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PROFILE OF A BRICK WORKER

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### Introduction

Gyanamma is a forty five year old Ezhava brick worker. She lives in a squatter settlement about two kilometres outside the city limit of Trivandrum, the capital city of Kerala State. She has six children, three boys and three girls. All her children are grown up; even her youngest, a boy, is about fourteen years of age. Among her six children, four are already married and three stay separately in their own homes. Her oldest son stays with his own family, a couple of miles away from where Gyanamma lives. But her two married daughters stay near her in the same settlement. So Gyanamma now lives with her fifty three year old husband Krishnan, her recently married son, Divakaran and his wife, and her teenage daughter and son, Girija and Anu.

### The House

Gyanamma lives in a medium sized hut built on a four cent piece of land. The hut has three rooms, one 10' by 10' and two about 5ft x 8ft. One of the latter two rooms is used as kitchen. The other room which is exactly the size of the kitchen is used by Divakaran and his wife. The walls are made of unburn bricks and the roof is thatched. There is a small platform built in front of her house where they can all sit down and relax in the evening. To one side of her kitchen, there is a small thatched enclosure built with palm fronds for the goats. Both of the other two rooms have separate entrances. One

enters the kitchen from the bigger room, which is also the living room. This room has only one small window overlooking the steep ridge.

Before this particular settlement of huts came into existence some ten years back, the site on which it is built was a waste land belonging to Government. It was a steep slope full of bushes and trees. Like the other first settlers, Gyanamma's husband and sons cleared the land and carved out a house site for themselves. The particular row of houses, of which Gyanamma's is one, is a narrow ribbon-like stretch of land on the top of the slope, barely wide enough for a hut to perch on. Actually, from Gyanamma's back window all that you see is a steep slope with huts precariously perched here and there, giving one the feeling that they might fall anytime the rain lashes out. However, the window also commands a fantastic distant view, looking on to a lake and a vast stretch of green.

Gyanamma had to move into this settlement ten years back after she was evicted from a similar settlement in an area which now comes within the city limits of Trivandrum. She and her children were working already for brick kilns in that vicinity and decided to move here as (a) this too was also government land and (b) it had a number of brick kilns close by. All Gyanamma's family work for the kilns except her husband. Her oldest son, however stayed behind near the old settlement to work for the old brick kiln where they all were working before. He was already married and wanted by them to set up a separate house with his wife.

The husband

Gyanamma is really the head of the household though her husband is very much there. Krishnan, Gyanamma's husband gave up work for good some 5 years back. He spends his time minding three goats (a mother and two kids) and looking after the house. When Krishnan retired, his union paid him some sort of gratuity. Out of that he had bought a female goat for Rs.150/-. This goat had two kids. After it went dry, Krishnan sold it and bought another goat ready to deliver within a month or so. Krishnan kept the kids, however, so that once they are grown up each of them will fetch a full price.

Krishnan frequently works as a baby sitter not only for his married daughters living in the same settlement but also for other Ezhava neighbours. Though there are people from all castes living in the settlement, the Ezhava families tend to stick together.

Krishnan once used to be a boatman transporting coconut husks, taking them through the backwaters, but now he feels too old and his eyesight is weak. Boatmen who transport coir husks have very often to spend nights on the boat when taking the husks to their proper destination for retting. It is a strenuous kind of work involving long hours but lasts only a few days a week.

Krishnan spends his time now taking the goats grazing in the ravine at the foot of the slope and collecting grass and leaves for them to eat. His other two companions during the day are a cat and a dog which they rear as household pets. The cat keeps track of the rats and the dog guards the house when Krishnan is out grazing the goats. Being a man, he does not, nor is he expected to, help Gyanamma with any of the female typed tasks like carrying water, sweeping the house or cooking, though he has plenty of time and even energy.

~~Krishnan depends on Gyanamma for his survival except that when his goat gave milk he sold it to the tea shop and bought with that money bidis to smoke and also tea to drink.~~

### Her Children

None of Gyanamma's six children went to school. She has trained them all as brick workers taking them along with her to work as they grew up. The brick industry is one where people of practically all-ages can work. In a way it is a temptation for parents to send children there to earn a living before it is good for them. Since the wages are paid according to the quantum of work done, all have a chance to perform upto their respective abilities.

She would have very much liked her youngest son Anu to go to school. Actually she could have spared him for when it was his turn, there were at least two or three earning members in the family. Earlier Gyanamma could not afford the luxury of sparing any of her other children for school. She needed all the help she could get to make both ends meet. Unfortunately, Anu was not at all interested in studies and preferred to come along with her to the brick site. Gyanamma's second son Divakaran has taught himself a little bit, and can sign his name and read newspaper head lines.

### Her morning routine

Gyanamma's main job every day is to transport sun-dried bricks to the kiln to be baked. Her work starts early in the morning at 7 0' clock. In order to present herself at the work site at that early hour she has to get up at five in the morning. She usually times this by the early morning plane that comes from Madras to

Trivandrum carrying one of the morning English Newspapers. She is the first one in the house to wake up and her first task is to go and fetch two pots of water. She has to get on to the main road and walk about a furlong to do this. For sometime, the water tap was disconnected as there were complaints against the squatter households bathing on the roadside. This is usually forbidden but it is seldom that municipal authorities go to the extent of cutting off the water supply. After the tap was disconnected, an unauthorised dent was made in the main pipe and water was collected with the help of small tin cans. Gyanamma, as also other women of the settlement, had to spend thrice the amount of time she normally spends and never had the satisfaction of getting clean drinking water. There was nothing that she or the other residents of the settlement could do. They have such a low status in the eyes of all and sundry that they had no voice, or courage to take up the issue. They are considered the poorest of the poor and had really no right to expect anything. Even allowing them to hold on to their shanties was itself a great favour. Anyway, Gyanamma managed to bring her morning supply of water. It took her thrice as long as before. Luckily, after about six months the tap was reinstated and her task has been made much easier.

Once she has brought the morning supply of water, she sweeps her front yard and kitchen and then goes down to the ravine for her toilet. The ravine has been divided into two parts, one used exclusively by women and the other by men. Thus both the sexes have some privacy and have no fear of running into each other. It is too early in the day for her to have a bath. Moreover she doesn't have time for it.

Anyway, once she comes back from work, she needs the bath badly as she is usually covered with mud and sweat. So she has only a small wash in the

morning near the banana tree at the back of her house. She combs her hair in front of a small mirror and goes to the tea shop in the settlement itself to have a cup of hot sugary tea mixed with milk. She prefers to have tea at the shop on the days she goes to work as she does not keep sugar or milk at home. Her youngest son, Anu loves to eat plain sugar ~~once he knows it is there~~ so that she can never find any for her tea.

#### Her Nature of work

Her work site is about 3 furlongs from the squatter. Though there are a couple of other brick kilns, she and her family have always worked for the kiln belonging to an ex-military sergeant, called Havildar, ever since she came to this settlement. She feels that it is better to work for the same brick kiln. Then she can not only be sure of work but also can expect to get a small loan in an hour of crisis. Also, her children are assured of employment, indeed it has become like a family venture.

If it is a clear day and the sun is bright, she is sure to get work. However, as a routine she will first present herself to the kiln owner and then start work. The place where the bricks are moulded and dried is usually a 10 minute walk from the brick kiln. Gyanamma has to go there to start her work. She usually has a small piece of torn towel twisted into a coil to rest a wooden plank, 2ft x 8 inches, on her head. The plank is used as a base on which the bricks can be placed. An adult woman carries 20 bricks at a time; she herself has to stack the load on the plank on her head while standing. The technique of doing it is first to stack the bricks two at a time, starting from the centre of the plank, and then to place one brick at a time, on either side of this upto the same height. Once twenty bricks are stacked in this fashion she starts walking with a swinging rhythm,

supporting the bricks with one hand and using the other hand for balance in the swinging motion. She has to walk fast, virtually run, in order to dispose of the load quickly. As she reaches the site of the brick kiln a man will be standing there to receive and stack the bricks she unloads. We cannot help her unload it as she will lose the balance. The danger is two-fold, the brick may fall and break, or she may sprain her neck in the process. Actually, the main brunt of this weight carrying, falls on the neck.

So she unloads the bricks herself, two at a time from the sides, handing them over to the man who is there to receive and stack them. Thus the whole operation of loading, transporting and unloading falls on her. The man helps her just at the final stages.

#### Daily wage

Whatever be the number of bricks she has carried which usually varies between five hundred to seven hundred per day, her wages are never more than five rupees. If she has carted more, it is because the distance she covers then is less. Her wage depends on both the distance she covers and the number of bricks she carts in the course of the day. Gyanamma has been doing this job for the last thirty years. Her job has remained the same. The day she was strong enough to cart twenty bricks she had reached the ceiling. Now she cannot aspire or hope towards any change in her work or her money. Occasionally, the men may ask her to join them in stacking bricks in the kiln for firing. This needs some extra skill, in the sense that two bricks are lightly tapped and thrown at a time a few feet to the next man who in turn throws them to another man till they reach their final destination for stacking. The brick kilns are about 20 ft. high and men usually form a conveyor belt to stack bricks. Doing this male work, however, does not bring Gyanamma



any extra remuneration except for the recognition it confers on her as an experienced hand.

#### Sex Typing of work

In the brick industry there is a very rigid compartmentalisation of work. Women are used here exclusively as head load carriers and nothing else. If they are not carting bricks they are carting clay, but they do not have access to any of the other jobs, such as moulding, shaping, stacking and arranging in the kiln. These are all exclusively male jobs. Moreover all these other jobs carry much higher wages, nearly twice as much as women get for the load carrying jobs they do. The work that men do is not only more interesting but also carries higher remuneration without being physically more exhausting. Compared to the woman brick worker, the woman construction worker, who too is usually confined to carrying loads from one place to another, makes eight rupees a day. Since at any one time no kiln employs more than twenty persons, the whole industry belongs to the unorganised sector. Brick baking is therefore considered a cottage industry. The workers, female as well as male, do not belong to any trade unions. But women are the more exploited ones. They hang on to it because of (a) the uncertainty of work opportunity elsewhere, say in construction and (b) the continuity brick work offers in terms of employment.

#### Operation in Brickmaking

Brick making usually takes place once the paddy has been harvested. It can take place only in fields where the soil is clayey. Trivandrum and Trichur Districts of Kerala are particularly suited for this but there are brick kilns all over the State. You find, in between the paddy fields, many patches where land is left fallow and brick making

~~takes place. It is common to lease out one's paddy land for brick making~~ once in every two/three years. Usually land is given on lease for six months ~~after harvesting.~~ The idea is to get thereby the level of the land lowered somewhat so that (a) it can be terraced and water can flow from other parts more easily and (b) the top soil is removed so that fresh manure can be added.

Once a brick maker has taken a piece of land on lease, the going rate around Trivandrum (in 1976-77) has been around Rs. 1300 for the entire six months for 20 cents of paddy land. Water is let into the patch to flood it for some days. It is only then that the soil can be dug up and kneaded into a clayey consistency. They are supposed to dig only 2 ft. deep in that patch of land all round. Dug thus, a twenty cent <sup>piece</sup> usually yields enough clay for 2,00,000 bricks. Usually the soil is dug up in patches of 4 ft. x 4 ft. x 2 ft. Two men dig out the mud with a shovel and knead it thoroughly with their feet. They know by experience when the soil has reached proper consistency for the purpose of moulding. If it is not raining, they make small clay heaps for the purpose of moulding very near the place where they are kneading.

Each clay mound has a height of 3 ft. and also a diameter of 3 ft. Once clay is heaped to the required height and diameter, the outer edges of the mound are nicely smoothed and coconut palm leaves are used to shield it from the sun. In this way, the clay loses some of its moisture without forming a crust or cracking and remains soft to the touch. The mound has to be left for drying for three days. After three days, the clay has just enough moisture to be shaped into a brick when pressed into the mould. The men who knead the clay are paid nine rupees a day. It is not a piece rate wage.

But the job is, no doubt, strenuous and messy because men have to be knee deep in slush and constantly stamping away for six hours with only small breaks.

Sometimes when it is raining, or threatens to rain, the kneaded mound has to be transferred to an elevated site near the kiln itself so that the rain won't harm it and the moulding can be done near the site. Usually this need arises during the monsoon season when brick moulding takes place intermittently. This task of transferring clay to the kiln site again is delegated to female workers. Moving a mound of clay carries a wage of twelve rupees irrespective of the distance and number of women working on the job.

A mound of clay yields 1300 bricks and at least two mounds will have to be transferred to keep the team of two men occupied in moulding for a day. Thus if five women workers transfer two mounds a day they together can make 24 rupees. When Gyanama has to cart clay she shares the work with her daughters and friends. The job is divided in such a way that one woman scoops out the mud with a ply plank and loads it on the other's heads. This is a messy job though slightly more paying but is only done during the rains. Brick kiln owners themselves usually avoid this. They do not find it always economical in comparison to transportation of bricks. Moreover, space around the kiln can be a major constraint to undertaking moulding of bricks there.

A normal size brick kiln around Trivandrum takes in around 75,000 at a time. One moulding team of three men consisting of a mistry and two helpers can turn out about 2600 bricks a day. Thus it takes roughly a month to feed the kiln which is usually fired once every month, except during the heavy rains.

Thus, with 3 men employed on moulding, two men in the field digging and kneading clay, 5 to 6 women carting bricks, and two men unloading and stacking bricks at the kiln, each kiln of an average size in Trivandrum district can be said to employ 12-13 persons every day. In the monsoon months, however, the firing does not take place every month. On an average, a kiln is fired ten times in a year. Naturally, therefore in the monsoon months the work, be it moulding transporting or staking, gets staggered.

#### Current Wage Differentials

The mistry in the moulding team gets the highest wage of Rs.12 a day; his two helpers come next with ten rupees a day. The kneading of the clay, though strenuous, does not carry high wages. The men engaged in kneading, as already stated, are paid Rs.9 per day. The men engaged in stacking bricks at the kiln are paid Rs.10 a day. As for the women who only cart bricks or clay and are paid on piece rate basis they never make more than Rs.5 a day. Compared to that, a woman construction worker gets Rs.7 a day.

Gyanamma's two sons have luckily graduated to the position of moulding assistants and get ten rupees a day. Her eldest son helps with moulding for a brick kiln that Gyanamma herself worked for several years back. Her three daughters, two married and one still unmarried, also work for the same kiln, but being women cannot aspire to do anything better than load carting. So while her sons make Rs.10 a day each, Gyanamma and her daughters make between Rs.4.50 and Rs.5.00 everyday they are in job.

#### Early Life

Gyanamma has virtually grown up around the brick kilns. Her parents died when she was very young and she was raised by her mother's sister who was also a brick worker. Her father was a landless labourer attached

to a big land lord and her mother eked out a livelihood as a vegetable vendor while she was a line. Even when Gyanamma was nine or ten years old she would often go to the paddy fields to cart a few extra bricks for her aunt. As was told earlier, brick carting is done by people of all ages. Young children carry just as much as their tender heads can hold and try to earn some money for their parents. Her aunt got Gyanamma married at the age of 16 to Krishnan, an Ezhava boatman from a village some 12 kilometres from Trivandrum. His job was to transport coconut husks through the backwaters. Gyanamma stayed home without working for only a year. The very next year her husband Krishnan got an offer to work as a coolie for the army. He went all the way to distant Assam and Gyanamma was left to fend for herself. So she started working for the brick kiln, the job she was familiar with, and came back from her husband's village <sup>to live</sup> near her aunt.

#### Krishnan's work

Traditionally, the Ezhava community has always been closely associated with the coconut and palm culture. They have not only been the traditional toddy tappers but are also connected with coir making, transporting of coconut husks, and generally anything to do with coconut use and cultivation. Krishnan, when he came back from his brief interlude with the army, went back to his old job as a boatman transporting coir husks through the back waters. <sup>But</sup> he himself never owned a boat. The coir husks were collected from different places and then loaded on to a country craft. A boat of this kind can carry about 75,000 husks. Krishnan used to ply the boat between Pachallur and Akulam, some 20 kms. apart. Usually, he worked in a team of three men. It took a long while to negotiate the boat with the help of a pole, as in some parts the back waters are not only not deep but also densely covered with water hyacinth, the African payal.

It took them 24 hours to reach the destination. Together, the men got 20 rupees for every trip, but their in-transit expenses were also quite high, being a strenuous job, lasting long hours, in damp surroundings, mostly on food and drink. The men who worked on this job were almost all given to liquor. Krishnan too spent off a good part of his earnings and by the time he would come home he could give Gyanamma hardly three to four rupees. This was just enough only to take care of feeding Krishnan for the rest of the week. The rest of the family had therefore to be provided out of whatever Gyanamma and her children earned from earting bricks.

### Bringing up Children

Gyanamma's earnings were so important to the family that she had to work till the last day of her several confinements. She delivered all her children with the help of mid-wife and her aunts. Gyanamma feels that she didn't have much of a problem working till the last day since her body and muscles were all supple. She remembers staying in the house after delivery for only a month and then getting back to work leaving the baby either at the neighbour's or with a relative. As her children grew up, she decided against sending them to school and started taking them with her for work. She felt that it was no use sending them to school just for a short while as they would anyway not get any better job with just a little bit of education.

### First Son

When her first son became a helper to a Mistry, Gyanamma got him married when she got an offer from one of her caste group. They got some 2 tolas (i.e. about 25 grams) of gold and some 300 rupees in dowry. This was the first time in her life she had some money to spend. Within a year the son and his new bride decided to set up a separate establishment. Anyway Gyanamma could not do anything about it.

### First Daughter

Two of her daughters, Swarni and Shakuntala were now going to work with her. Though Gyanamma had taken some dowry for her son's marriage, she had not, and could not, make any provision for her daughters' marriages. Gyanamma knew that no match could be arranged without exchange of dowry. She just waited and hoped for the best. She knew her daughters were good looking and something would turn up. Her only wish was that they should get married to Ezhava boys. Very soon, an Ezhava boy, Rajappan, fell for Swarni and she decided to go and stay with him. Rajappan, however, was only a casual labourer and was already a great drink addict. Gyanamma didn't like the match but had really nothing to say as she had no alternative to offer. Then one day, some two years after Swarni started living with him, Rajappan fell down while he was riding a rented cycle and broke his arm. He went to the nearby Medical College Hospital and got it fixed but somehow the fracture was not attended to properly and to this day he has the full use of only one hand. So he has been a drag on Swarni ever since. Quite often, however, he goes away from the house to stay for days on end with his own mother. But so far he has always come back. Swarni is happy whenever he comes back, because she feels it is better to have a man around the house than none. Thus Swarni had to take over the full responsibility of running the house pretty soon and now has two children, a son and a daughter, to look after as well.

When Gyanamma moved on to the present settlement 9 or 10 years back she asked her daughter, Swarni, also to move and be near her. Her son-in-law was already dependent and Swarni needed both the moral and physical support of her own family. They cleared another two cents of land towards the foot of the same hill for a hut and moved Swarni and her family there.

~~Within a year of the move, Rajappan decided to undergo vasectomy. Swarni needed money to re-do her roof which wasn't good. The roof's need to be re-done every two years, at least. Re-doing the roof can be a major expense for the low income household. The choice before Swarni and Rajappan to get money for re-doing the roof was between "mortgaging" the ration card of Rajappan going to the family planning clinic where he would get paid for undergoing vasectomy. Since they already had two children, one son and a daughter, Rajappan decided to undergo vasectomy. Two years later, Swarni also get herself sterilised when they were again in a similar situation. Unfortunately, very soon after her s operation their first son died of jaundice. Now they have only one daughter, Usha. She has studied upto the 5th class, and is the first literate person in Gyanamma's family. But Usha has been stopped already from going to school. Instead, she is going to work with her mother to supplement the family income.~~

Recently, when the house roof gave away again during the rains, Swarni's family had to come to her rescuer. Gyanamma took her into her house and gave her the goat shed to cook in. Swarni cooked separately for herself and her daughter in the goat shed but slept with her parents in their house. Rajappan went away to his mother. Eventually, when they can collect some money to buy the materials, Swarni's father and second brother will rebuild her roof. Rajappan will probably turn up to help in manual work. Thus Gyanamma has to be always prepared to take in her daughter.

#### Second daughter

Gyanamma's second daughter, Shakuntala, has been a great help <sup>all</sup> to her. She would go with her mother to the brick kiln and her wages went to the family. Actually, it was with the help of Shakuntala's



and Divakaran's wages that Gyanamma could build all her house with unburnt bricks and even put in doors and windows. But this was to last only for a short time. Shakuntala fell in love with a Pulaya, low caste boy, Suren. His family also lived in the same settlement. Gyanamma knew of the budding romance but was hoping that it would eventually fade out. He was younger than Shakuntala by about five years, with no father or elder brother to support the family. His mother was a poor agricultural labourer with three sons, including Suren, to look after. The other people in the colony felt however, that Gyanamma was encouraging the match because she wanted her daughter to get married without any dowry. Anyway, one fine day, Shakuntala decided to elope with the boy. Gyanamma searched for her daughter and found out where she was and brought her back. Now Shakuntala and her husband live in the same settlement very close to Gyanamma. When she had a baby boy, she left him every morning in Gyanamma's house to be looked after by Krishnan while she was at work. Gyanamma had a small cloth cradle for the child in her living room. Indeed, the child is really a part of Gyanamma's house.

Though Suren finds work on and off and brings in some money but his responsibility is great as his mother doesn't make much money. He has two younger brothers who are going to school. There was a short period when no one in Suren's house had work except Shakuntala who was going to the brick kiln. Shakuntala resents the sharing of her wages with Suren's family and has started cooking separately in the same hut. Suren's mother was not prepared to *share with her daughter-in-law* the ration settlement. Then the roof of their hut collapsed and the two separated families had to live with some make shift shelter.

Unlike Swarni, Shakuntala does not have access to her mother's house in such circumstances, for she is married below caste. What turn the future events will take is anybody's guess. In her heart, Gyanamma knows that Shakuntala too is not well settled and will have to fend for herself.

### Second Son

All along, the person who was until very recently a real help to Gyanamma was Divakaran, her second son. He not only earned ten rupees a day but contributed the major part of his earnings to the family. He had no vices and Gyanamma liked having him work in the same kiln. This meant a lot of respect for her and the other workers were scared of treating her roughly lest Divakaran pick a quarrel with them.

Though Divakaran was only twenty-two years old, a good offer came for his marriage. The girl's party was willing to give a dowry of 1000 rupees and two tolas of gold. Also, the girl would have in her name some 25 cents of garden land i.e. land on which you can grow tapioca and coconut but not paddy, in a village called Attapara, only 10 kilometres away from Trivandrum. The girl was literate, having attended school for five years, and good looking. Krishnan, Gyanamma and the rest of the family <sup>went</sup> with Divakaran to visit the girl's family and the marriage was agreed upon.

The date was to be fixed for the earliest most auspicious period for marriages. Gyanamma and Krishnan were very excited about the offer of dowry and did not want to take any chances lest Divakaran might decide to marry of his own accord. Their neighbourhood was a bad place, for this sort of things could happen any day. Not only would she have to put up with any sort of girl but also lose all chance of a dowry. In the settlement, though common law marriages were

severely looked down upon, they were the order of the day. Both Swarni and Shakuntala had a common law marriage. Why expose Divakaran to the same danger? A dowry marriage was a real prestigious affair.

Gyanamma's first job was to go and get a horoscope cast for her son. They got hold of an Ezhava pundit and paid him fourteen rupees to cast Divakaran's horoscope. The pundit also matched the horoscope with the girl's and found that the earliest most auspicious day for marriage was the day of Onam in 1976. They had to pay another five rupees for this. After all, this was a proper marriage, and this would give the family a lot of prestige in the squatter settlement; hence these expenses had to be incurred.

In this particular case the girl's party was better placed than the boy's party since the girl's three brothers were masons, though she had lost her father.

Once the marriage arrangements were finalised, Divakaran collected the money from the girl's party in three instalments. With the first instalment of 300 rupees, Divakaran brought two nylon sarees, with blouses and petticoats to match, two lungis and two towels, all for the bride. He also bought a small box, the first of its kind in their home, to keep the clothes. Otherwise, they hung all their clothes on a clothes line tied to nails between two walls.

Divakaran bought for himself a lungi and two shirts. He still had to buy some new clothes for his parents, his unmarried sister and younger brother. So he bought these clothes from the same shop when he collected some more money from the girl's party. By the time everyone in the family had new clothes, he had spent 500 rupees.

Swarni, the eldest daughter went to the city market and did all the grocery and vegetable shopping. A nearby bakery and the squatter tea shop were asked to supply cakes, banana chips and coffee. Women from the neighbouring households were mobilised to help make idlies for the feast.

The marriage took place on the Onam day in a temple about 2 kilometres away. Divakaran went with his father and twentyone others, not counting his younger sister and brother, by bus to the temple. These twentyone others were mostly relatives from his father's and mother's side and their families. It also included their close friends and Bahava neighbours from the squatter settlement. Gyanamma herself and her married daughters were not supposed to go to the marriage party. So they stayed behind. The time chosen by their horoscope man was 2 o'clock in the afternoon. So the marriage party reached there a little before that. The girl's party was there already. The wedding ceremony took only fifteen minutes. Thereafter, a small fast was held at the temple itself by the girl's party. After that, the marriage party returned with the bride, Sujatha, in three taxi-loads to the squatter settlement.

Gyanamma was ready with her eldest daughter, Swarni, and her close friends to do arati and welcome the bride. A brass lamp, which was bought with the dowry money was lit. Shakuntala, however, had to be kept away even from the reception ceremony because she had married out of caste. She could join them later for the fest once the ceremonies were over.

As the guests arrived, every female guest admired the clothes and jewellery the bride wore. They were all so excited and happy. Gyanamma would repeatedly tell all the guests that now it is the turn of her son and daughter-in-law to look after her. She had become too old to work any more. This was her way of preparing them for the future when she would retire from work and depend on them. Divakaran would just smile and not say anything. She would also add that she had chosen the bride from a poor house so that she would be humble. Gyanamma knew very well that Sujatha's family was economically much better off than her own, but this was her way of keeping the daughter-in-law humble.

For a week after the wedding, the house was full of people, visiting and congratulating Gyanamma. Divakaran and Sujatha used the smaller of the two rooms in the house and the rest of the family shared the living room. No one from Gyanamma's house had gone to work. Anyway, the brick kiln itself was closed for more than a fortnight because of rains. Then Gyanamma got ill from over exhaustion. So Divakaran bought her a few aspirins. He knew that these relieve some pain but Gyanamma's body ached and the flu would not go. For nearly a fortnight the six people in the house were living on the left over dowry money. The married daughters and their children were also present most of the waking hours. Because of the heavy rains, Swarni's roof had given way and she along with her daughter had to be accommodated by Gyanamma. It was not for nothing, therefore, that Divakaran, the newly married son, was showing signs of irritation with the house and the people in it!

### Gyanamma's Illness

Gyanamma was aware of the growing tension in the house. She moved out the goats and gave the little 3 ft. by 4 ft. goat shed to Swarni to cook her food separately. Divakaran started going to work, but whatever he brought was not enough. He could not even take his bride to a movie. Day by day, he started giving less money to the family. Gyanamma too showed no signs of getting better. Things were going from bad to worse with her health so she went to the nearby Medical College Hospital. She had to take her ration card with her for identification and wait in a long queue. They finally examined her and gave her an injection and a prescription for medicines to buy. Gyanamma was not happy either with their treatment or with their handling of her case. So she did not buy the medicines and refused to go for further injections. Instead, she went to a nearby clinic run by a church school. She felt she got better attention there, but it did not really put her back on her feet. Finally, she went to the Government Ayurvedic Clinic and only then she started feeling better.

Gyanamma almost felt like giving up work altogether. She felt that the work at the kiln was too hard. It was hard work and her body ached for rest. She very much wanted to retire after the wedding. But when she saw the tension building up at home she thought it was better for her to go to work somehow. But even before Gyanamma could do this, Divakaran and Sujatha went away for a while to stay with Sujatha's family.

Divakaran wanted to have a look at the land which was in Sujatha's name. Sujatha was very happy to go back after a month and a half with her in-laws. Once Divakaran went, it took him a month to come back. He wanted to plant tapioca on Sujatha's land. Also, his mother-in-law's

roof needed replacing. So he pawned Sujatha's chain and bangle and got a loan of Rs.400 from the bank. He gave his mother-in-law Rs.150 to do the roofing and spent the rest on planting tapioca with the help of two other men.

In the meantime, the family at Gyanamma's house had to manage with only the intermittent wages of Girija, Gyanamma's unmarried daughter. That hastened Gyanamma's going back to work. She thought she could start by carting smaller loads of say 250 bricks at a time. Having mentally reconciled herself with the idea that she could not stop working, she soon started to feel better. Onam, 1977, is just round the corner and Gyanamma has been fully at work for almost a full year since Divakaran's marriage.

Divakaran and Sujatha came back and brought Sujatha's younger brother with them. Sujatha was now expecting a child. Still Divakaran was in no mood to contribute to the daily family pool of cash more than 3 or 4 rupees and there were constant arguments. Finally Gyanamma told Sujatha, in a huff, to cook separately if she wanted. That was what Sujatha and Divakaran wanted but had not been bold enough to suggest to her. They started using the goat shed as their kitchen. The news of separation of the kitchen spread like wild fire in the squatter settlement. The seeds for the eventual complete separation of Divakaran from his mother had been sown.

Luckily, the application with the Panchayat Office for the allotment of land on which she is squatting with her family was in Gyanamma's own name. If ever it is allotted, the land on which her house stands will therefore belong to her, and not to Divakaran, who must eventually move out.

Gyanamma knows she has nearly lost Divakaran and will soon lose Girija, her unmarried daughter, because she is bound to go off with some boy or other. She still has one more son to hold on to. She has gone back to work and has not given up hope that some day she can stop work and someone will look after her and her aging husband, Krishnan.

#### Krishnan's Goats

Krishnan too was so involved with the quarrels going on around in the house after Divakaran's wedding that one day he forgot to check on his pregnant goat at lunch time. He had taken her down the slope to graze early in the morning and had tied her near Swarni's house at the foothill of the ridge. He had tied the goat with just a two ply coir rope which it snapped and wandered around. It appears that it must have found a whole lot of tapioca peel and eaten some. But the tapioca peels are very dangerous and make the animals giddy. By evening the goat was ill and bleating in pain. When the message reached Gyanamma and Krishnan, they immediately rushed down to see what had gone wrong. Their first suspicion was foul play. Gyanamma even thought that Sujatha, her own new daughter-in-law, might have, herself or through some lady, done some black magic on the goat. Luckily the goat still had some small pieces of tapioca skin in its mouth and that dispelled all such doubts. They immediately tried to get some local herb medicines and set for the squatter washer woman to remove any possible spell. Every neighbour who came to watch had his or her own remedy to recommend. Gyanamma tried all this and finally ended up spending some 3 Rs. desperately trying to save the animal. But it was too late. Gyanamma could not bear it any longer and left Krishnan to handle the corpse.



Krishnan, naturally, wanted to recover as much money as possible. He called his two Paraiyah neighbours, of whom one was a professional butcher to cut up the goat. They wanted in return not only the usual one kilo of meat but also the goat skin, knowing that it was too late in the evening and Krishnan could not get anyone else to do it for him at that hour. The goat skin, if properly reclaimed, usually fetches around 20 rupees. So Krishnan refused to part with it. The butcher still cut up the goat but cut up the skin so very badly that Krishnan could not sell it for a penny. He could only sell the goat meat to the neighbours but that too at half the market price and recover thereby around 20 rupees.

This was a major set back for Gyanamma and as well as Krishnan. As was mentioned earlier, Krishnan had bought the goat for Rs.150. It was pregnant already when he bought it and was now due to deliver any day. Krishnan was hoping that it would not only start giving milk soon but also deliver couple of kids that he could bring up. Already, he was having two young goats from his earlier goat. Eventually he hoped to buy a cow for the household. Only two other households in this settlement of forty two have cows. All his plans were thus dashed. Gyanamma was sad too not only because the goat was so close to Krishnan's heart but also because it possibly made Krishnan feel useful. Krishnan was able to buy his bidis and an occasional cup of tea at the nearby shop with the money he made from the goat's milk. Now Krishnan was left with only two young goats to tend. If nothing happens to them, he should be able to sell them for Rs.150 each in about a year. But that sum will be enough to buy a cow for his family.

With Sujatha cooking separately and Krishnan's goat dead, the year beginning with Onam of 1976 did not turn out to be as hopeful as Gyanamma expected. In fact, by the middle of the year the prospect looked grimmer particularly when Gyanamma allowed herself to think of her old age, of the days, when she wont be able to go to work any longer and when both Krishnan and herself will have to depend on someone else completely for their maintenance.

### Propitiating the Devi

It was the month of March and the nearby Devi temple was being got ready for its annual celebrations which are timed more or less, with the harvesting of winter (Mundakan) paddy crop. Gyanamma's third son, Anu, wanted to join other children of his age group, 11 to 15 who roll, on the appointed day, lying down going round the temple diety. (This particular ceremony is called Ural). To do so, Anu would have to prepare himself by being on a vegetarian diet for a whole week. Also he was not to eat during that week any food cooked the previous day. Obviously, this meant that he could not eat for breakfast left over rice from the previous night. Gyanamma would have to either cook fresh food or give him money to buy his breakfast. Also Gyanamma must cook a proper vegetarian meal for him in the evening. Ordinarily, she cooked some fish which they all ate with rice and tapioca. Buying vegetables would mean another extra expense. Then a new towel would have to be bought for him. All told, it would cost her at least 25 rupees<sup>in the sweet rice (Pongal)</sup>/excluding/offering at the temple.

On the appointed day, Anu had to fast and go without food altogether from the morning onward. He was taken to the temple in the afternoon. He had to have a new towel to wrap himself after a dip in the pond

near the temple. The priest took all the boys in a group to the pond; after they had their dip each wrapped around himself the new towel. Then they were brought ceremoniously with beating of drums and tom toms. Once the boys reached the temple entrance they were asked to lie flat on the stomach and start rolling around the diety to the accompaniment of the drums. Krishnan and Divakaran helped Anu roll round the temple / soon he and was all others in his group/in a trance. This took about an hour. Rolling round and round on a completely empty stomach with the dinning sound of the drums, even a well bodied adult would feel dizzy very soon.

Gyanamma had taken a vow to cook sweet rice and offer it to the diety. So she was in the temple yard cooking sweet rice in a new mud pot in the company of 200 other women all sitting next to each other in a row, each with her own stove and cooking ingredients. Once the Ezhava temple priest came and sprinkled the holywater on her sweet rice Gyanamma left a portion for the temple and took the rest home to share with Anu and the family. Krishnan and Divakaran walked Anu back home and gave him a cold water bath and coconut water to drink.

Gyanamma prayed before the Devi for the early allotment of land on which she was squatting. She felt mentally much better thereafter and more reconciled to the family situation as it had evolved during the year. She felt the extra money she now spent on Anu was well worth it.

On the eve of Onam 1977, Gyanamma's house has two kitchens, one Sujatha's who now has a two-month old baby girl, and the other Gyanamma's own. Sujatha has not gone out for work ever since she was married. Will Divakaran ask, or let, her go out for work?

Gyanamma doesn't know. Why should she bother now? Divakaran doesn't help his mother any longer. In fact, the earlier he puts up his own separate cottage, the better it will be for Gyanamma. She will have more room for herself and her daughters.