

### **Abstract**

Kerala State, India has carried out a major land reform. Data collected during eight months of field research in 1986-87 in a Kerala village show how employment opportunities have changed for women in different castes as a result of the land reform. The effects of other reforms on women's occupational choices are also discussed.

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## **Land Reform and Women's Work in a Kerala Village**

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## LAND REFORM AND WOMEN'S WORK IN A KERALA VILLAGE

### Introduction

A number of studies demonstrate that development strategies emphasizing increased agricultural production can have a negative impact on women's employment (Charlton 1984; ISIS 1984; Mukhopadhyay 1984; Nelson 1979; Rogers 1980; Sen and Grown 1987). In India evidence suggests that the Green Revolution approach to development leads to involuntary female unemployment (Bhalla 1989; Chen 1989; Duvvury 1989; Nayyar 1987; Sharma 1982).

Kerala State, located in the extreme southwest of India, has carried out a far-reaching land reform, the most substantial in Asia outside of the socialist countries. The aim has been to reduce inequality by eradicating the landlord-tenant relationship, while also providing a range of social services to the general population (Franke and Chasin 1989). What impact does a development strategy based on improving the quality of life through radical reforms have on women's occupational choices? In this paper, data from the study of Nadur village in central Kerala will be used to examine the relationship between land reform and occupational choices for women.

### The Kerala Land Reform

Beginning in the 19th century, the region of India that became Kerala in 1956 was the scene of mass movements which first sought changes in caste relationships. As proletarianization increased, as the Indian independence movement developed, and as the revolution seized power in the Soviet Union, Kerala's social movements became more radical. In 1939, militants formed the Kerala branch of the Communist Party, and in 1957 the party was elected to office. Land reform had been a major campaign issue, and a program to implement this demand was begun. Conflicts developed with landlords and with the central government in New Delhi. An alliance of opposition parties took power from the Communists in 1959, but agitation for reform continued and a left coalition, led by the Communist Party of India, Marxist (following the 1964 split in the CPI), regained power in 1967. Land reform policies continued to be formulated and a comprehensive bill was enacted in 1969 (Sathyamurthy 1985:102-140; Herring 1983:153-216).

Until the passage of the 1969 land reform law, rice (paddy) land and house compound in Nadur belonged almost exclusively to the Nambudiris, the highest caste in Kerala. Under the land reform, tenant farmers received paddy land while all households received house compound land (paramba), on which valuable trees including coconuts, mangoes, areca nut, and teak, grow. About 140 acres of land were redistributed among the households in our sample, with about one-third being paddy land. The current land holdings of households are mainly a result of this redistribution process, but there has also been some buying and selling of land within the village.

### Site Selection

No single village can represent all Kerala, a region made up of three environmentally and historically different zones: Travancore, Cochin, and Malabar. Nadur, however, in central Kerala has many typical features of the state's history and ecology. In addition, there have been fewer changes in this village than in many others in Kerala, thus the effects of the land reform can be more clearly seen.

Industrial development has not occurred in the Nadur region; therefore, occupational changes for women in Nadur cannot be explained as a result of industrialization. In many other communities, men have migrated to the Gulf states where they find work at relatively high pay and send money home to their families. This has not been the case in Nadur, where village life has not been much changed by large remittances from the Middle East. (On some of the effects of this migration, see Gulati 1983.) Another important reason we chose this village was that it had been studied previously by anthropologist Joan Mencher who made her data available to us.

### Methods of Research and Analysis

My study of women's occupations was part of a larger project analyzing the effects of the Kerala reforms on the quality of life in Nadur. Joan Mencher collected her data in 1971, just as these policies were about to be implemented. Her survey provides a baseline from which to analyze the consequences of these reforms, sixteen years later.

We conducted the field work for our project from November 1986 to July 1987. The principal research instrument was the household survey described below. We surveyed a total of 170 households, chosen from a census block of the 356 households in Mencher's 1971 study. Since that survey was a block rather than a random sample, we took a block within that block, thereby holding caste ratios constant. However, the lowest caste, the Pulayas, live in colonies on the edge of Nadur and were underrepresented in our block survey. We thus sampled a few households from each of the Pulaya neighborhoods.

I collected additional data on women's occupations by studying a spinning cooperative in Nadur which employed 18 village women. The information I collected on the spinners and their households is discussed below.

We lived in the village for eight months, conducting the survey with two research assistants, a female economics student and a male resident of the village. These assistants conducted the household survey in Malayalam, the language of Kerala, and wrote the responses in English. Our female assistant conducted interviews with the spinning co-op members. We collected data on household composition, caste, landholdings, income sources and amounts, education and occupation of parents, use of government services, and attitudes. Questionnaire results were entered into a data base for analysis using the SPSS/PC+ statistical program.

## Caste in Nadur

To understand the relationship between land reform and women's occupations, we must also consider the effects of caste membership on an individual's occupational choices. In Nadur, as throughout India, caste affects many aspects of the experiences of each individual and household.

In central Kerala, where Nadur is located, the dominant caste was the Nambudiris (Mencher 1966), who controlled the land both through their family holdings and the Hindu temples which owned land and had tenants. The rents paid to the temples were used, among other things, to support the Nambudiri priests. One of the temples in Nadur, for example, received annually 10,000 paras of paddy, equivalent to about 35,000 pounds.

Traditionally, until 1933, land passed intact to the eldest son of a Nambudiri household head when he died. In 1969, when the land reform act was passed, large amounts of land were held by particular Nambudiri families. These households employed servants to carry out the household chores and agricultural laborers to work the fields--occupations which were largely filled by those from Nair and Pulaya castes.

Before 1971, the Nambudiri families, comprising eight percent of the families in the village, controlled 100 percent of the paddy lands and over 90 percent of all other lands. After the land reform they had only 22 percent of the total land. Those who had been tenants of the Nambudiri-controlled temples also received land. Other social changes meant that religion lost some of its importance in the lives of people. Young men are much less likely to embark on the long study of the sacred texts, the Vedas, to prepare themselves to be priests. Now, they receive a secular education in schools and look for jobs in the modern occupational sector.

The largest caste in Nadur is the Nairs, 49 percent of the village. The Nambudiris and the Nairs are the most widely studied of Kerala's castes. Because the Nairs were traditionally polyandrous, their marriage and family customs have been the subject of numerous debates and discussions (Gough 1952; Fuller 1976). Women enjoyed a sexual freedom that was rare in India and in most of the rest of the world. Inheritance was matrilineal, and fathers did not live with their wives and children.

Following the British conquest of Kerala in 1792, the unique features of Nair life underwent many changes. The Kerala land reform also had an effect on traditional Nair households by breaking up the property of the matrilineal kinship unit (Mencher 1962). Since the Nairs were considered "non-polluting," they could have physical contact with the Nambudiris, and prepare food for them, while other castes could not. Consequently, some Nair women became servants in Nambudiri households.

The Pulayas, Kerala's equivalent of those formerly called untouchables, are now referred to as the Scheduled Castes. They have been the poorest and most oppressed caste and still are at the bottom of the economic ladder. Traditionally, they worked as agricultural and general laborers.

Additional castes in Nadur include the Chetties, whose caste occupation is making a wafer called a pappadam; the several craft castes comprising Nadur's

goldsmith's, blacksmiths, carpenters, and stone masons; and Ezhavas, traditionally coconut tenders and tappers. There are several other Hindu castes in Nadur but their numbers are small.

Muslims are also considered a caste. They live in their own neighborhoods although many go to school with Hindus students. Occupationally, men were and still are principally small shopkeepers, peddlers, and laborers, while women generally have not engaged in wage labor.

### Changes in Women's Occupations

Before considering the effects of the land reform on occupational changes, we will look at the overall changes in occupations of women and men. The data on the occupations of the parents of the head of the household and his/her spouse are the basis for the comparison between pre- and post-reform time periods. We will refer to all the parents' occupations as pre-reform: these are occupations that were held before 1971. We will use the term post-reform to refer to the occupations of our respondents in 1986-87. In analyzing 1987 occupational data, only persons between ages 15 and 60 were considered. These occupations refer to the primary occupation of the person. People may engage in more than one income-generating activity.

In pre-reform Nadur, as Table 1 indicates, the majority of women were concerned with household affairs. This term covers a range of often arduous activities, the exact nature of which depends on the wealth and caste of the household. The women who were part of the paid labor force all worked as servants or laborers. Men, on the other hand, worked in a range of occupations.

No women in 1987 gave farming as an occupation and only a very small number were servants. There has been a 16 percent decrease in those engaged in household affairs, and some movement into professions, white collar, or service work. There has been a very slight increase in the percentage of women working as laborers. Seven of these women work in the spinning co-op, six work on nearby rubber and pineapple estates, and four are employed as parambas laborers. Another four of the women are engaged in their traditional caste occupation of making pappadam. The remaining four laboring women work as a temple servant, a cook, a television assembler, and a tailor.

The proportion of women doing agricultural labor is relatively unchanged, and in both periods agricultural labor is the major source of female paid employment. Nearly one-third of the women now say they are unemployed.

Looking at the comparable data in Table 2, we see that men have experienced greater occupational changes than women. Men have been more likely than women to become professionals, white collar workers, or service workers. More men are in some sort of petty trade than previously. Far fewer men are agricultural laborers, and more are general laborers. Male unemployment is lower than female unemployment, but still accounts for a fifth of the responses. Since men have more physical mobility than women, they are able to look for work in a wider geographical area.

Before the land reform, agricultural labor was an important source of income for both men and women. Why are men less likely to do this work now, while for women there is very little change? The findings here are not directly related to the land reform: In Kerala, as a whole agriculture has decreased in significance, accounting for 49 percent of state revenues in 1970-1971, and 39 percent in 1986-1987 (Government of Kerala 1987: Cover). In Nadur, this is reflected in the decline in the proportion of all those calling themselves farmers, 13 percent before the reform, but only 2 percent in 1987.

In spite of this change, however, women remain agricultural laborers in about the same proportion as formerly, while for men there has been a sharp decline. The difference can be best explained by the division of labor existing between men and women who work in the paddy fields. Women do the transplanting and the harvesting, while men, using buffaloes, formerly did much of the plowing and sowing. Today, tractors have replaced most of the animal traction, and much less male labor is needed in the fields. Women's tasks have not been mechanized. There is still a demand for female agricultural labor.

More women could work in the fields than do, however. Farmers in our sample complained of not having enough workers at harvest time. However, women seem to prefer unemployment to laboring in the paddy fields. Women's traditional work in the rice fields is detrimental to their health. There is danger from leeches, parasites, infections, rheumatism, and arthritis (Mencher and Saradhamoni 1982:A 153).

The land reform can help explain this seeming contradiction--on the one hand high rates of female unemployment, on the other hand a demand for female labor. Because former tenants now own their land, are able to keep their crops, and do not have to pay rent, some women have the option of avoiding field labor on other people's land. This is discussed below.

#### Land Reform, Caste, and Occupation

The land reform's impact affected the castes differently, since caste determined to a large extent whether one was a landlord, a tenant farmer, an agricultural laborer and/or a servant, or had some other occupation (Mencher 1966b).

Table 3 shows the amounts of land owned by each of Nadur's castes before and after the land reform. As can be seen, the redistribution brought ownership much more in line with caste distribution in the population. Some castes, however, such as the Craft Castes and Pulayas, still have much less than their proportion in the population while Nambudiris are still privileged, albeit less than in the pre-reform period.

Caste was also directly correlated with female occupations in the past. In this section of the paper we will focus on three Hindu castes that best illustrate the effects of the land reform on women's occupations: Nambudiris, Nairs, and Pulayas. The Nambudiris were the caste that lost land, the Nairs gained the most land, while the Pulayas neither gained much nor lost any land.

Table 4 shows the occupations that Nambudiri, Nair, and Pulaya women had before the land reform.

No Nambudiri women in pre-reform Nadur had any employment. Following the land reform, this changed. Having lost much land and their temple privileges, the Nambudiris invested in education for both male and female offspring. Nambudiri women are the most highly educated in the village with 8.8 mean years of education. This is over three years more than the Nair women, the next most highly educated group. High standards of living can be maintained only if cash incomes are entering the household. While it was once appropriate for Nambudiri women to be secluded from the rest of the world, it is now desirable for them to enter the labor force, and they prepare themselves to do so.

Of the 18 Nambudiri women in the 1987 sample, half are engaged in household affairs. In earlier generations, 100 percent of Nambudiri women were so engaged. Nambudiri women wish to work, but over a third describe themselves as being unemployed. They would prefer to be in the labor force but there is a serious lack of jobs for educated persons throughout Kerala, and they will not work in lower status occupations. Caste notions may be exerting an influence here.

Two Nambudiri women are wage earners: one is a school-teacher, the other runs the village post office. Their husbands have similar jobs, and their households are among the wealthiest in the village.

The land reform made it more necessary for Nambudiri women to work, while previous land holdings gave them the necessary resources to invest in education. It is also possible that some of the decline in Nair servants results from the Nambudiris no longer being willing or able to hire household help at a wage acceptable to those who formerly would have filled this role.

There is not a wide range of occupations open to women in the Nadur area, and an unmarried woman is very unlikely to seek work away from her family. Work in the fields is available, yet as noted earlier, many women prefer unemployment. Having some land, growing one's own crops, and not having to pay rent seems to allow women to be more selective in their choice of jobs. The land reform thus prevents women in former tenant households from desperately seeking work, no matter how unpleasant.

Not all households received paddy land, only those which had been tenants. Pulaya households were especially unlikely to get paddy land. Pulaya women, who formerly were agricultural or house compound laborers, are still almost entirely engaged in these same occupations. This can be seen by comparing their occupations as listed on Tables 4 and 5. Other studies in India have also determined a correlation between land holdings and female agricultural labor (Nayyar 1987:2211).

Table 5 gives a more detailed look at the relationship between landholdings, caste, and women's occupations. This table indicates that a woman is more likely to be in household affairs or unemployed if she is part of a household with land resources. There are some exceptions to this relationship, however.

There are two Pulaya women and two Nair women who come from households with more than one acre of land, but who are still working as agricultural laborers. The Pulaya women are both from the same household, which has nine members, three of whom are students while one is unemployed. A family member purchased the land in 1985, using money earned from his job in a Madras tea shop. The family has probably not had this land long enough for it to make any major difference in their lives. Given the large size of the household and the number of non-working members, their holdings may not be sufficient to allow the women to refuse work as agricultural laborers.

The two Nair women, who are from the same household, are also supporting a large household. In this case, eight people are dependent on their earnings. The only adult male is himself an unemployed agricultural laborer. There is not enough land for the family to be self-sufficient in food. They would in any case, need some income for non-food essentials.

### Women in Modern Occupations

Ten women hold professional, white-collar, or service jobs--occupations that women simply did not have in the pre-reform period. They are distributed among the castes as shown in Table 6.

It seems likely that women in these occupations would be from households with large amounts of land, either households that gained land in the reform or ones that retained large amounts after the reform. These are the households that would have the resources to invest in female education which could then be used to move into these occupations. However, that is not the case.

Instead, most of these women are from households which had some past advantages or were in some way unusual. The two Nambudiri women are among the most highly educated in the village. In the sample, there are six women with advanced degrees, comprising 2 percent of the total adult females. (The comparable figure for men is 13, or 5 percent of the total adult males.) The Nair schoolteacher, with a degree from a teachers college, held this job even in 1971. Her sister, who is no longer in the village, was at that time a clerk in the village panchayat office. Their father was the clerk for the village court. The maternal grandfather of this household was a Nambudiri, a link that helps account for the relative success of the household.

Two Nair women work as clerks at the local post office. The father of one used to be a mail carrier, a connection which helps explain his daughter's employment. There is not enough supplementary information available to discuss the other woman in this category. The Nair midwife is married to a traditional ayurvedic physician. This household formerly tenanted the more than two acres of land it now owns.

Two of the women are Mannan caste members from the same household. Mannans are one of Kerala's smallest scheduled caste groups and this household may have benefited from government programs for the historically most disadvantaged castes. Both of these women have their SSLC degrees (10th grade competency in the U.S). The remaining two cases are more difficult to explain. The Ezhava nursing student has a mother who is an agricultural

laborer and a brother who is a tailor. The lab technician comes from the Chetty caste and her mother makes pappadams. In this, as in the Ezhava case, the household's source for money to invest in the daughter's education is not clear.

All the women working as professionals, white collar workers, or service workers are employed either in the health field or in non-health related government jobs. For men in the modern sector, about 50 percent work for the government and the rest have jobs in the private sector. Men, of course, also have more of an option than do women to leave the village and seek work elsewhere.

#### The Spinning Cooperative and Women's Employment

As illustrated above one of the most important sources of professional, white collar, and service jobs for women in Nadur is in the government-financed sector of the economy. For women in the labor category, this sector is also important.

Of the 24 women in our sample who are laborers, one-third are in jobs supported directly by the state government of Kerala. These include the cook in the local nursery school, and seven young women who work in a spinning cooperative which is part of the Kerala Khadi and Village Industries Association, an enterprise set up in Nadur in 1979. Of the 30 spinners working in this enterprise, 18 are from Nadur.

The women who work in the spinning enterprise complain of chest pains, headaches, and backaches, which they associate directly with their work. One respondent who commented on the need for more employment proposed that small industries be established which "do not require this much torture and hardship."

The spinning cooperative could take on more laborers. The machines are available, but apparently some women would rather be unemployed than work there. Previously discussed data shows that women from landless households or those with only small amounts of land are more likely to engage in arduous occupations. Consistent with this finding, women working in the co-op come from households with relatively small amounts of land, the average for the Nadur spinning households being about one-third of an acre. These results are skewed by one exceptionally large household that has nearly two acres of land. If this household is excluded from the calculations, then the average size is about one-fourth of an acre.

The spinners come from households that are relatively poor, having an average yearly income of 4854 rupees a year. This is well below the average for the sample, that is, about 6871 rupees per household in 1987. Six of the spinners are providing over half of the family income. For one divorced woman, estranged from her family, and living alone, the spinning cooperative is her only source of income. It is not clear what she would do if this job were not available. All spinners are unmarried and stop this work when they marry; it is not clear how their families can cope with the loss of income.

### Other Reforms

The land reform has mainly altered female occupations among the higher castes. Other changes have interacted with the reform to produce some of the employment patterns described here. The growth of public sector jobs and those in health care (some public, some private) provides employment opportunities. But for many women and men, this is not adequate. Unemployment is a major and acknowledged problem in Kerala.

Additional reforms, however, do ameliorate people's difficult situations. One of these, specifically targeting women, is a feeding program for those who are pregnant or lactating. Women can receive free lunches of 65 grams of rice or wheat at one of the six nursery schools in Nadur. Women benefit as well from other reforms, even from programs not explicitly intended for females. Since 1974, Kerala has had an Agricultural Workers' Act providing for a minimum wage, regulated working hours, and arbitration for settling employer-employee disputes. However, in Nadur, at least, few agricultural laborers seemed to be aware of this legislation. In 1982, another reform directed at agricultural laborers provided for a monthly pension of 45 rupees, which was raised in 1987 to 60 rupees (Menon 1987:28). This act is especially important for women, who make up the majority of agricultural laborers. In Nadur, in 1987, out of 18 people receiving pensions, 13 (72%) are women.

Other reform measures include a school lunch program, which, in addition to feeding children, means that for some mothers there is one less meal a day to prepare and serve. Further research is needed to determine the impact of this feeding program on women's time and resources. A ration shop sells basic foodstuffs and cooking oil at subsidized prices; and, although people complain about the quality of the products there, they nevertheless make wide use of this shop. Improvements in the village water supply, which are being undertaken by the left-front government elected in 1987, will benefit everyone if fully implemented, especially women who in the dry season and at times of drought are the ones who must fetch water from distant wells.

### Summary and Conclusions

Kerala's land reform has had two major consequences for the occupational choices of women in Nadur. First, women from the highest caste, the Nambudiris, whose households lost land, have been more motivated to seek work. Second, women from households in other castes with relatively large amounts of land, mostly obtained because of the land reform, are able to be somewhat more selective in their occupational choices.

In households where there is at least half an acre of land, women are able to refuse certain kinds of arduous physical work. Women in Nadur have not been forced out of traditional occupations, as is the case in other regions in the Third World. Women in Nadur seem to prefer unemployment to working as laborers in the fields or elsewhere.

The effects of women's employment on their households are somewhat mitigated by the land reform. The more land a household has, the greater the subsistence it provides. Production above the family's subsistence needs can be sold to supplement the family's income even if farming is not considered to

be the major occupation of the household members. This would mean that women who are unable to find jobs that they consider suitable to their educational level and/or caste could choose to remain at home. Other reforms in Kerala, particularly the expansion of health services and education, have provided some employment opportunities for women, as well as improving the quality of life for the general population. The state government has also tried to create some jobs for village women. There is still much to be done both in terms of employment and other areas of village life. There are other societies which have had land reforms, in particular Taiwan, South Korea, Nicaragua, and Cuba. Further research is needed to see how these land redistributions have interacted with other aspects of social change to effect women's occupational choices.

Table 1  
Changes in Female Occupations

Occupation	Pre-Reform <sup>1</sup> Parent's generation	Post-Reform <sup>2</sup> 1986-87 survey
HH affairs	54%	38%
Ag. laborer	22%	18%
Laborer	6%	8%
Modern <sup>3</sup>	-	3%
Servant	16%	0.3%
Trade	-	1%
Farmers	2%	-
Unemployed <sup>4</sup>	-	32%
N	100% 329	100.3% 301

1. Pre-reform refers to occupations held before 1971.
2. Post-reform refers to occupations held as of 1987.
3. Modern refers to professional, white collar, and service occupations.
4. Unemployed was not given as a response by any of our respondents when asked about parental occupations. But this does not necessarily mean that unemployment was absent.

Note: Totals of more or less than 100% on tables are due to rounding.

Table 2  
Changes in Male Occupations

Occupation	Pre-Reform	Post-Reform
Landlord	3%	-
Priest	3%	0.4%
HH affairs	5%	3%
Ag. laborer	17%	3%
Laborer	25%	36%
Skilled laborer	6%	11%
Modern	4%	10%
Servant	8%	0.4%
Trade	6%	12%
Farmer	24%	5%
Unemployed	-	19%
	101%	99.8%
N	317	247

Table 3  
Caste and Land Ownership, 1971 and 1987

Caste <sup>1</sup>	Percent of Households	Percent of Land Owned	
		1971	1987
Nambudiri	8%	94%	22%
Nair/Variar	49%	4%	46%
Craft Castes	6%	0	2%
Other Castes <sup>2</sup>	8%	0	9%
Muslim	13%	2%	13%
Ezhava	8%	0.3%	5%
Mannan <sup>3</sup>	2%	0	1%
Pulaya <sup>3</sup>	6%	0	2%
		100.3%	100%

1. The Castes are listed in approximate order of their traditional rankings, from highest to most "polluting."
2. Other Castes are the Ezhuthasan and Chetty. The latter traditionally made pappadams or sold clothing. The former taught writing or engaged in field labor.
3. The Mannan and Pulaya castes together make up Nadur's Scheduled Caste population. Formerly the untouchable groups, these are now eligible for government programs aimed at improving their status.

Table 4  
Caste and Pre-Reform Female Occupations

Occupation	Nambudiri	Nair	Pulaya
HH affairs	100%	43%	-
Farmer	-	4%	5%
Ag. laborer	-	19%	86%
Laborer	-	2%	9%
Servant	-	32%	-
N	100% 25	100% 162	100% 22

Table 5  
Caste, Landownership, and Female Occupations

	Nambudiris		Nairs		Pulayas	
	Large <sup>1</sup>	Small <sup>2</sup>	Large	Small	Large	Small
HHAF	50%	50%	51%	36%	-	-
Ag. labor	-	-	7%	34%	100%	81%
Laborer	-	-	9%	10%	-	6%
Modern	6%	50%	3%	2%	-	-
Trade	-	-	3%	-	-	-
Unemployed	44%	-	27%	18%	-	13%
N	100% 16	100% 2	100% 74	100% 83	100% 2	100% 16

1. Large landownership refers to households with holdings of half an acre or more.
2. Small landownership refers to households with holdings of half an acre or less.

Table 6

Females in Modern Occupations  
Nadur Village, Kerala

Caste	Percent	Specific Occupations
Nambudiri	20%	Schoolteacher, Postmistress
Nair	40%	Postal savings agents, schoolteacher, midwife
Ezhava	10%	Nurse trainee
Mannan	20%	Nursing assistant, office supervisor
Other	10%	Lab technician
	100%	
N	10	

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