mechanised fishing.

Doubt is entertained in many quarters about the net gains of mechanised fishing, particularly on the score of the distribution of additional incomes it has generated. However, going by the experience of Puthenthura whose fishermen themselves virtually spurned mechanisation by sticking to traditional mode of fishing, women of the village have been able to improve their economic status, measured in terms of both work participation and occupational distribution. This has been possible because of the vastly greater as well as improved work opportunities which mechanisation of fishing in the neighbourhood has thrown open for the women of the area. Thus, given the opportunities, women seem quite willing to take them up. At least, that is the message of Puthenthura.

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