

WOMEN in the unorganized sector of industry outnumber those in the organized sector. They face more problems as they have no protection from labour laws and are far more vulnerable to exploitation. Economic development often adversely affects the life conditions of these women.

This study tries to examine the conditions of women in the unorganized sector of the coir industry in Kerala. Their work consists of the primary processing stages—retting the green coconut husk, spinning the coir yarn by hand or spindle, extracting the fibre by beating the husk, and to a small extent, the small-scale weaving of mats and matting.

Kerala accounts for about 95 per cent of India's total production of coir and coir products. The coir industry is one of the three major traditional industries in the state, the other two being cashew and handlooms. It provides direct employment to five lakh people, and about ten lakhs are dependent on the industry in one way or another.

The majority of coir workers find employment only for about 200 days in a year. Theirs is a life of abject poverty and starvation, with nothing to fall back on and nowhere to work for five months of that year. Their problem is very acute, mainly because in the coastal areas of Kerala where the coir industry is concentrated there are few opportunities for alternative or supplementary employment. Living below poverty line, coir workers are subject to the worst type of exploitation and social degradation. Most of their suffering is caused by low wages and the lack of continuous employment. They exist in a state of constant underemployment.

### **From Organized to Unorganized**

During the last two decades, particularly in the 70s, an alarming trend developed. Factory owners began to close down organized factories and to use instead products made in small and cottage type units. From 1950 to about 1965 the coir workers' movement was very strong. They forced private managements—many of them foreign—to concede their demands for minimum wages, gratuity, dearness allowance and other facilities. By closing down

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## **Constant Underemployment— Women In Kerala's Coir Industry**

factories, the industrialists were able to deprive the workers, most of whom are women, of all these rights. The wages in the "unorganized" sector of the coir industry are now so low that the workers have one of the lowest income and expenditure levels in the country. There are thousands who get such low wages as Rs. 1.50 and Rs 2.50 a day. Starvation deaths have also been reported. This, while coir products are being sold at more and more fancy prices both in the country and in a flourishing export market!

### **Machines Replace Women**

Another alarming development is the recent attempt to introduce mechanisation at various levels of production, leading to large scale unemployment amongst women. As the workers have been trying to organize themselves and have won several trade union rights, management of big coir factories has retaliated by introducing machines to replace labour. This serves two purposes—it cuts at the roots of workers' unity and it increases the profits of the owners. The industrialists say that mechanization has been introduced to improve productivity and to meet competition in international markets. But their actual motive is to break the organized strength of the workers.

Also, mechanization is an easy way of making the workers more helpless and reducing their wages because the machines, by throwing thousands out of employment, create a reserve army of unemployed people, thus forcing those who are still employed to be more

submissive, for fear of being replaced at any time. The efforts of government to implement minimum wages have been only partially successful, that too only in the organized sector. In the unorganized sector, where women do the extraction of fibre and spinning of yarn outside the factory, it becomes impossible to keep a check, and the wages are abnormally low.

### **25 Paise A Day**

About 50,000 workers are employed in retting. These workers have employment for not more than one week in a year. The extraction of fibre from retted husks is done almost entirely by women. This work is very difficult unhygienic and unhealthy. About 90 per cent of the hand spinners and nearly 67 per cent of the spindle spinners are women. Nearly 97,800 people were engaged in the spinning sector in 1966. About 52 per cent of them were employed as wage labour. A recent estimate put the total at 1.19 lakhs. 91.1 per cent of them are women, 2.4 percent are men and 6.5 percent are children. The hand spinners also do the work of beating and cleaning the husks. There are about 15,000 workers in the manufacturing sector.

The majority of workers are engaged in fibre extraction on very low wages. The average monthly income of a hand spinner is Rs. 10 and of a spindle spinner Rs 30. There is a 51 per cent excess of workers in the hand spinning sector. This is chiefly due to the lack of alternative employment. The average working days per year are 204 and most of the people are unemployed due to non-availability

of raw materials. Spindle-spinning gives full time employment to many, but there are plenty of surplus workers here too. The average number of working days is only 192 a year.

The hand spinners have to purchase retted husk from the dealers, extract the fibre and convert it into yarn which they sell to the local trader. Thus they get an average of 25 paise a day for eight to ten hours' work in their homes. They are exploited by both dealers and petty traders. As there is no employer-employee relationship and no payment of wages, this kind of exploitation cannot be removed by fixation of a minimum wage.

### Women-Dwarfed By Malnutrition

The number of women workers in coir factories has been on a continuous decline. The pretext was that "women workers do much less work than men do." Before 1947, women as time-rate workers used to get 37 paise per day. In 1947, with a 25 per cent increase in basic wage, they started getting 50 paise a day. They started getting maternity benefits as a result of trade union activity and collective bargaining. But the management used these increases as a pretext to employ less women workers. The reason they gave was that "women workers cannot yield more output even if they are paid more."

Most of the workers, including young women, have only rags to wear. They look prematurely old. Many young women between the ages of 18 and 30 are unmarried because their parents cannot afford to pay the marriage expenses. Girls between the ages of 16 and 20 are dwarfed due to malnutrition and inadequate quantity of even starchy and cereal food. Women workers start beating husks before daybreak and continue till sunset. They can beat only 30 to 40 husks a day. They are paid 75 to 88 paise per 100 husks. Coir spinners start work at about three in the morning and work till six or seven in the evening with a short interval in the afternoon. The rate of payment is Rs 1.75 to Rs 2 for 100 mudies of coir yarn. Generally, two adults and one boy or girl working on the spinning wheel can produce 150 to 200

mudies in a day. Thus their earning for a 12 hour day comes to Rs 1 or 1.25.

Workers are usually made to work overtime without extra pay. A number of malpractices continue such as not maintaining proper registers, recruiting people on a temporary basis and employing them continually so that they have no job security.

### Unequal Everywhere

400 women workers were interviewed by us. They were aged 30 to 60 years. Most of them belong to the Ezhava caste, 30 Nair women who belong to the "high

The average per capita income is Rs 41 per month for a spinning and beating worker. The average total income of a family, including income from agriculture and other sources is Rs 1,239.30 per year. The average family has to be in perpetual debt just to live at subsistence level. They have no land of their own. They construct small thatched huts on the land of the employer. In 1969 the United Front government passed an Agrarian Land Reform Bill under which all hutments dwellers received the right to their hutments. They have no financial



—Bhārati Mirchandani

caste" category have joined the industry due to the lack of alternative employment in coastal areas and the increasing pauperization of high caste Hindus as a result of their alienation from land.

Most women workers are illiterate due to very low educational opportunities. Women have made better use of the existing facilities for primary education than have men. However, fewer girls study upto middle school because they are withdrawn to help in the coir units or at home.

assets at all, such as bank deposits, insurance policies or ready cash. Their economy is run on borrowing at exorbitant interest rates.

Most women workers are not aware of the exact minimum wage declared by government. Working on the price-rate system, they put in long and tedious hours, in unsanitary conditions. As a result most of them suffer from diseases related to environmental insanitation. The majority feel that do not have equality of status in the family and do

not have any say in taking decisions regarding education, marriage or selection of job. Alcoholism among men and wife-beating are widely prevalent. The women coir workers work long hours in the coir units and then have to do all the housework such as cooking, washing, cleaning and looking after the children. Their husbands do not help at all with domestic work.

### **In The Hands Of A Few**

Coir industry is heavily export-oriented and from its early years, has been concentrated in the hands of a few industrialists. The bigger factories employ a large number of workers from other parts of the state. The rural poor, driven by insecure conditions in agriculture, constantly migrate to the coir industry centres. However, they find themselves equally insecure as industrial workers because they are at the mercy of the management, who, having a vast army of impoverished unemployed to choose from, can hire and fire at their will, and depress wages below subsistence and starvation levels.

There have been attempts to set up cooperative societies for manufacture of coir products. In 1962 such a scheme was launched "as a corrective against the

monopolistic activities of individual businessmen and to ensure a fair deal to the numerous workers." However the monopoly interests are so strong that the cooperative movement is unable to curb them. At present, 80 per cent of the coir industry is in the private sector and only 20 per cent in the cooperative sector. Also most of the cooperatives are in an unsatisfactory state, ridden with factional and political divisions. Ironically, the cooperative societies which are supposed to replace the monopolies, are actually forced to make a deal with them for purchase of retted husk.

Though the unit value of coir exports increased between 21 and 47 per cent in one year, these benefits were appropriated by the exporters. Neither the small producers nor the workers got any share of the profit. The industrialists wrongly argue that they cannot pay higher wages because of low productivity and low demand in the market. In fact, there is a high rate of exploitation by merchant exporters, big manufacturers and middlemen. Studies show that it will be possible to give better wages to workers if middlemen and monopolists who control are removed

from the scene, if husk prices are controlled and reasonable distribution of profits among workers ensured.

### **Workers' Struggles**

Even the existing low wages have been ensured only by a series of workers' struggles. Upto 1971 these struggles were isolated and sporadic. In 1971 a Centre of Coir Workers was founded under the leadership of the CITU. Thousands of workers participated in the joint struggle for minimum wages, and were able to increase their wage by more than 50 per cent. Wages are higher in areas where coir workers have been continually struggling, and lower in regions where trade union organization is backward.

Of the women surveyed, only 39.5 per cent were members of trade unions. Other studies show that women have joined in several trade union struggles. Though battling against poverty, malnutrition and unemployment, there are many young women with a long history of struggle in unions. As women with a measure of economic independence who are becoming increasingly conscious of their rights, they contribute positively to the rising women's consciousness in Kerala. □

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## **The Struggle Continues**

About a thousand coir workers including some women, staged a dharna at the residence of the union industries minister in New Delhi on August 21, demanding mainly that this industry employing five lakhs, including four lakh women, be saved from its present slump.

The women who came for the dharna were aware of their specific problems as well, such as the replacement of big factories by small scale units, which is directed against the workers' organized struggles and has an important impact on women's employment, wages, and service conditions. They are also affected by the introduction of mechanization at various levels of production. According to Susheela Gopalan, president of the CITU coir workers union: 'There has not been a single day when a struggle has not taken place—on the questions of raw material prices, minimum wages, hours of work'. Thousands of women have participated. Over the past four years there has been a continuous struggle against mechanization. Women have lost their lives during police firing when they were struggling for minimum wages.

As one woman said: "We have no rest from struggles. Even to come to Delhi for the dharna was not easy. My college-going daughter is alone at home and I managed to persuade my mother to come and look after her while I was at Delhi'. My mother was also apprehensive but I told her: 'Look, you should be proud of me. I've been elected by the CITU to represent the cooperative and they are paying my fare."

—from "The Voice Of The Working Woman"