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IMPACT OF THE OCCUPATIONAL STRUCTURE  
ON THE ROLES AND STATUS OF WOMEN

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### Introduction

The purpose of this paper is to study the roles and the status of working women in Kerala, given their occupational structure. The study is based on three case studies done during the year 1976-77 in the districts of Trivandrum. These are based on the lives of women who are working in the various important occupational categories found in Kerala in general and Trivandrum in particular.

Historically, the occupational distribution of working women as well as men in Kerala has been somewhat different from the all-India distribution in that the two occupational categories, manufacturing and other services have accounted for much larger proportions of working women and men than in the country as a whole.<sup>1/</sup>

Table I will show how according to both the 1961 and 1971 Censuses, the proportion of women involved in work other than cultivation and agricultural labour is twice as high as that in the country as a whole. Table II sets out the occupational distribution of working women for India, Kerala State and Trivandrum district, into nine broad industrial categories on the lines of the Census.

Kerala has always offered its women scope to engage in such industries as coir, cashew and handloom. All these industries are not only highly labour intensive but also, if I am permitted to coin a phrase, quite female intensive due very largely to the type of skill required and the low level of wage offered for work in these industries. There is also a relatively greater concentration of women in other services in Kerala State compared to the country as a whole. It has something to do, partly at least, with the high female literacy in Kerala. As a result, women offer themselves in greater numbers for government services which, in recent years, have been the major source of additional employment in the State. Also, it may have something to do with the number of tea/coffee and eating establishments in Kerala. Though these are usually household establishments in which women of the household play a full role, it is not uncommon for a few women from the neighbourhood also to help and make a living. It might be worthwhile to mention in this connection that the pattern of rural settlement in Kerala is such where rural houses are not found in clusters but are spread out along the roads continuously for miles together. One could practically stop anywhere along a road and find a tea/coffee shop within yards.

It can be seen from Table II that not only is the distribution of working women quite different in Kerala from the all-India pattern but also the Trivandrum district pattern is even more sharply different than all-India pattern in this regard. Thus for the two Census years, 1961 and 1971, for which we have comparable data, we find that the proportion of working women engaged in the household industries and other manufacturing industries in Kerala has been greater than in the country as a whole. The Kerala figure has been about 3 times as high as the all-India figure. It is seen also that Kerala's proportion of working women

engaged in other services has been substantially above the all-India proportion. These very disparities are even sharper when we come to the Trivandrum district where the proportion of working women engaged in household industries, other manufacturing and other services is four to five times as high as the all-India proportion for each of these categories.

In terms of the composition of labour force in 1971, while 44.48 percent of those employed in household industries in Kerala are women, the proportion of woman agricultural labourers is only 37.37%. In other services, 29.27 per cent of those engaged in work were women and in manufacturing other than household industries the corresponding percentage is 25.09.

Table II also gives some idea of the change over time in the occupational distribution of working women. It can be seen that while between 1951 and 1961 the proportion of working women engaged in Kerala State as a whole in household industry and other manufacturing remained more or less the same, it declined substantially between 1961 and 1971. For Trivandrum district, however, the corresponding decline was much less. Regarding the proportion of working woman engaged in other services for the State of Kerala as a whole there was a 100% increase between 1951 and 1961 followed by a decline of 26% between 1961 and 1971. Again, the decline in the proportion of working women engaged in other services in Trivandrum district was far less. Thus household industries, manufacturing and other services have retained their importance as a major source of employment for working women in Trivandrum district in addition to agricultural labour.

Though the occupational distribution in Kerala in general, and Trivandrum in particular, does not seem to have undergone any major shift in the past twenty years, it does present quite a diversified pattern particularly in terms of the importance of the industrial sector. Does this confer any benefit on working women? Does it affect their role and status? To answer these questions, I have relied on the three case studies that I have undertaken, but not yet completed, of working women in Trivandrum district. One of them is an agricultural labourer, one is a construction worker and one is a brick worker. I have plans to take up the study of a coir worker and a fish vendor.

My agricultural worker comes from one of the two major scheduled castes in Kerala. My construction worker started as a weaver (i.e., as one engaged in household industry) in her own home but she is no longer engaged in weaving; she now works for construction as a head load porter. Brick making and baking is regarded as a manufacturing activity other than household industry for purposes of census classification. But my brick worker is really a head load porter of bricks. So apart from the fact that my case studies are chosen somewhat arbitrarily on the basis of the cooperation I could get from them in my investigations, and not on any sampling basis, they can be said to be quite representative of the situation in this State.

## II

Narayani is a Pulaya women, who works as an agricultural labourer. She lives with her husband, Venny, in a very small thatched hut built unauthorised on government land. Theirs is possibly the humblest cottage in a squatter colony. They have five children, of whom three are boys and two girls. The eldest is a boy of 16 and the youngest is also a boy of three.

Since agricultural operations are seasonal and not enough to keep her occupied throughout the year, Marayani works as a construction worker also. Though she is always moving in and out of agricultural labour depending on the availability of work, she considers herself, first and foremost, an agricultural labourer. Marayani's husband too is Pulaya by caste, but Christian by religion and works as a head load worker for the trucks that transport granite stones. His job is to go with a truck to the quarries, load it there and then accompany the truck to unload it at various construction sites. But he does not get work regularly these days. Venny had hurt himself some one year back while unloading stones and had not only to be hospitalised for some time but was also invalid for over six months. Even afterwards he was able to go to work only off and on. It was then that the family was in real distress and had to mortgage its ration card for a sum of Rs.130. They have not been able to get back the ration card for almost a year now.

Though Venny stays home very often all the housekeeping tasks are clearly typed feminine, and fall on either Marayani or her daughter Shakuntala, who is 14 years old. In the morning before going to work, Marayani has to cart water home and clean the house. In the evening, she does the grocery shopping, washes her own and her family's clothes and cooks the main family meal for the family thereafter. All the remaining household chores have to be done by Shakuntala who was taken out of school when one of Marayani's sons fell seriously ill and had to be hospitalised. She was never sent to school because there was so much to do at home. Even the sixteen year old son, refuses to go to school, and has no work either but he is of no help to the mother or sister in the house.

Narayani buys her breakfast and lunch out when she is out at work. These and the betelnuts she is addicted to cost her at least 2 rupees. With the balance of her wage, which is now 7 rupees a day, she buys all the provisions necessary to cook the evening meal for her. The children have to make do with the left over from the evening meal for the morning breakfast. If there is some rice left at home, Shakuntala cooks it for lunch but the family's real meal is in the evening.

Narayani's status in her neighbourhood is low already because she is a Pulaya and belongs to the traditional low caste of the State. Then she has to go out and work and that too in an occupation which only the really down and out are prepared to take up. Indeed, agricultural labour is a traditionally low caste female occupation. Further, she has a very humble cottage and has mortgaged her ration card.

Thus even in this squatter locality where Narayani lives, though every household is poor by any standard, there are gradations; caste is one of the factors, an important one of course, determining a household's ranking. So caste itself pushes Narayani down. Add to it the fact that she works as an agricultural labourer and this pushes her down still further.

Even in this squatter locality, there are households where women do not go out for work. The moment the male breadwinner has a steady income, women are withdrawn from work. The very fact that a woman is working is a clear indication that the man of the house is not doing well. And if a family has had to borrow money on the strength of its ration card, it shows up the economic distress of the family.

Narayani carries still another stigma. Her husband, Venny, underwent vasectomy some years back but Narayani got two kids thereafter. To everyone in the neighbourhood feels that Narayani is carrying on with other men. The fact that Venny still lives with her is attributed to Narayani's black magic on him. Narayani is aware of the people's suspicions. She believes, however, that Venny was never operated upon, not aware that sometimes vasectomy can, and does go awry. All the same her name is in mud. Also she has too more mouths to feed.

On the paddy fields, Narayani is valued for her skill in transplanting which she has acquired over many generations. Her father and grandmother worked as agricultural labourers. But they were attached to certain fields and were therefore assured of work and a living. Narayani also works for certain farmers but does not feel secure that next year they will give her work. She gets some days of employment for weeding also. Then if manure has to be carted to the fields she gets employment. But she does not get employment for sowing, harvesting or threshing. Sowing and harvesting are done in this part of Trivandrum district entirely by men while threshing is done by the upper caste women including the Dalits.

In almost all the agricultural operations that Narayani is employed for, she usually works in a group with other women. In fact, these are predominantly female operations, with only a sprinkling of male participation. At the time of transplanting, for instance, there is one man engaged in spudding, to every five women engaged in transplanting. In the off season, however, when Narayani works on a construction site, she has to work in groups where men far outnumber women.



As far as Narayani is concerned, Venny is the head of the household. She is very proud that Venny has stuck to her for almost 20 years. Desertion by households is a common occurrence in the locality where Narayani lives. She talks about him in reverential terms and never mentions his real name. Also she has her dinner only after he comes home and has his first meal. If it is too late for him to go down the hill and bathe because of the steep terrain, Narayani will cart for him a couple of buckets of water from the nearby Municipal tap.

Narayani never questions the amount Venny brings back home on the day he gets work. Venny makes between 10 to 12 rupees on the day he works but never contributes more than 5 rupees to the house. Narayani brings back 5 out of 7 rupees to the house. When Suren, the 16 year old son, gets work, which is not very often, he spends <sup>the</sup> whole wage and gives nothing to his mother. But he expects to be fed at home. When Shakuntala, the 14 year old girl, does some piece time work and makes a couple of rupees, she gives the whole amount to her mother. "But isn't that the right thing to expect?" asks Narayani. The girl will go away if she is given the freedom to spend on her own. The boy will run away from the house, if the parents put pressure on him.

Narayani is concerned, all the same, that Suren is not looking for work seriously. He is virtually illiterate and will get only a headless worker's job but even that is not so easy to come by.

As for Shakuntala and Ramani, the two girls who have had virtually no schooling, Narayani is not worried. Like their mother, they will take to agricultural labour. Shakuntala is not yet grown up enough to start going with her mother to the fields. May be with the help of a brick worker in the neighbourhood Shakuntala will get inducted into carting and

bricks, a work which is somewhat less busy and much less seasonal though less paying than agricultural labour. The same goes for Parani. And, in time both will get married.

After Suresh, Parayani is concerned about the youngest two, Lobi, sons. She even plans to send them to school.

### III

Gyanamma is an Ezhava woman. (Ezhava caste is classified as a backward caste, as distinct from scheduled caste). She is around forty five years of age and works for a brick kiln. She lives with her fifty year old retired husband and two unmarried children in a cottage made of thatched roof and <sup>unbaked brick</sup> walls. The land where they are squatting is government land.

Gyanamma has worked for brick kilns since she was twelve. Her job has not changed one bit. When she was young she carted ten to twelve bricks at a time on her head. Gradually, she started carting twenty bricks at a time. The day she carted twenty bricks she had reached the peak of her career.

All of Gyanamma's grown up children, sons and daughters, married or not are now working for brick kilns. While her two grown up sons have become Mistris, her three daughters, including Girija, the 16 year old unmarried daughter, cart bricks on their head for a living. Because of the low wages of 65 to 80 paise for carting 100 bricks the daily wage for carting bricks works out to between Rs.4 and 4.50, as against the prevailing female wage in construction of Rs.7.00 a day.

Children get involved in work quite early. This has been the pattern for the last three generations. Schooling in Kerala is not only free it also carries the attraction of a free mid-day meal at the primary

stage. Still many families engaged in porting bricks for the kilns cannot afford to keep their children at school because even half a rupee that a child might earn makes a difference.

Ordinarily five or six women, do the carting of bricks from the fields to the kiln in a group. They attach themselves to a particular kiln and do all the carting work. Practically all the men working for kilns are supposed to possess a certain amount of skill. They get better wages therefore. Gyanamma is possibly the oldest, and the senior-most, of men and women working for her kiln. Sometimes, she even helps men in their work while stacking the kiln before they are fired for baking. But she always gets the same lower female wage .

Gyanamma and the other women working for the kilns have never questioned their lot. They seem convinced that they cannot do men's jobs. They have never complained that their work is as, if not more, physically arduous as the job jobs of stacking bricks which men do at a higher wage.

In her house, Gyanamma does all the housework with the help from her daughter, Girija. Together they clean, cook and do the shopping. Gyanamma's husband, Krishnan, who has retired from work as a boatman is now virtually supported by his wife, looks after two goats and does odd jobs and ends around the house but is of no help in the strenuous daily chores of the house.

Gyanamma has worked hard all her life to raise the family. Even when Krishnan was working, his contribution to the family's daily budget was intermittent and marginal. The family always depended upon Gyanamma's regular, though small, earnings and the earnings of the sons and daughters so long as they did not get married. But, Krishnan was, and is, the head of the household and has a voice when all important decisions have to be taken.

Vijayamma, a forty year old Ezhava women, earns her livelihood by working principally for the construction industry. Vijayamma has separated <sup>and lives</sup> from her husband/with her three children, a seventeen year old son and two daughters, one fourteen and the other six year old. Vijayamma has been on her own for the last six years. Her husband has since re-married.

Vijayamma's story of how she left her husband is straightforward. She never really stayed with him except for the first two years or so, after marriage. The husband was never interested in her, but in her parents' property, the little land her mother had in her name. So the last time she came away from him, she decided never again to go back to him, however difficult it may be to explain away the fact of being without her husband. <sup>she</sup> Hasn't <sup>she</sup> thought of another husband? No, Vijayamma feels the children will suffer as a result and her son is grown up enough to protect her.

Vijayamma's parents were weavers and she too grew up as a weaver in her own household. Even before she got married, the going was not good in weaving, because of the slump in the handloom industry. Vijayamma's husband was a daily wage labourer however. After their first child, Vijayamma too started working as a coolie for the dam th t was coming up near her husband's house. Later on, she started working on construction sites.

Her job is to cart granite stones on her head. A man would load a stone weighing approximately around 40 to 50 kilos on her head and she would cart it to the right place and unload it herself. When she is not carting granite stones, she is carting bricks, sand, cement bags, or concrete mix. For almost twenty years now, she has been doing the same thing.

Several of the men who have worked with her have become masons. But no woman has ever become a mason. Women have to go on doing the physically exhausting job of carting head loads the whole day long, rain or shine, from the day they enter the labour force till the day age forces them out, without any protection against accident. Not that men do not do carting of head loads in construction industry but some day some can graduate to a better paid and less exhausting job in the same industry. Not women.

Vijayamma is not the least worried about why she has not become a mason after 20 years. She is surprised that a question like this is at all posed. Her main worry is that she should keep her job. The job next day is assured only if the mason says so. There are two or three women seeking work for everyone that is in job. Also, a sort of premium is placed in industry on youth. Young women are preferred because they have better stamina to do this type of work. Also, men prefer younger women to work with them. They can not only do the job better but there is scope for some slight romance. Usually, where both husband and wife are working for construction they do not work on the same site. Vijayamma, for instance, never worked on the same site with her husband even when they were working for the same project.

Vijayamma's grown up son, Vijayan, has been to high school but he dropped out in the last one year. He has already started working but the only job he can get is of a coolie in the construction industry.

According to Vijayamma, women who work for construction industry have a thick skin. Whether they are good or bad, their morals are suspect in the eyes of the society they live in. Their self evaluation is also affected because of the servile attitude they have to take before men they work

On the domestic front, being a single woman now makes life quite hard for Vijayamma. To have been deserted by one's husband carries a stigma, though the fact that she has a son who is almost major makes up for that considerably. In fact, most people in the locality believe that Vijayamma is a widow and being a widow at her age is not so bad. Though she herself is illiterate, Vijayan, her son has had 8-9 years of schooling and is now always on the look out for work. He makes some money and dutifully gives most of it to his mother. Vijayamma is proud no end of this. Her fourteen year old daughter, Nirmala, was withdrawn from school to run the house after Vijayamma got her last child, Jayanthi, who too though now six years old has not yet been put in school. Nirmala helps her mother with the domestic chores and looks after her little sister when the mother is out at work.

Vijayamma is a very concerned mother but while her concern is that Vijayan should somehow make the grade for a regular factory hand, her concern with respect to Nirmala is that she should not mix with boys and girls in the locality that she does not regard of good character. Vijayamma hopes that Nirmala won't have to go out for work, at least not till she is married off.

Though absolutely illiterate, Vijayamma is easily the brightest not only of my case studies, but also of the 40 odd housewives in her locality. Even when her parents were better off, they sent her brothers to school, but not Vijayamma. In fact, after Vijayamma started working, she herself helped her younger brother through not only school but also the commerce college. Vijayamma has never regretted the fact that she was never sent to school. Indeed, she does not think much of sending girls to school. On the other hand, she does feel bad that Vijayan dropped out of school. She did dream that he would go to college and, like his uncle, get a good job so that she won't have to worry about her old age.

For Nirmala and Jayanthi, the mother thinks quite differently. Nirmala has just come of age. Before that Vijayamma used to worry why her puberty was not coming on. Hereafter, Vijayamma will have other type of worries till Nirmala is married off, particularly because she does not think highly of the young boys in the neighbourhood.

## V

To knit together my three studies, for the purposes of this paper, let me start by underlining that all of these households belong not only to the what may broadly be called the low income group but also to the 4 or 5 deciles of our population living below the poverty line. The women of these households are engaged in manual work.

It can be seen that while two of them, the agricultural labourer and the brickworker are in the same occupation as their mothers, the third, the construction worker started off as a weaver, i.e., in skilled work, and had subsequently to move down to an unskilled job. It can be seen also that whatever be the occupation women are in, they have virtually no scope whatsoever of improving their grade. A brick worker never becomes a mason, nor does a construction worker if it is a woman. As for the agricultural labourer, she transplants and weeds all her life.

Women seem to take to wage labour because they are married to men who are in casual wage labour with no continuity in employment. When the husband is too old or sick to work or deserts the wife, naturally the dependence on the wife's wage becomes immensely greater than before.

Even when the husband is there and working, once women take to work and start earning, they seem to contribute a much larger proportion of their wage to the running of the home than their men.



Men tend to spend a larger proportion of their relatively higher wage on eating out.

While working women in the low income groups I am studying assume a major responsibility they have a low status among their friends and neighbours and with the men under whom they work. What is worse is that their own self evaluation is not very high either. They are still very male-dependent in their thinking.

The prospect for the female children in the households of the working women in my three case studies can be said to be not very encouraging either. Of the two daughters of the agricultural labourer, the elder one dropped out of school early and the younger one was never sent to school. Of the brick workers daughters none has been sent to school and of the construction workers two daughters, the elder one was withdrawn from school early and the younger one has not been sent to school. So even in a State such as Kerala which takes pride in not only having <sup>the</sup> highest literacy but also covering more than 100% of the children in the age group 5-7 through primary schools, female children of working women engaged in manual jobs seem to be left out.

Are male children in these households doing better? It would appear to be so. The construction worker's son had 8 to 9 years of schooling. The agricultural labourer's elder son dropped out of school much against the parents' wishes, but the parents hope to send the younger one to school when ~~they~~ <sup>he</sup> becomes five. The brick worker's sons never went to school but of the three sons two have already become masons for the brick kilns and the third is yet too young to take up even full time work.



Workwise, the prospect for the female children is that they will take to their mother's occupations. The grown up daughters of the brick worker are already fully occupied in the same work as their mother. The elder daughter of the agricultural labourer might soon start going out to the paddy fields with her mother. Even the construction worker is mentally unprepared to send her elder daughter to work on a construction site. 'Let her do it in her husband's house.'

### Conclusion

I cannot but conclude my paper on a rather sad note, that neither the women themselves who are engaged in manual work nor their daughters can, at the present moment look forward to a future that is somewhat better. The so-called progress in recent years has bypassed them.

We have seen no evidence of upward movement in the occupational distribution of working women, i.e., from unskilled occupations to skilled occupations, nor is there any evidence of movement to better paid jobs within the same occupation.

Being women, the role of working women continues to combine outside work with domestic duties and their status continues to be low not only in the society they live in but also in their own self estimation.

Much more sadly, the prospect for the younger female generation looks equally grim if not grimmer. They are likely to be almost as illeducated as their mothers and the struggle for existence for them is likely to be quite hard.

If this is the prospect in a State which is supposed to be far ahead of the rest of the country in social services, especially education including female education, what will it be like in the rest of India?

Table 1: Percentage Distribution of Working Women by Agricultural and other workers - Kerala, 1961 and 1971

	Cultivators		Agricultural labourers		Other workers	
	1961	1971	1961	1971	1961	1971
Trivandrum	14.96	2.06	13.12	27.26	71.92	70.66
Kerala	16.25	4.64	27.42	45.06	56.33	46.3
India	55.69	27.93	23.68	45.93	20.43	26.0

Source:- Census of India, 1971, Series 1, Paper I of 1971, Supplement, Provisional Population Totals, India, 1971.

Table II: Occupational distribution of working women at the all-India, Kerala State and Trivandrum district levels

Census Industrial category	1951			1961			1971		
	India	Kerala	Tri- vandrum	India	Kerala	Tri- vandrum	India	Kerala	Tri- vandrum
	I	II	III	I	II	III	I	II	III
I. Cultivators	45.4	17.0	N.A.	55.7	10.3	14.97	29.6	4.63	2.13
II. Agricultural labourers	31.4	32.3	-do-	23.9	27.4	13.12	50.4	49.06	21.17
III. Livestock, fishing, plantation etc.	3.4	7.5	-do-	2.0	5.3	1.16	2.5	5.39	1.61
IV. Mining and quarrying	-	-	-do-	-	-	-	0.4	0.16	0.65
V. a) Household industry	6.9	27.0	-do-	9.2	17.82	26.61	4.3	8.14	10.1
b) Manufacturing other than household industry	-	-	-	-	8.10	9.22	2.8	12.30	2.13
VI. Construction	0.7	0.3	-do-	0.4	0.2	0.11	0.6	0.3	0.1
VII. Trade and commerce	2.9	2.1	-do-	1.4	1.4	5.71	1.8	2.0	2.1
VIII. Transport, storage and communications	0.3	6.7	-do-	0.3	0.4	0.93	0.5	1.0	1.1
IX. Other Services	9.0	13.1	-do-	7.3	23.1	23.17	7.1	17.01	1.7

Source: Census of India, paper no.1 of 1962 and Trivandrum District Census Handbook, 1961 and 1971.

Notes and References

- 1/ The Cochin Census for 1911 led to the following observations to make on this subject:

"This comparative preponderance of industrial population in these two States (Travancore and Cochin) is due not to the infertility of the soil or its unsuitability to agriculture but to certain natural advantages possessed by them which have directed a larger proportion of people than in most other parts of India to industrial occupations. Among these may be mentioned the existence of a large extent of backwaters and canals teeming with fish life and providing occupation to a large number of fishermen, fish-curers and dealers, and boat and boatmen; of valuable forests covering nearly one-half of the States and providing employment to numbers of wood-cutters, sawers, carpenters and collectors of forest produce; and of the facilities for the cultivation of coconut palm, the raw produce of which affords scope for important and extensive industries, such as toddy drawing, jaggery making, and coconut oil pressing, coir making etc...."

(See Census of Cochin, 1911, Vol. XVIII, Part I, Report p.81.)

- 2/ It is interesting to note in this connection that the catering industry is found most widespread in Kerala, as compared to the whole country, according to the 1961 Census. There were in 1961 about 3.8 hotels, rest houses, restaurants, sweetmeat shops, eating places etc. for every 1,000 persons in Kerala. The corresponding figure for the whole of India was 0.9. Out of every 1,000 occupied "Census houses" in Kerala, in about 21 were found hotels, rest houses, restaurants, sweetmeat shops, eating places etc. The corresponding figure for the whole country was 4. Indeed about one-sixth of all hotels, restaurants, etc., in the whole country are located in Kerala alone.

(See: B.E.Kale, "Working Population of Kerala" in Population Growth in Kerala, Demographic Research Centre, Bureau of Economics and Statistics, 1965, p.280.

- 3/ This may give the impression that Kerala is ahead of India in economic progress. But this is not true. The per capita availability of land in the State is so low that agriculture cannot support more than it does at present. There is considerable underemployment in the agricultural sector. The population reported as industrial is occupied mostly in cottage and small industries in which capital investment per worker and productivity are very low. Even those employed in the factory units are engaged in less productive agro-based industries like cashew, coir, etc.

(See K.Narayanan Nair, "Influence of the Population of Kerala on Its Economic Development", in Population Growth in Kerala, Demographic Research Centre, Bureau of Economics and Statistics, 1965, p.206.

- 4/ A Portrait of Population, Kerala, Census of India, 1971, p.150.

- 5/ In Kerala enrollment in classes I-V as a percentage of the population in the age group 6-11 was 119 as compared to the corresponding all-India figure of 78.

(See: Poverty, Unemployment and Development Policies, A Case Study of