

EXPRESSIONS OF 'CONCERN' AMONG THE ARAYA WOMEN IN KERALA: ANTHROPOLOGICAL INSIGHTS

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Abstract: This study is about various concerns shared by women among the Arayan, a marine fishing community in Kannur district of Kerala State. Like any other socially and economically downtrodden sections of India's population, fishing communities are also characterized by poverty, low educational attainment, and minimum material possessions including the living space. Fishing villages are dispossessed with basic amenities such as better health care facilities, pure drinking water and land space for hygienic sanitation. Mechanization in marine fishery has created many structural changes in the sector with the slow disappearance of women from the industry. However, one cannot underestimate the contribution of women in the fisheries sector; particularly in post-harvest activities. Health related issues like anemia, malnutrition and deficiencies in vitamins and proteins are observed in fishing communities especially among women and children. Attitude of fisherwomen towards community's collective welfare influences other sectors of their life and culture. However, a lot of factors make them more vulnerable to livelihood insecurities such as problems of ageing, poverty, hunger, non-availability of clean drinking water, inadequate sanitation, improper housing and domestic violence. Anthropological research on the above issues is vital for planning poverty alleviation programme and public policies for the women in fishing families.

The fisheries sector in India both inland and the marine faces several challenges such as socio-economic deprivations due to low income, unsustainable methods of harvesting, over exploitation of resources, exploitation from the marketing sector, discrepancies in the distribution of profits, political interventions, environmental hazards and climate change. These challenges directly affect the fisheries sector leading fishing societies to vulnerabilities in the livelihood aspects.

In Kerala, the marine fishing industry occupies an uncompromising place in the economic activities of the State with a contribution of 3% to the NDP of the State. (The Economic Review, 2010). Until 1960, the traditional fishery sector in Kerala was technologically compelled by non-mechanized locally made crafts, dugout canoes, planks, nets and gears of people's choice and convenience also suitable to particular environmental conditions. Fishing was also considered as a caste or community based subsistence activity. Like any other socially and economically downtrodden sections of Kerala's population, fishing groups were also characterized by poverty, low educational attainment, and minimum material possessions including the living space (Ashaletta, 2002; Shyam and Geetha, 2013; Gopal, 2017; Hapke and Ayyanketil, 2018; Ramachandran, 2021). Technological and socio-cultural factors also acted as barriers to any effort in the development of women among fishing communities. The adaptation of fishermen to coastal ecosystem was possible with traditional technologies like catamaran and dugout

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canoes and these technologies were also suitable to climate conditions, type of fish and its availability. Traditionally fishermen possessed a treasure house of indigenous knowledge which helped them in the identification of resources and preparation of fishing vessels appropriate to particular waters.

With the advent of mechanization in marine fishery the financial capacities of the fishermen to involve in marine resource management got unsettled which resulted an increase in subsistence vulnerability. Inadequate and unequal access to marine resources together with lack of basic comforts due to unreliable income also created discontent among the marine fishermen towards their traditional economy. Sathiadhas (2009) has pointed out that “there is high incidence of poverty in the coastal rural sector explicitly revealing that majority of these people still could not get much of the benefits of the economic development taken place in our country” (2009:774). Even though mechanization has created certain level of competitions and progressions, the individual relationships materialized through social institutions are found strong. Along with this one cannot underestimate the contribution of women in the fisheries sector; particularly in post-harvest activities such as processing, vending, net making etc. Attitude of fisherwomen towards community/collective welfare influences other sectors of their life and culture and so, it is rightly appreciated. However, lot of factors makes them more vulnerable to livelihood insecurities such as problems of ageing, poverty, hunger, non-availability of clean drinking water, inadequate sanitation, improper housing and domestic violence. This paper attempts to explore the agonies of women among the Araya, a marine fishing caste of Kerala from an anthropological perspective.

Recent literature on women in fishing societies

Anthropologists are always interested in exploring the life patterns and social institutions of communities as part of its adaptation to environment and studies on fishing communities are also not exceptional. Earlier anthropological studies (Iyer, 1909; Thurston, 1909) were descriptive in nature emphasizing the life and culture of fishing societies in Kerala from the perspective of ethnography. Later, in Kerala studies from different perspectives were made focusing on development, mechanization, gender, environment and depletion of natural resources, and so on.

Kurien (2001) notes that the fisherwomen in Kerala were involved only in post fishing activities and they were restricted fishing on account of taboo. He recommends that modern scientific knowledge (like marine biology, oceanography, navigational technology) must be blended with traditional fishing so that small scale fishing enterprise can remain sustainable.

Ashaletha (2002) notes that, the changes happened due to mechanization in marine fishery have transformed the role and contribution of women in fishery sector. She suggested that technological handicap of women must be reduced and possibilities of gainful employment for fisherwomen in possibly profitable ventures

must be explored as part of development.

Khader et al., (2006) discussed the need of providing training programs for fisherwomen to empower them to involve in profitable employment in the post-harvest sector of fisheries.

Ganesh Kumar et al., (2010) suggested the importance of promoting institutions like SHGs, producer / fishermen associations, cooperatives, etc. by permitting access to private agencies with suitable regulatory mechanism for improving the competence of fish marketing.

Shyam and Geetha (2013) points out that fisherwomen face gender discrimination in the areas of bulk handling of fishery output, its transport, storage, securing credit from financial institutions and during auctions. They also suggested remedial measures in the areas of auction and credit availability to ensure fair deal for fisherwomen.

Hassan (2014) discusses the probability of oyster cultivation by fisherwomen as an alternative source of livelihood and the organizational role of SHGs in this project in Vadakkekara in Ernakulam district of Kerala.

Gopal (2017) studied the impact of migrant labor in sea-food processing industry in Kerala. He pointed out that migrant labor has resulted in rapid decline in the involvement of local women in post fishing industry.

Shakir (2017) notes that Kudumbashree program was not successful among fisherwomen of Kerala due to factors ranging from exclusionary pattern within Kudumbashree to lack of education. He also adds that involvement in Kudumbashree brought them close to political parties of all spectrums and they feel more empowered by being in association with political parties.

Hapke and Ayyanketil (2018) highlighted the variation of nature of work among fisherwomen from different religious backgrounds in Kerala. They stated that decline of income from post fisheries sector persuaded to opt for occupational diversification among fisherwomen. They note that women in traditional fishery work like fish drying, sale and net making also declined. With regard to mechanization of fishing, it is noted that for fisherwomen it had brought opportunities as well as challenges.

Bindu Ramachandran (2021) discussed the various anxieties experienced by the members of Hindu fishing families in Kerala because of the depletion of marine resources, issues in marketing, lack of infrastructure facilities, and labour migration. She has also stated about the new survival strategies functioning among them as part of making better existences.

Methodology

This paper was based on information collected as part of minor research project under Innovative Research Programme, Kannur University, Kerala. Marine fishermen families from five fishing villages in Kannur district of Kerala were

selected for this anthropological study. A sample of 250 fishermen families were selected randomly as sample population and 350 women from these families were identified with a purposive sampling for in-depth analysis on issues of women. These women were identified from families where either a women is engaged in pre and post fisheries activities or there must be a sea going man. A detailed household survey was conducted among the selected 250 families (Fig.1) for collecting a wide range of primary data on household patterns and mechanisms. The researcher spent 2-3 months in the field for collecting the data. The respondents were contacted frequently for collecting information. The researcher adjusted her time and availability according to the convenience of the fisherwomen for taking interviews. Both individual and focused group interviews were conducted for collecting information on various issues experienced and handled by the women in fishing families.

Household survey of families was done with the help of a survey schedule comprised of qualitative and quantitative questions across a number of domains, including on age, sex, marital status, marital distances and jurisdictions, occupational status, ownership of fishing gears and tools, educational status, material possessions including movable and immovable properties etc. along with information on infrastructure facilities and development related aspects. The survey was complemented by information from discussions with experts and insiders, like local academics, trade union leaders, government officials, middlemen and leaders of cooperatives. Regarding other methods used for data collection, anthropological techniques such as interview, observation mostly non-participant, (participant observation was also done for collecting information from fisherwomen at work time), genealogical method, case studies and questionnaires were operated. Structured and semi structured interview schedules were used as tools to collect data from different category of people such as fish vendors, mediators and owners of vessels. Both individual and focus group discussions were made with women and men separately and together to get their views on various issues existing in the society and their problems of survival.

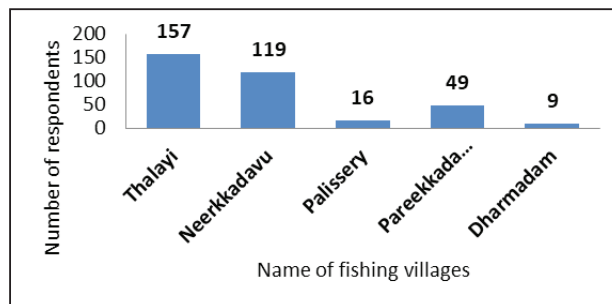


Figure – 1: Name of fishing villages and number of respondents selected for the study.
[Source: Field data]

In addition to primary data, secondary sources of information were also contacted for supporting the primary information. Publications of C.M.F.R.I. (Central Marine Fisheries Institute), Cochin, Fisheries Directorate, Thiruvananthapuram; District fisheries office at Kannur, Matsyafed, Fishermen welfare and development cooperative societies, office of the Society for Assistance to fisherwomen (SAF) etc. were used for substantiating the information collected from the field.

A glimpse on Araya society

The size of households is an important factor in the fishing families. In the sample population, it varies considerably that 132 families are identified as nuclear and 118 are joint families. Anthropologically it is very interesting to note that joint families still exist among populations who face an uncertain economy. Since deep sea fishing is a joint venture needs support and cooperation, it fostered strong familial bonds among them which created a favourable climate for joint family. One of the women said,

“After marriage I was taken to a joint family where I managed the household activities with my co-sisters and mother-in-law. We, the daughter-in-laws were mentored by mother-in-law in every activity and she taught us to manage a family by safeguarding the interests of other family members, the social value of sharing, and the importance of keeping morality. My husband’s family was a comparatively settled one in that area and we had fishing vessels and other related equipment. Mother-in-law also advised us the importance of keeping strong relationships among brothers (because we were four co-sisters) which she identified as most important to overcome the struggles in family”.

But, because of the withdrawal of new generation from the traditional occupation of fishing, joint families started to dissolve and nuclear households are fast becoming the norm. However, they try to build their houses close to their kinsmen. This proves that family ties are still strong among the fishing societies.

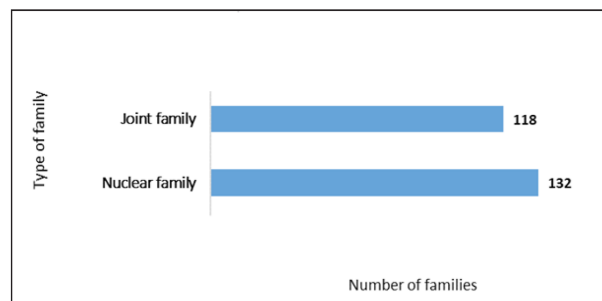


Figure - 2: Types of families among fishermen in the study area. [Source: Field data]

The poor economic condition of some of the nuclear families to detach from the joint household is another reason for maintaining joint families. In certain other cases, the joint ownership of fishing crafts and vessels by siblings also bind them stay together in one house. It is significant to note that, in the 250 families surveyed (with a total of 1219 members) the widower/widow status is 8/64 which shows the comparatively short life span of the males. There is also a concern that the number of unmarried males is double the number of females. The disinterest in marrying boys engaged in fishing and related activities is the main reason informed by the people. A tendency is also noted among the women that they like to marry men from other castes and religions who are engaged in occupations other than fishing. Economic independence of women mainly acts as a catalyst in preparing them to take decisions about marriage.

Kalpana Ram (1991) argued that fisheries have prevented women from directly accessing resources at sea and they can be engaged only in additional activities such as fish vending, fish curing, and net mending. But today there is a widespread involvement of women in self-help groups (Fig.3). This helps them to address and handle many issues at household and societal level. Apart from providing an income, women are of the opinion that working in SHGs has helped them to develop their personality through interacting with people from outside. The involvement of women in SHG is high for the last two years because of the continuous effort from the part of authorities. One of the informants says,

“Now we are able to do some of the works such as bank transactions, getting things done from government offices, participating in PTA meetings organized by the schools and taking decisions at family level. This kind of an empowerment we received only because of the involvement in SHGs”.

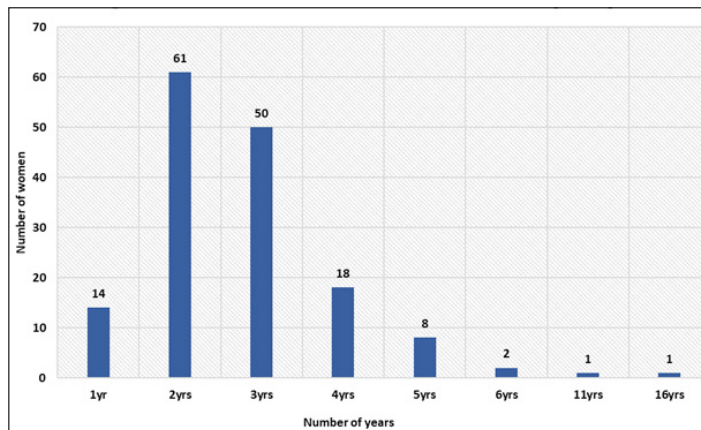


Figure – 3: Number of women involved in SHGs for the last 16 years. [Source: Field data]

Another woman said,

“We can really experience the difference in attitude of family members towards us after getting an income to support the family. So, we always advice our daughters to study well and try for a job. An income even if it is small will give an emotional support to us especially during exigencies. Moreover, the exposure we are getting by interacting with others will also give us a feeling that somebody will be there to help us”.

From the words of fisherwomen it was evident that they realize the importance of SHGs and the empowerment that they received. However, they have many concerns at family and societal level which they are struggling to solve and overcome.

Concerns of fisherwomen

- i) Due to economic constraints and shortage of space the families have no other way to procure their own sources of water. From the 250 households surveyed for collecting basic information, it was seen that 182 families were depending on public sources for availing drinking water. These public water points are given either by government and other non-governmental agencies. For drinking water they usually depend on public water sources supplied twice a week. Quarrels are common among people while procuring water. Most of the households complained about the presence of salinity in drinking water, supply of polluted water, discoloured water etc. especially during seasons of scarcity. Women are more concerned about the usage of this water for cooking, drinking and personal use because of the health problems reported among them. Another significant health issue impacting the female population of the community is urinary tract infection. This is a result of the inadequate sanitation and hygiene systems. Due to lack of money, most of them would leave diseases usually undiagnosed and unattended.
- ii) In the sample population, more than 50% of the families availed loan for constructing houses. Out of the 113 persons who availed various loans, 48 percent availed loans for housing. This is mainly from nationalized banks. 27 percent have availed gold loan by mortgaging their gold ornaments. This was availed for various purposes including the daily requirements during periods of emergencies. They try to recover the ornaments when they have money after a good catch; otherwise they keep it with the bank or money lender for long time until the same is put under auction. Eight percent availed loan from the fisheries department for buying fishing equipment. Personal loans are also taken from the banks and money lenders for a number of purposes. There are also cases where they availed loan exclusively for marriage and education of their children. In the middle of economic constraints women

are found more concerned about the repayment of loans.

- iii) Out of the 250 families surveyed, it was seen that 182 families are depending on public sources for drinking water. These public water points are given either by government and other non-governmental agencies. Due to economic and space constraints, the families have no other way to provide their own sources of water and they depend other sources. For drinking purpose, they mostly depend on public tap water, which is supplied to these areas only twice a week. Quarrels are common among the women when they are in queues for collecting water. They are concerned about health problems resulted from the using of this polluted drinking water.
- iv) Payment of electricity bill is a problem shared by the some of the women. Households occupied by nuclear families experience no problem but in the cases of joint families where a single house is shared by 3-4 nuclear families, bill payment becomes a problem. One or two families in a joint household use electrical and electronic devices according to their financial capacity where as others do not have these facilities. But at the time of payment of electricity bill all the families have to share the money. If payment is not done properly electricity department disconnects the power supply. In most of the joint households this issue results in conflicts among the families members and women are more concerned about this. They have no other way to find out an independent residence because of their financial crisis.
- v) There is a clear gender inequality in sharing of food in the families. The females provide enough food to males for their tireless work of fishing without considering their health requirements. Aged women informed that in joint families they experienced hunger in its worst form but at present because of economic independence and freedom younger females are not ready to make such compromises. However, hunger and undernourishment are still a concern for women in fishing families.
- vi) Food insecurity resulted in common health problems such as malnutrition, poor health status, diabetes, hypertension, and depression among fisher women along with problems like increased anemic condition, issues in eye sights, muscle pain, orthopedic and cardiac problems. Changes in the traditional economic structure have paved way for deviations in family/ community level authority structures especially in decision making. With new kinds of gender roles and inequalities, women experience serious psychological frustrations and emotional disorders.
- vii) Regarding the governmental approach in involving fishermen in policy formulation, 50% of the respondents supported this intervention. But rest of the 50% showed complete reluctance in this matter. 98% of the informants revealed that policy makers are not at all sensitive towards the needs and requirements of the fishermen. They also added that a kind of interactive

policy formulation will only help to overcome the present problems existing in the fishermen societies.

- viii) 27.6% of the sample population opined that they faced many difficulties in availing the admissible grant from government during accidental death in the sea. In many occasions the doctors did not believe the background in which death has happened.
- ix) Excess alcohol consumption among men is reported as one of the main concerns by women. Above 50% of women complained that their men used to spend half of the income for alcohol consumption. Because of this, women are struggling a lot to meet the family requirements and they mostly mortgage their ornaments for huge interest rates. They could hardly take it back due to the unaffordable repayment amount.
- x) Participation of males especially younger generation in local political parties is one of the reasons expressed by women regarding the deviance of young men from family responsibilities. They supported the affiliation of men with community/religious organizations but least interested in affiliating their men political parties.

Conclusion

In Kerala, fisherwomen played an important role in the fisheries sectors in terms of their contribution in post-fishing activities such as processing and small-scale marketing. Persistent poverty and deteriorating economic conditions have forced many women to engage in varied economic activities along with household duties. Mechanization in marine fishery has directly or indirectly limited the role of women in the fishing business. This has brought a lot of changes in the socio-economic conditions of fisherwomen adversely affecting their livelihood. Integration of migrant workers from northern part of India has also reduced the job opportunities of women in fishing harbours and markets.

In Kerala especially in Kannur district the number of women engaged in marine fisheries sector is very less. Their participation is also negligible in the post-harvest stage. But earlier it was not the situation. When it was a community-based occupation involving the participation of most of the family members, women also participated actively in post-harvest activities such as net making, drying, salting etc. But mechanization in marine fishery has created many structural changes in the sector with the slow disappearance of women from the industry. In the study areas only 8.6% of the women are engaged in post-harvest activities such as fish processing and vending.

In Kerala, in addition to the reduction in marine resources, other constraints such as limited access and control over resources like water, land, finance and technologies also affected the wellbeing of women in fishing societies. Less

influence on the decision making process, lack of proper infrastructure and support facilities for marketing and processing are also added to the list of concerns. Fishing villages are underprivileged with basic amenities such as cleanliness, better health care, pure drinking water and sanitation. Malnutrition and vitamin deficiency problems are widespread especially among fisherwomen and children. Furthermore, poor awareness/knowledge in the areas of health, nutrition and child care heightened their problems.

The research observed that changes in traditional fisheries sector and gender relations are highly interrelated. The governmental programmes such as Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Act (MGNREGA) and the women-orientated poverty alleviation programme called Women Self Helps Groups (*Kudumbashree*) played a vital role deconstructing conventional gender relations in a household level among the Arayan fishing community.

Currently, reducing poverty and hunger is central to the goal of development of any nation. In Kerala, anthropological research on this line is not that much explored. Research on these topics is vital for planning poverty alleviation programmes and public policies for the marginalized sections of population such as the fisherwomen. The findings from this study can be used by stakeholders, such as the Central and State government, institutes engaged in fisheries research, NGOs, and voluntary organizations for timely intervention and preparation of policies to reduce specific vulnerability factors and to safeguard a sustainable livelihood to women in fishing communities. In effect, these will contribute to achieving the goal one, two and three of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) which aim at eradicating poverty and hunger and to sustain good health and well-being. This study is highly significant from the perspectives of development and empowerment of women.

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