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CHILD LABOUR IN KERALA'S COIR INDUSTRY -
STUDY OF A FEW SELECTED VILLAGES

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Introduction

Coir is the fibre obtained from the husk of the coconut. Though India ranks only third in terms of the acreage under coconut cultivation, she comes on top with regard to the production of coir in the world. India and Sri Lanka together account for almost 90% of the world output of coir. But while India concentrates on retted fibre, Sri Lanka enjoys a virtual monopoly in the production of coir bristle which is extracted mechanically.

Operations in the coir industry fall into four major categories:

1. Retting
2. Defibring
3. Spinning
4. Manufacturing

Retting involves soaking of green husks in shallow brackish water for a period of six to ten months. The retted husks are beaten with wooden mallets to extract the fibre which after willowing is rolled in sliver packs for purposes of spinning which may be done by hand or ratt, the name given to the set of spinning wheels used for making coir yarn. It is this yarn which gets processed, or manufactured, into finished products like coir mats, rugs and carpets.

In terms of the contribution of these operations to employment it is spinning, hand as well as wheel spinning, that ranks first, accounting for 43% of the total employment in the coir industry, followed

by defibring 30%, retting 11% and manufacturing 11%. The total number of persons believed to be employed in the coir industry in Kerala is estimated at between 4 and 5 hundred thousand.

In terms of sex distribution of the persons employed in the coir industry, while defibring and spinning operations are female dominated, retting is a predominantly male activity. Manufacturing which too is largely a cottage industry (i.e., organised in small units which do not have to be registered as factories under the factory Act) employees both sexes about equally.

The involvement of children (i.e., persons below the age of 15) in the coir industry is believed to be quite significant but it is in wheel spinning that the proportion of children is particularly marked, being above 20% of the total number of persons engaged in it.

II

Scope and Plan of the Study

The objective of this study is to report on the extent and nature of involvement of children in the coir industry. For this purpose, it was decided to study only those operations of the industry in which children were found to be involved in significant numbers on the basis of actual observation. Such operations were found to be wheel spinning of coir and defibring of coconut husks.

Choice of sample

Two of the coastal taluks, namely Neyyattinkara and Chirayinkil, known for coir producing activity in Trivandrum district were chosen for study. The coastal villages in Neyyattinkara lie on a continuous stretch. Production of coir on household basis is a major economic activity in these villages. Five of these villages forming a continuous chain, each with a co-operative society of its own, were chosen for this study. These villages are Edayar, Pachalloor, Panathura, Neduman and Thiruvallom. Five to seven households were selected at random in each of these villages on the basis of the membership lists with each co-operative society. In the same neighbourhood there is a major husk retting centre. Seventy children, i.e., those below the age of 15 years working in this centre were picked up at random and interviewed.

While Neyyattinkara is known for household production, Chirayinkil is known for its larger coir producing units. For the purpose of this study, one co-operative and four private establishments were chosen. The co-operative chosen is probably one of the largest wheel spinning establishments in the State. Unlike the co-operatives in Neyyattinkara, which owned no ratts of their own, this particular co-operative owns seventy ratts, one power operated willowing machine and a large open yard of its own to house its operations. The private establishments are proprietary in that each owns a number of ratts. In choosing these establishments, care was taken to select those of different sizes. One establishment owned fine ratts, two of the establishments chosen owned

six ratts each, and one owned fifteen ratts. But the choice was arbitrary in the sense that the cooperation of the owner was an important consideration in the choice of these establishments.

In all, 267 children could thus be interviewed. As far as possible, not only the employers of the children but also at least one of the parents were interviewed to verify and supplement information. However, having selected the establishments, all the children working there were interviewed.

III

Religion and Caste

Of the 267 working children covered by the study, 43 are Muslims and the rest Hindus. Table 1 presents the distribution of the working

Table 1: Distribution of Working Children by Sex, Religion, Caste and Location

	Hindus				Muslims	Total
	High Caste Nair	Backward Castes Ezhavas/Arayas	Other Backward Castes	Scheduled Castes		
<u>I. Boys</u>						
i) Chirayinkil	7	1	-	1	12	21
ii) Neyyattinkara	-	32	22	-	-	54
Total	7	33	22	1	12	75
(%)	(9)	(44)	(29)	(1)	(16)	(100)
<u>II. Girls</u>						
i) Chirayinkil	34	5	-	3	31	74
ii) Neyyattinkara	-	98	15	5	-	118
Total	34	103	15	8	31	192
(%)	(18)	(54)	(8)	(4)	(16)	(100)
<u>III All Children</u>						
i) Chirayinkil	41	6	-	4	43	95
ii) Neyyattinkara	-	130	37	5	-	172
Total	41	136	37	9	43	267
(%)	(15)	(51)	(14)	(3)	(16)	(100)

children surveyed for the purpose of this study by the religion and caste group to which they belong. Though Christians comprise 17.26% of the total population of Trivandrum District, evidently no Christian child was engaged in the coir industry in the villages covered by this survey. Muslims were concentrated in Chirayinkil. } Not a single boy or girl interviewed in Neyyattinkara was either Muslim or Christian.

Hindu boys and girls interviewed belong to various caste groups but their distribution among major caste groups shows some distinct geographical pattern. While in Chirayinkil 41 out of 52 (78%) Hindu children came from the higher caste, Nair, in Neyyattinkara not one out of 172 Hindu children was drawn from any higher caste. In fact, only one backward caste, Ezhava, accounted for a little over three-fourths of the working children interviewed in Neyyattinkara in the coir industry. The second largest number was drawn from another backward caste, Araya. This is a major caste from which Hindu fishermen of the State are drawn. Together, these two castes accounted for 95% of the working children interviewed in Neyyattinkara. The only scheduled caste, untouchable, child falling within the sample was in Chirayinkil working for the co-operative.

It is interesting to note that while for every other religion and/or caste grouping, identified in the table, girls outnumber boys, the Araya boys outnumber their girls. To illustrate, while there is one Ezhava boy to every three Ezhava girls, there are three Araya boys to every two Araya girls working in the coir industry in Neyyattinkara.

It is to be remembered however that the Arayas, being engaged principally in fishing, do coir defibring and spinning only as a subsidiary occupation.

IV

Sex and Age Distribution

In Table 2 is presented the distribution of the working children interviewed by sex and type of establishment. It can be seen that,

Table 2: Distribution of Working Children by Age, Sex and Type of Establishment

	5-8	9-11	12-14	Total
<u>I. Boys</u>				
i) Chirayinkil				
(a) Kaniyapuram Cooperative	-	4	11	15
(b) Kaniyapuram Private Establishments	-	1	5	6
ii) Neyyattinkara				
(a) Kovalam Husk beating centre	-	4	9	13
(b) Spinning Households	8	9	24	41
Total	8	18	49	75
(%)	(11)	(24)	(65)	(100)
<u>II. Girls</u>				
i) Chirayinkil				
(a) Kaniyapuram Cooperative	4	10	31	45
(b) Kaniyapuram Private Establishments	3	7	19	29
ii) Neyyattinkara				
(a) Kovalam Husk beating Centre	12	15	32	59
(b) Spinning Households	14	16	29	59
Total	33	48	111	192
(%)	(17)	(25)	(58)	(100)
<u>III. All Children</u>				
Total	41	66	160	267
(%)	(15)	(25)	(60)	(100)

taking the aggregate, for every two boys there are five girls engaged in the coir operations covered by this study. This ratio between the sexes,

however, is considerably higher than the ratio of one to three for all male to female workers engaged in these operations.

Taken by type of establishment, it cannot be overlooked that only with respect to spinning households is the ratio of boys to girls significantly higher than the overall ratio. This can be taken to show that when children have to work away from their own houses, there is a greater tendency to send girls rather than boys.

The distribution of working children is given by age, sex and type of establishment to see if the age of entry into work differs between sexes. If so, does it differ in any one type of establishment more than others? It can be seen that in the age group of 5 to 8 years, there are girls in all type of establishments whereas boys are there only in the spinning households. Thus what was noticed above is particularly true when it comes to sending young children for work outside the house. The fact that in the higher age groups of 9 to 11 and 12 to 14 girls still exceed the number of boys working even in the household establishments, has something to do probably with the sex typing of operations in this industry.

V

Educational level

Kerala State leads the rest of the country in regard to the level of literacy. A little over 60% of the State's total population was found to be literate in the 1971 Census. The corresponding percentage for the country as a whole was only 29. In regard to

school enrolment of children in the age group of 5 to 11, Kerala is supposed to have attained complete coverage. Unfortunately, the picture does not look so bright when it comes to children working for the coir industry surveyed for the purpose of this study.

Table 3: Distribution of Working Children by Educational Status, Sex and Type of Establishment

	Educational Status			Total	
	Illiterate	School dropouts	School goers		
<u>I. Boys</u>					
i) Chirayinkil					
(a) Kaniyapuram Cooperative	-	12	3	15	
(b) Kaniyapuram Private Establishments	1	4	1	6	
ii) Neyyattinkara					
(a) Kovalam Husk beating Centre	3	5	5	13	
(b) Spinning Households	7	20	14	41	
Total	11	41	23	75	
(%)	(15)	(54)	(31)	(100)	
<u>II. Girls</u>					
i) Chirayinkil					
(a) Kaniyapuram Cooperative	4	33	8	45	
(b) Kaniyapuram Private Establishments	2	22	5	29	
ii) Neyyattinkara					
(a) Kovalam Husk beating Centre	12	17	30	59	
(b) Spinning Households	23	16	20	59	
Total	41	88	63	192	
(%)	(21)	(47)	(32)	(100)	
<u>III. All Children</u>	Total	52	129	86	267
	(%)	(19)	(48)	(32)	(100)

Table 3 gives the distribution of the children surveyed by sex and educational status. It can be seen that 19% of the children working in the coir industry have never been to school. A higher proportion of girls than boys are illiterate, the percentages being 21% and 15% for

girls and boys respectively. But the percentage of school drop outs is higher among boys than girls. This can be taken to mean that a larger proportion of working girls than boys do not get sent to school at all but of the girls who start going to school the proportion of those who drop out works out to be less than the proportion of similar boys.

A slight disaggregation of the data by Taluks reveals that while the incidence of illiteracy is distinctly higher in Neyyattinkara than Chirayinkil among both working girls and boys, the position is reversed in regard to drop out ratios. For both working girls and boys, the incidence of dropping out of school is significantly greater in Chirayinkil than Neyyattinkara.

Disaggregation of the school drop outs by the type of establishments for which the boys and girls are working does not reveal any significant difference which could be attributed to the type of establishment.

As can be seen from Table 4 giving the distribution of school drop outs among working boys and girls, the incidence of dropping out occurs largely after 3rd, 4th and 5th years of school education, i.e., on completion generally of 8th, 9th and 10th years of age. These years account for 77% of the girls dropping out and 62% of the boys dropping out.

Table 4: Distribution of Dropouts by Years of Schooling, Sex and Type of Establishments

	Years of Schooling									Total
	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	
<u>I. Boys</u>										
i) Chirayinkil										
(a) Kaniyapuram Cooperative	1	2	2	5	2	-	-	-	-	12
(b) Kaniyapuram Private Establishments	-	-	1	2	1	-	-	-	-	4
ii) Neyyattinkara										
(a) Kovalam Huskbeating Centre	-	1	1	-	1	1	1	-	-	5
(b) Spinning Households	1	1	2	5	4	1	3	1	2	20
Total	2	4	6	12	8	2	4	1	2	41
(%)	(5)	(10)	(15)	(27)	(20)	(5)	(10)	(20)	(5)	(100)
<u>II. Girls</u>										
i) Chirayinkil										
(a) Kaniyapuram Cooperative	-	4	8	8	7	2	3	1	-	33
(b) Kaniyapuram Private Establishments	-	2	6	12	3	-	-	-	-	22
ii) Neyyattinkara										
(a) Kovalam Husk beating Centre	-	1	5	4	4	1	1	1	-	17
(b) Spinning Households	-	1	3	6	3	3	-	-	-	16
Total	-	8	22	30	16	6	4	2	-	88
(%)		(9)	(25)	(34)	(18)	(7)	(4)	(2)	-	(100)
<u>III. All Children</u>										
Total	2	12	28	42	24	8	8	3	-	125
(%)	(1)	(9)	(22)	(33)	(19)	(6)	(6)	(2)	-	(100)

VI

Parent's Occupation

Some interesting observations can be made also about the occupational status of the parents of working children. For this purpose, the children working in coir industry have been classified both by their mother's and father's occupation.

We find that only 10% of the 267 children come from homes where the mother is not working. But there are significant differences in

this regard when children are distributed by location and the type of establishment. As can be seen from Table 5, while on the one extreme is the Kanayapuram Co-operative where the mothers of only

Table 5: Distribution of Working Children by Mother's Occupation and Type of Establishments

Mother's occupation	Kanyapuram cooperat- ive	Kanyapuram Private Establish- ments	Neyyattinkara		Total (%)
			Kovalam Husk beating Centres	Spinning Households	
1. Husk beaters	1	2	60	-	63 (24)
2. Spinners	35	21	8	-	64 (24)
3. Fibre Cleaners	3	-	-	-	3 (1)
4. Ratt Rotators	1	-	-	-	1
5. Joint Operators	-	5	-	100	105 (39)
6. Others (i.e. working in occupations not connected with coir)	2	1	4	-	7 (3)
7. Non-Workers	18	6	-	-	24 (9)
8. Dead	-	-	-	-	-
Total	60	35	72	100	267 (100)

70% of the children work, the corresponding proportion is 100% for children working in the spinning households and the husk beating centre at Kovalam.

It is worth noting also that the overwhelming majority of working mothers are themselves engaged in the coir industry. Again, the percentage of such mothers is 100 for spinning households.

While for nine out of 10 children, their mothers were engaged in one or the other operation in the coir industry, only one out of every four

children has his/her father working for the coir industry. This can be seen from Table 6. Though women far outnumber men in the coir industry, there are several jobs in this industry which are

Table 6: Distribution of Working Children by Father's Occupation and Type of Establishments

Father's occupation	Kaniyapuram Cooperative	Kaniyapuram Private Establish- ments	Kovalam Husk beating Centre	Spinning House hold's	Total	(%)
1. Work related to coir	4	-	30	29	63	(24)
2. Coolie work outside coir industry	38	11	22	15	86	(32)
3. Other work including fishing	3	2	12	48	65	(24)
4. Deserters	6	8	4	5	23	(9)
5. Non-workers	7	9	3	1	20	(7)
6. Dead	2	5	1	2	10	(4)
Total	60	35	72	100	167	(100)

earmarked for men and which carry a much higher daily wage than jobs that women get in the industry. Men work as retters, transporters of green husks, bundlers, counters and transporters of ropes.

About one-third of the children have given the occupation of their fathers as coolie work. This means that they are either agricultural labourers or doing some manual work involving mostly head load transportation of goods other than coir. While one-tenth have fathers who are self-employed as toddy tappers, bidi makers, petty shop-keepers etc., for another one-tenth, their fathers, though

fishermen by caste and principal occupation, are engaged in coir making as a secondary occupation. All these categories account for 80% of the children surveyed. The remaining 20% are children with fathers who either are dead or retired from work or have deserted their wives. While 7% of the fathers have deserted, an equal number have fathers who are not working. These men are reported as not well and hence unable to work and earn a livelihood.

As was noted earlier, 10% of the working children have non-working mothers. This compares with the figure of 7% of non-working fathers. But the comparison could be misleading unless one is careful. Firstly, all working children are living with their mothers. As it happens not even one of the children surveyed reported his/her mother as dead. Nor was there any case reported of the mother having deserted the child to be taken care of by its father. Only for two out of the twenty four mothers reported as not working was health given as the reason for not being gainfully occupied. Thus while all fathers were reported as not working for reasons of health, mothers were reported as working for largely other reasons.

Establishment-wise, while 18 out of 24 children with non-working mothers are working for the co-operative where wage rates are, as we note later, probably the highest prevailing, 22 out of 49 children with no support from fathers (i.e., including also those with fathers who are dead or have deserted) are working for the private enterprise establishment where wage rates are probably the most exploitative.

Work Pattern of Children

By and large, there are three major operations in which young children are involved. These are husk beating, cleaning and willowing the fibre and rotating the ratt's spinning wheel. Of these three operations, the beating of retted husks is the dirtiest and massiest, involving as it does working on soaked husks which have been left to decompose in stagnant brackish water for months on end. But compartmentalisation between jobs is not complete in that there are boys and girls who may be required to do more than one operation.

Then there are other minor jobs (i.e., jobs where the number employed tends to be small) where children are taken on as helpers to adults. These jobs involve largely head load transportation of husk and ropes. Also, there are children who help in the bundling of coir ropes. Most of these minor jobs, however, seem to be open to boys because one sees very few girls in these jobs.

Table 7 gives the distribution of working children by the type of operation, age and sex. It can be seen that in practically all the operations children are drawn from both the sexes, though in different proportions. For adults, however, the operations are clearly sex typed in the sense that you never see men engaged in husk beating or spinning.

While both boys and girls are employed to rotate the spinning wheel, the adults they work with are almost invariably women. Again cleaning

Table 7: Distribution of Working Children by
Type of Operation, Age & Sex

Type of Operation	5-8		9-11		12-14		All Ages		All Children
	Boys	Girls	Boys	Girls	Boys	Girls	Boys	Girls	
1. Husk beating	-	12	2	15	-	31	2	58	60
2. Ratt rotating	8	21	14	17	12	50	34	88	122
3. Ratt rotating-cum-spinning					10	29	10	29	39
4. Ratt rotating-cum-husk beating	-	-	16	-	-	-	-	16	16
5. Fibre collection	-	-	2	-	9	1	11	1	12
6. Other operations	-	-	-	-	18	-	18	-	18
	8	33	18	48	49	111	75	192	267

Notes: (i) Except at the husk beating centre, children seem to combine husk beating with some other operation as e.g. ratt rotating.

(ii) Fibre collection is an operation by itself only at the husk beating centres.

(iii) In spinning households and ^{private} establishments, children seem often to combine fibre cleaning with ratt rotating.

and willowing the fibre, a task often combined with ratt rotating, is done by both boys and girls. But in the beating of husks one sees only girls, hardly ever a boy. Only two boys and 58 girls are employed in husk beating. However, while one sees girls of all ages, both boys, engaged in this operation are in the age group of 9 to 11. Since the collection of fibre from the various husk beaters is by itself a job at the husk beating yards, a number of boys were found working at the Kovalam husk beating centre. Those doing husk beating sit out under the open sky, but as close as possible to coconut trees to get some

shade from the sun, each with her own tools, a wooden plank and an assortment of mallets. Of the 13 boys working in the husk beating centre while there are two boys beating the husk eleven are engaged in transporting the fibre to the various households engaged in the spinning of coir fibre.

It is in the spinning households that there is considerable overlap in the kind of work done by the children of both the sexes. The same boy or girl may be engaged sometime in one operation and sometime in the other. However, as can be seen from the table, while both boys and girls combine ratt rotating with spinning, and this happens when they are in the age groups of 12 to 13, only girls between 9 and 11 combine ratt rotating with husk beating.

It should be added that while spinning households get large quantities of defibring done at the husk beating yards some husk beating gets done right in the yard of the house. Usually, the husks defibred at home are the ones allocated to the households from their cooperative. Though the Kaniyapuram Co-operative undertakes to have considerable quantities of retted husk defibred in its own yard, no child is engaged by it for this operation. On the other hand, in the Kaniyapuram private enterprise establishments, while no defibring is done on their spinning sites, it is farmed out by them to women and children who work in the retting yards of these establishments located near the backwaters. All the four private establishments surveyed had no complaint about supply of retted coconut husks acting as a bottleneck to their regular operations. The largest of these owned of a coconut estate.

VIII

Hours of work

The hours of work and the time schedule of the children seem to vary considerably according to the type of establishment and whether or not a child is combining school going with work.

In the Kovalam husk beating centre there are two distinct divisions. There are those who work full time from 8 in the morning till 4.30 in the afternoon. School going boys and girls come to work only on Sundays, other holidays and days they skip school, except that some boys living nearby come to the centre after school hours to help in the final collection of fibre from the husk beaters and thereby make a little money.

For the spinning households around Kovalam also the distinction between those who go to school and those who do not is useful. Children who go to school have to do their stint in the early hours of the day. They get up along with the adults at 4 a.m. and work till 8 a.m. Then they get ready for school. They put in another two hours of work after they come back from school.

Actually, this getting up before the crack of dawn has little to do with the children having to go to school. A household, which uses very largely its own family labour, has to allocate its time in such a way that they make maximum use of the day light. The household undertakes spinning from 4 a.m. to 9 a.m. Since the houses have no

electricity, they start work in the light of the hurricane lanterns or open-wick kerosine lamps. After a short break, defibring of husks is taken up and it goes on till about 3 p.m. Then the fibre has to be cleaned, willowed with hand and got ready for spinning the following morning.

Children returning from school help in cleaning and willowing the fibre. They are usually free by 6 p.m. after which they may bathe, say their prayers and do homework for school before taking dinner. These households call it a day rather early in the evening to be able to start their day before the crack of dawn.

Children on the whole, have very little time or energy to do their lessons at home. In fact, it is not certain that much gets done by way of learning even at school. The typical school has 100 to 120 children of different ages all seated in one big hall, but in different groups. Such a school serves, by and large, as a place to get away from home and play.

In Chirayinkil, the Kaniyapuram Co-operative observes regular working hours, starting at 8.30 a.m. and closing at 4.30 p.m. People take short breaks of a few minutes, duration after every couple of hours to take a sip of water or a snack which they carry from home. Therefore ordinarily it is difficult for children here to combine school going with work. But since the schools in Kaniyapuram work in two shifts, it is possible for households with children of different ages to make them combine work with school. Still such cases of children combining work with school are very few.

Also, in the four private enterprise establishments studied there are very few school going children. But the major reason is that they have to work very long hours, starting their day at 7.30 a.m. and winding it up only at 6 p.m. with a few short breaks in between which add up to 60 minutes in all. Both boys and girls seem to be considerably over worked.

IX

Other Working Conditions

The other conditions under which children work also seem to differ rather widely in the four types of establishments.

The husk beating centre in Kovalam seems to come out the worst in terms of both surroundings as well as facilities. Husk beating is done on a vast stretch of sandy land lying between the sea and the back waters but husk beaters are concentrated on the banks of the backwaters. The approach to the location is very easy but once one enters there, it is a different world. It is a world of dark, damp sand and backwaters turned almost black emitting unpleasant smell. All around, one sees mounds of pith which has collected over years of husk beating. Though the place abounds in coconut trees it is only when one is right there that one realises how little shade they really provide from the equatorial sun. Those who can afford 20 paise once a while put up a palm frond as a screen and work under its direct shade, rotating it every hour with the change in the direction of the sun. Every worker has to have her own palm frond.

While a worker can thus protect herself from the sun, there is no escape for the worker from the smell, dampness and dirt of the retted husk. Having been submerged in dirty brackish water for six months or so, when the husk is beaten with the mallet it lets out the smell and throws up the pith. The watery pith invariably splashes all over one's body and face though the husk is always squeezed before one starts beating it.

Though thousands of women work along this particular stretch practically no facilities whatsoever exist to meet even the basic requirements of people in the course of their work. Access to drinking water and wash room facilities are just non-existent. There are, however, a couple of tea shops within easy reach and vendors come round to sell some snacks all through the day.

In comparison, spinning households in Kovalam area appear to offer somewhat better environment for work. Firstly, the courtyards are kept neat and clean. Secondly there is always some shade provided for everyone. Thirdly, drinking water and washroom facilities are within easy reach.

Since children work in these households along with their own family members, the atmosphere tends to be very relaxed. The principal work which children do in these households is to rotate the wheel. The wheel is almost invariably kept in a small thatched shed to protect it from the sun. So the child operating the wheel is also protected. The two women feeding the fibre to the ratt have to walk backwards and forwards in the open from the wheel spindle to the other spindle.

Even though the working hours and timings observed in the households can, as stated above, be quite inconvenient and exhausting, there can be little doubt where a child, or even an adult, would choose to work if offered the choice between the husk beating centre and an average household establishment.

Still, it is the Kaniyapuram Co-operative which seems to provide a model environment for work. It has a large yard housing some seventy ratts, all kept in long rows of thatched shed. Children working on the wheels are fully protected from the sun. The whole yard is kept neat and clean. In one corner of the yard, there is a well one can go to for drinking water. Also, a few thatched toilets have been built in another corner.

Unlike the co-operative, the private enterprise establishments in Kaniyapuram do not bother to provide the basic facilities in their work yards even though their workers are required to stay much longer hours than in the co-operative.

X

Wage Rates

For all operations in the coir industry, workers get paid on piece rate basis. The piece rates, however, differ from area to area and also for the types of the establishment.

In the husk beating centre at Kovalam, the piece rate is the same regardless of the spinning establishment for which one may be defibring the husks. For defibring 100 husks (or 300 sections, as

each coconut husk is divided into three sections for easy handling) a worker uniformly gets paid six rupees (in 1972). Since children tend to defibre a smaller number than adults they make a smaller wage. Small children i.e., those between the ages of 5 to 8, can defibre only 25 sections on an average and make only Rs.0.50 in a day. Children between the ages of 9 to 11 tend to do 60 sections making Rs.1.20 every day and children between the ages of 12 to 13 seem to be able to defibre 125 sections and earn Rs.2.50 every day. Ordinarily, an adult is able to defibre 200 sections and earn Rs.4 every day.

Calculations get a little more complicated for headload transporting of cleaned fibre to the various spinning households. The payment is calculated according to the quantum of fibre as well as the distance covered. For a distance of one kilometre, the rate prevailing currently is 5 rupees for fibre extracted from 1000 husks. Usually, boys between the ages of 12 to 14 are involved in this operation. They get paid at the rate of 5 rupees for transporting 1000 husk-fibre. Also payment for this work is received by a boy only when he has completed that quantum of work. Usually this type of transportation has to be done only in the afternoons after the husk beaters have completed their defibering for the day. The boys undertaking this work usually combine it with school going. But they must transport all the fibre, that has been dehusked, the same day.

The payment for defibering is made around 4 p.m. in the evening every day. There is a leader, called kontrak, for every team of five

or six husk beaters. She takes charge of distributing the husks and making the payment for defibring. If a child is working by herself, the wages are paid directly to the child at the end of the day. However, since more than 80% of the children work side by side with their mothers, it is probably right to say that payments due to children are generally collected by their mothers.

The boys transporting fibre collect their wages directly from the spinning households every third or fourth day after they have transported 1000-husk fibre.

In the spinning households the question of daily wage payment really does not arise. The whole household works as a team. If the household is a member of a co-operative, it gets retted husks from the co-operative to be defibred and spun for payment. Nearly 75% of the spinning households in Neyyattinkara area surveyed are members of co-operatives, but co-operatives have not been supplying these households with retted husks in quantities adequate to keep them fully occupied. So they have to go to private businessmen for retted husks.

Whether it is the co-operatives or private business men for whom these households defibre, they work on the basis of a fee. Though the cooperatives pay distinctly better rates, they are supposed to enforce more severe standards of work. Also, the cooperatives settle their payments once a week, where as private businessmen settle the payments straight away. So there are households which inspite of their membership of a cooperative work almost entirely for private business men.

Neither the adults nor the children of a spinning household get paid individually. However if there are some adults and/or children from the neighbourhood working for a household, they have to be paid at the same piece rate as prevails in the neighbourhood.

Unlike the co-operatives studied in Neyyattinkara, the Kaniyapuram Co-operative has, as stated above, organised all the operations on a site of its own where people, adults and children, assemble to work. Only members of the cooperative and their children are eligible for work. However, since the co-operative is always short of husks, not all its members and their children get employment with the co-operative. Those who became members first get priority over others. Since out of some one thousand members of the co-operative only 350, comprising of 280 adults and seventy children, get work on the co-operative's work yard on any one day, the majority of the co-operative's membership enjoys little of its benefits.

The co-operative pays on piece rate basis. A team of two spinners and one wheel rotater, who is invariably a child, is currently paid Rs.17.55 to produce 128 ropes, with a total length of approximately 2560 metres. This amount is divided between the team members in such a way that the child rotating the wheel is entitled to one-fifth and the balance four-fifths are shared equally between the two adults. Since a team can easily produce the above quantity in a day, it is safe to say that while an adult working for the co-operative makes Rs.7 a day the child makes Rs.3.50. But the payment is made by the co-operative every week, not every day.

There are quite a few of private spinning establishments in Chirayinkil taluk. They are owned mostly by relatively well-to-do Muslims who do not have to depend much on outside sources for the supply of retted husks as they undertake retting of husks as well. So work opportunities are available with them practically throughout the year, except for about six to eight weeks of very heavy rains. These private spinning establishments differ from the spinning households in Neyattinkara in that the members of the owners household do not participate in work. They play only a supervisory cum-management role.

There is no uniformity in the piece rates which prevail among the private establishments though the more cautious ones would, when normally approached, claim to pay wages at the same rates as the co-operative. But it is an open secret that they don't. On an average, a team of three workers, two adults and one child, is required to turn in 125 ropes of the total length of 3500 metres to earn Rs.17.55 in a day. This means that if they turn in only 260 metres, as in the co-operative, they will get paid only Rs.13.84 which when divided among the team members would give the child Rs.2.25 and each adult Rs.5. per day.

Ordinarily the people working for these private establishments put in much longer hours so that at the end of the day their take home wage is as high as possible. While in the co-operative work stops every day at 4.30 in the afternoon. One notices private establishments continuing to work till sun set i.e. till after 6 p.m. Wage is paid

at the end of the day, usually to mothers if the child is accompanied by the mother or to the child itself if he or she comes by herself.

XI

Some General Observations

On the basis of the above study of the operations connected with the coir industry in a few villages of Kerala State, it would appear that the children are involved in this operation on a significant scale. According to the 1971 census, only 1.8% of the total number of workers in the State were children. However, in the coir industry the proportion of children appears to be distinctly higher.

It is possibly in wheel spinning that the proportion of children is the highest. It is invariably a child, usually a female child, who sits at the wheel of the ratt. The adults are invariably women. So depending on whether a ratt is two-spindled or three-spindled, the ratio of children to adults is either 1 to 2 or 1 to 3. Of course, all spinning of coir is not done with the help of the ratt. Almost as many persons, if not more, are believed to be engaged in the hand spinning of coir as in wheel spinning, with the help of ratt. Do as many children get involved in hand spinning as in wheel spinning? This is a question that this short study is unable to answer because in the villages surveyed no hand spinning was reported.

Then there are operations besides spinning in the coir industry. These are principally husk beating, fibre cleaning and processing of coir yarn, or rope. This study shows that in husk beating and fibre

cleaning children are involved in large numbers but in what proportion to the adults, and whether that proportion has been rising or declining over the years, it is difficult to say.

What can safely be generalized is that even in the two operations, wheel spinning and husk beating, while girls tend to outnumber boys in a big way, it is especially so with respect to husk beating which is possibly one of the messiest jobs.

Though quite a good proportion of children working in the coir industry combine work with school going - this is particularly so with children working for their own spinning households - it appears that dropping out of school takes place on a rather large scale. Girls, however, seems to stay on in school longer than boys.

In terms of working conditions too, the spinning households, however modest they are, seem to come out the best because on work sites away from the house even basic facilities are not always provided. The work site of the co-operative at Kaniyapuram was rather an exception that one does not generally come by. While the household also provides psychological support to children working side by side with their mothers and relatives in familiar and usually wholesome environment, the working hours observed in the spinning households seem to be the longest, longer than even the private establishments at Kaniyapuram where almost 50% more work has to be put in to earn the same wage that the co-operative in the same village offers.



Appendix

Selected Readings

- 1 Coir Industry: A Study of its structure and organisation with particular reference to employment in Kerala, M.V. Nair, Indian Institute of Management, Bangalore, 1977.
- 2 A Study of the Coir Industry in India, Problems and Prospects, Dr. M.V. Pylee, Coir Board, Cochin, 1976.
- 3 Report of the Study Group on Mechanisation in Coir Industry in Kerala, Government of Kerala, State Planning Board, Trivandrum, 1973.
- 4 Census of India, 1971, Kerala, Series 9, Part II-B(ii).
- 5 A Portrait of Population, Kerala, Census of India, 1971.
- 6 Coir Yarn: A study on different types of coir yarn produced in India, The Coir Board, Ernakulam, 1967.
- 7 Report on the Economic and Statistical Survey of Coir Industry, 1960, Coir Board, Ernakulam, 1963.