

I WAS born in a village called Puthenthuruthu, a small island village, a short distance away from Shakthikulangara where I live now. Even now, my village is not approachable by road. We have to use a boat or some kind of ferry to go back and forth from Shakthikulangara.

I come from a large family. Of the 10 children, five girls and five boys, born to my parents, I was the third child. All of us were born in our house in Puthenthuruthu. My father was a fisherman owning a small craft, *kochuvallom*, and a cast net. This is a small scoop net made of cotton used by the traditional fishermen of the area when the sea is rough and they cannot put their canoe to sea. This is a net that one can handle from the beach itself. My mother used to collect shells, clean and dry them and then sell them to be converted into lime. My mother's mother was a shell collector too, though she also worked as a midwife attending to childbirths in our village.

No Schooling

I was never sent to school. There were no schools in our village and if one wanted to go, one would have to depend on the ferry. My parents were very hard up and did not see any need for educating children. So none of us was sent to school. Some children from our village did go to school in Shakthi-kulangara by boat but they came from better off families. I stayed home and helped my mother with the housework and in taking care of the younger children. Also, I helped my mother in cleaning and drying shells. Sometimes, I went out with her to collect them. I attained puberty at the age of 16 and at the age of 19, I was married off to Valerian, a cousin of mine living in Shakthikulangara. He was 23 years old then. We were married in the church at Shakthikulangara. The only dowry I got was a thin pair of golden earrings weighing 20 grams of gold worth Rs 300.

In-laws Not Strangers

In Valerian's house in Shakthi-kulangara, I was not with

LEELA GULATI

Philomena—She Has No Voice

In Manushi No. 21, we printed a summary of Leela Gulati's study "Fishing, Technology And Women" in which she examined the impact on women of mechanisation of fishing in the Neendakara area, Kerala. Here we reproduce one of the case studies accompanying her report, which shows the plight of a fisherman's "nonworking" wife.



strangers. They were my relatives and used to visit my family before our marriage. That is how our marriage was arranged.

Everyone knew my father-in-law, as he took a very active part in the church. He was a strong and articulate man, proud of his awareness of politics and things in general. They were certainly being generous in letting me enter their family. They probably could have got a girl from a family doing better than us.

My father-in-law is now 65 years of age. He had 12 children, but only 10 are living. The first one died when he was two months old because of congestion in the lung. Of the surviving ones, eight are boys and two girls. My mother-in-law kept having children even after her sons were married and were raising their own families. My husband, Valerian, is their first living son.

Eight Pregnancies

During the 15 years of my married life, I have had eight pregnancies, all live. But I have only six children living. My first two children, both girls, died as infants. I began to expect my first child two years after our marriage. I went to the government hospital, in Quilon city, for delivery. On the fortieth day, the child is usually taken to the church for baptism. But I lost my first child, a girl, on the thirtieth day.

The Latin Catholic custom is that the couple should stay apart for a month. This is the minimum period of rest considered necessary for the wife and it is supposed to give her time to recuperate. During this time, she is given special herbal tonics, oil massage with hot baths and special food. I was also given all that. Within two months I was expecting again. This time also I went to the same hospital in Quilon, but had a premature delivery. The doctors felt the child was too weak. I went with my infant girl to my parents' home just to recover from the mental and physical strain of all this. But the child caught whooping cough from one of my brothers. So I had to come back

to my husband's place and take the child for treatment to the Benzigar hospital, a mission hospital, but in spite of all our efforts, the child did not survive.

Around this time, Valerian and I decided to go and live in my village. Actually, my father had mentioned that he would give us some land as he had not given me any dowry. So we put our hut on my father's land. But soon Valerian and my father had a big quarrel and just around the time when I was about to deliver my third child, he decided that we would not stay there any longer and that I should go with him to his parents' house at once. But it was late in the evening, so we had to take a ferry. Half-way across, I started having severe pains. Nearby lived my grandmother who was a midwife. She helped me deliver the baby and it was a boy. After 15 days of stay at my grandmother's house, I was moved to Valerian's house, because the child was running temperature and had to be taken to the hospital for immediate treatment. It was found that the umbilical cord had become septic. The child took six months to recover completely, so he was baptised late. We call him Babu. He is now 12 years old.

When my fourth child was due, after a two year gap, I went to a private nursing home in Shakthi-kulangara. Earlier, for my first deliveries, I had gone to the government hospital. Both of the children born to me there did not survive. Then I had problems with the third one, delivered at home with the help of my grandmother. As my due date came closer I started worrying about where to have my delivery. I was irritable and would quarrel with Valerian and his people. Then one day he was so angry that he beat me up badly and I became really sick. I think he felt bad about it. So, it was decided that I should go to a private nursing home though this would cost him a lot more money. My fourth child was a girl. She was baptised as Shirley. So far I had breastfed my children. But soon after

Shirley's birth, I had problems with my breasts. So for a while I had to put her on diluted cow's milk. She was fed with a piece of cloth soaked in milk. But no one in the family quite approved of it. So I switched Shirley back to breast-milk as soon as the doctor felt that it was perfectly safe to do so.

I breastfed Shirley for a little over one year before I conceived again. This was my fifth conception. It depressed me a great deal. I had heard about family planning already and though as Catholics we were not supposed to use contraceptives or get sterilised, I felt that I could not go through any more pregnancies. But I had no courage to talk to any one on this subject. When I went to hospital for my delivery, my kidneys were found to be infected. This time, for my confinement, I had gone to a church run hospital. Keeping in mind my history of complications and my state of health, the doctor there advised me to go in for sterilisation after delivery. I would have gone in for sterilisation if Valerian had been even half willing. He was stubbornly opposed to it. I delivered a boy and returned home after three days. I was weak and had not quite overcome my problem with the kidneys. I got scabies and passed it on to the boy.

Valerian and I started having frequent arguments. I felt he and his people did not worry enough about my health. Also, I felt very weak. So I was packed off to my parents' home along with my three children. I was virtually separated from Valerian for almost three years. During this time my parents had to look after us. I was afraid that I and my children would become a permanent burden on my parents if I did not go back to Valerian.

Health In Ruins

Then Valerian came one day to take me home. Within less than a year of this I was expecting again. Not that I wanted any more children but I was now resigned to going through any number of pregnancies regardless of what happened to my health. I did not want to be packed off again. So within

the next four years I had two more children. On the eve of my eighth delivery, I was very sick and felt so low that I thought I would not survive long.

From my sixth delivery onwards, I had been going to a hospital in Puthenthura for treatment and confinement. There the doctors and other medical staff do not like women to have many children though they never send you away. Every time I went there in pregnant condition, they would ask me if I would like my pregnancy to be terminated in view of my poor health. But who was I to say "Yes"? Valerian too would be asked whenever he was with me. He always said "No." I felt that he was really not convinced about the need. However, considering my condition during the course of my eighth pregnancy, he told the doctor that I could be sterilised if it was absolutely necessary for health reasons.

I stayed in the hospital for six days after my delivery and sterilisation. Soon thereafter, I was running high temperature because the stitches had got septic. I had to be readmitted in hospital for treatment. I have never felt so weak as I do now. Now I have a nine month old baby, and my health is in utter ruins. I feel weak in the lungs and get tired very soon. But I must somehow keep house and cook for Valerian and our five surviving children.

Lack Of Space

We live in this small thatched hut 15 feet by 12 feet, at the back of the house in which Valerian's parents live. The land belongs to Valerian's grandmother. The hut was put up by us, eight years ago, when Valerian brought me back from my home after a three year separation. The two feet elevation helps to keep the rainwater from entering the hut. Of the two rooms, one is used a store cum bedroom and the other as our kitchen.

A part of the little space that lies in between the two rooms serves as our prayer room. All Latin Catholic homes have their best room as a prayer room.

You can see here our collection of calendar and poster pictures of Jesus Christ and virgin Mary. I keep a small candle lamp burning there all the time. In the evening, all of us get together to offer our prayers to the sacred heart. In the store cum bedroom, Valerian hangs all his clothes on a string tied across the room, from one wall to the other. In fact, even my clothes and the children's clothes are hung there. This

level. But the water is contaminated and has a high level of salinity. So I use this water for all purposes except for drinking and cooking.

I am the first to wake up in the morning except on days when Valerian goes out fishing in the early hours of the morning. I clean the front yard, bring some water and then go to the bushes for toilet purposes. We have three schoolgoing children, Shirley,



is the only way to air the clothes and keep them safe from rats. Hanging them on the lines helps keep the clothes out of everybody's way. Then the few extra fishing nets of Valerian are also kept in this room dumped in a corner. The one he is currently using is kept in a verandah corner.

Daily Routine

I spend most of my waking hours moving in and out of the kitchen. It takes 10 minutes to reach the public water tap for me or for my daughter, Shirley, to collect water. We depend on this tap for our drinking water. For washing clothes and cleaning vessels, I use the pond in front of our hut. Most of the area is only two yards above the sea level, so it is easy to reach the water

Solomon and Raju. Babu, my first son, has given up school already. Before she gets ready for school, Shirley helps a little in the kitchen. She is able to do more work after she gets back from school. I always keep some left over rice and gruel from the previous night. The children have this for breakfast before going to school. Usually, Valerian goes to the street corner tea shop for his tea and breakfast. I make tea or black coffee just for myself and have it with the left over rice. The children get ready by themselves and Shirley helps Raju who is just six years old. The school is not far away and is run by the church. The children can walk back and forth by themselves. Once the schoolgoing children are out

of my way, I attend to the two young ones. I am still feeding the youngest one on breastmilk. It is not enough and I have to supplement it with some rice gruel.

I attend to washing of the vessels and the clothes after the children are taken care of. Washing clothes is a time consuming affair as the clothes are so dirty and I cannot spend much on soap. So I have to scrub and beat them hard. Washing clothes takes me two hours every day in the forenoon. Then I get back to the kitchen. I use firewood to do my cooking and kerosene for lighting the wicker lamps. Though there are no coconut trees on our land, there are some 20 trees on Valerian's father's land. These trees yield quite a quantity of dry shrubs that one can use for lighting a fire. The children collect them for me when they get back from school. But shrubs are not enough. We have to buy proper firewood as well. It is available from a corner firewood stall.

No Love Lost

Things would not be so difficult for me if Valerian was doing well in work and was more cooperative and kind. He not only gets angry but usually his anger is turned on to me. He feels bad that he is not doing as well, as a fisherman, as many others in this village. Over the years he has become even more bitter. While several others in the village, some very close relatives, own mechanised boats, Valerian has only a small craft of his own. We have not been able to save enough to improve our position.

Last year his state was even worse when the doctors declared him a diabetic. This upset him no end. How to avoid sugar yet eat enough to do the kind of hard work that is necessary on a traditional craft was a problem. Then of course he is addicted to liquor. He was strongly advised to cut it down. But he is finding it hard to do that. To top it all, two additional misfortunes occurred. In the heavy monsoons last year, our hut collapsed and we had to move into the house of Valerian's

parents. We were really not welcome there, but there was no other alternative open to us. Then I fell sick and the doctors wanted me to be hospitalised and have my uterus removed. When I got back from the hospital, I was completely drained of energy and was at the mercy of my in-laws.



There is not much love lost between me and my in-laws. My mother-in-law has new daughters-in-law who have brought in a much larger dowry and are healthier and possibly more helpful. My father-in-law just talks too much.

He also spends a lot of money on drink, possibly because he has wasted all the good opportunities that came his way. After all, he was one of the first to be allotted a mechanised boat when the new fishing project started.

Not Allowed To Earn

With men like Valerian and my father-in-law, none of us women can have any voice. We must only reproduce children and take care of the home without protest. I would have liked to work and contribute to the family income in spite of my bad health, but they would not hear of it. I would have at least been less dependent. They feel that men at the boat yard are not only drunk and badly behaved, but also take advantage of women who go to work there. So I was never permitted to go to the boat yard.

Now that I cannot have children any more, I feel I can gradually overcome my health problems. Then, if Valerian is unable to take care of us completely, I shall be happy to go out to work. I am only 35 years old. I am quite young. I see so many older women from our neighbourhood working and making money. I too would like to try my luck. Of course, Valerian thinks that the children will soon start contributing their mite. Babu, our eldest, has already stopped going to school. He can start going to sea with his father. But I would like my other children to go to school longer in life. How else can I make certain that I am well taken care of in my old age? □

Write For Manushi

If you are a reader of Manushi and would like to write for the magazine, write and tell us about yourself and your area of work, research or interest. If we know about your particular area of work, we will be in a better position to suggest a specific subject for you to consider writing about. This does not mean that you have to be a specialist or expert of any kind. One sort of writing that Manushi is always in need of is survey reports of specific groups of women, giving detailed information about their living and working conditions. To undertake such work, all you need is proximity to such a group of women, involvement, and willingness to put in some work as well as to lay out a systematic method of conducting the survey. We hope to hear from more of our readers in this regard.