

Bay of Bengal Programme

Development of Small-Scale Fisheries

FACTORS THAT INFLUENCE
THE ROLE AND STATUS OF
FISHERWOMEN

BOBP/WP/33



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FOOD AND AGRICULTURE ORGANISATION OF THE UNITED NATIONS

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OF FISHERWOMEN

BOB P/WP/33

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This report is based on a year's study of three fishing villages of Chengalpattu district, Tamil Nadu, conducted between February 1983 and January 1984. It profiles the villages and analyses the various factors that influence the role and status of the fisherwomen there. It also includes three case studies. These describe the lifestyle, the work, and the family and social status of three women.

During the course of the study the author, assisted by nine village women, did a basic survey of adult women in the three villages. She also conducted a sample survey covering one-tenth of all fisherwomen above the age of 13 and interviewed nine selected fisherwomen in depth over a period of six months. She lived for a few days with some of them.

How did this study originate? Between May and September 1982, a 10-week residential training course was conducted for 21 fisherwomen ("link workers") from seven coastal villages of Chengalpattu district. At the end of the course, follow-up action programmes were planned in cooperation with the trained fisherwomen. The study described in this paper was conducted to help these programmes.

The study is an activity of the small-scale fisheries project of the Bay of Bengal Programme (BOBP) and is part of the project's ongoing work in cooperation with the Fisherwomen's Extension Service of the Tamil Nadu Fisheries Department. This work includes several pilot activities to improve the status of women, particularly in the areas of credit, education and training. (A report on these activities is under preparation.)

It is hoped that this paper will be of some help to planners, officials and institutions who are concerned with fisheries development, particularly with ways and means of improving the socio-economic life of fisherwomen.

The small-scale fisheries project of the Bay of Bengal Programme is funded by SIDA (the Swedish International Development Authority) and executed by FAO (Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations). It covers five countries bordering the Bay of Bengal – Bangladesh, India, Malaysia, Sri Lanka and Thailand. It is a multi-disciplinary project, active in craft, gear, aquaculture, extension, information and development support. The project's main goals are to develop, demonstrate and promote appropriate technologies and methodologies to improve the conditions of small-scale fisherfolk and boost supplies of fish from the small sector in the BOBP's member countries.

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This document is a working paper and has not been cleared by the FAQ or by the government.

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1. INTRODUCTION

Marine fisherfolk are members of a low and disadvantaged caste belonging to the lowest economic strata in Indian society. The fisherwomen, in particular, have a very low status in the social hierarchy which leaves them worse off than their compatriots. A great number of them share with men the activities of fish distribution and marketing, fish processing, curing, preserving and other allied tasks.

There are some 200,000 fisherwomen in Tamil Nadu. Nearly 26% are involved in marketing and handling of fish. However, in Chengalpattu and North Arcot districts, up to 50% are engaged in marketing of fish.¹

1.1 Background of the study

In March 1981 a pilot project was initiated by the BOBP to improve the living conditions of women from small-scale marine fishing communities in Chengalpattu district of Tamil Nadu. This project was formulated on the basis of a study,² which examined the socio-economic conditions of marine fisherwomen, their involvement in productive activities and the scope for improved and new income-generating activities to better their economic condition.

The study pointed out that social and cultural barriers prevented fisherwomen from equal participation in political decision-making and in economic development. Fisherwomen were excluded from cooperative societies; they could not enjoy the benefits of banking and credit facilities, or of education and vocational training. It suggested that the most urgent need of women was better income.

Therefore, the BOBP planned an income-generating activity – net making – for fisherwomen in a village. The experience gained from this showed that unless the government comes forward to subsidize the investment costs, such income-generating activities will not be economically viable. Though the government subsidizes fishery activities, these subsidies are aimed exclusively at fishermen.

To assist fisherwomen gain equal access to government subsidies and social infrastructure facilities, an organizational set-up was required. Therefore, the BOBP appointed two women extension officers who were to be responsible for guiding and supervising fisherwomen “link workers” from the villages.

The BOBP expected these workers to function as a “link” between the fisherwomen and the Fisherwomen Extension Service of the Fisheries Department. To equip the link workers with the necessary knowledge and skill to perform their principal function, a long-term (10 weeks) residential training course was planned.

The extension officers were involved in planning and organizing the course. Twenty-one fisherwomen link workers from seven coastal villages attended the course. The training course was held in four segments from May to September 1982.

Towards the end of the training course, when follow-up action programmes were planned, the need was felt for a study that would identify factors which influence and determine the role and status of fisherwomen. This study would be parallel to the other activities implemented by the Fisherwomen Extension Service of the Fisheries Department. It had been learned that income earning does not directly entitle women to take independent decisions or obtain equal access to resources in the family and the village. This study tries to describe the factors that influence the role and status of fisherwomen.

¹ Tamil Nadu Fisheries Department. *Report of the state working group on fisheries for the Sixth Five-Year Plan 1980-85*. Madras, p. 70

² Edeltraud Drewes. *Three fishing villages in Tamil Nadu – A socio-economic study with special reference to the role and status of woman*, BO3P WP/14. Madras, India. 1982.

1.2 Objectives of the study

- To determine the present role and status of fisherwomen
- To identify the factors that influence the status of fisherwomen
- To understand the pattern of relationship that exists between the fisherwomen and their families
To understand the pattern of decision-making in the village and the part played by fisherwomen in it
- To study the attitude of the fisherwomen themselves, towards their problems, role and status in their families and in their village
- To prepare case studies of fisherwomen, which could be utilized as a source of authentic information for content training and which could serve as communication material
- To estimate the role fisherwomen can play in the process of social change.

1.3 Research questions

- Which are the factors that influence the role and status of fisherwomen?
- How do these factors influence the role and status of fisherwomen?
- Why is the fisherwoman socially dependent on her husband or any male family member, even though she is an income earning member of the family?
- Why are fisherwomen not given opportunities to take part in community decision making?
- What are the religious and social practices that prevent the fisherwomen from asserting their rights?
- How do marriage and family enhance or diminish the role and status of fisherwomen?
- What is the role fisherwomen can play in the process of social change?

1.4 Research methodology

Initially, adequate time was spent reviewing existing studies, papers and other publications of fisherwomen (bibliography in the appendices). It was decided to use quantitative research techniques like surveys, and qualitative research techniques, such as in-depth interviews, with the fisherwomen and participatory observation through living with the fisherwomen. In order to provide the basic quantitative information a sample survey was conducted.

1.4.1 Sample survey

Three fishing villages were selected for this study from the 63 fishing villages of Chengalpattu district (Appendix 3).

Thiruchinakuppam is the largest fishing village in Chengalpattu, located 20 km north of Madras city. Though it is called a village, it looks rather like an urban slum.

Panaiyur kuppam is situated 29 km south of Madras city and is a medium-sized fishing village. In spite of beach resorts springing up near this village, it has managed to retain its rural characteristics.

Chemmencheri kuppam is a small fishing village located 40 km south of the city and has not been affected by urban characteristics.

Factors common to all the three villages were: (i) link workers function in these villages, and (ii) fishing is exclusively by traditional non-mechanized crafts.

A sample size comprising 10 per cent of the total number of fisherwomen of age 13 and above was selected from each of the three villages based on the random sampling method. For the purpose of determining the sample, a basic survey was done of all fisherwomen – of age 13 years and above – in each of the three villages. The trained link workers were assigned the task of preparing the list of adult fisherwomen and collecting information regarding the age, marital status, education and occupation of all the adult fisherwomen in each family based on a questionnaire. Since the link workers were involved in this type of activity for the first time, they initially did not feel confident. This task not only brought in reliable basic data but also proved their ability and improved their self-confidence.

The interview schedule was formulated in order to collect as much information as possible in the sample survey. It was tested and changes were made where required. The author herself interviewed the adult fisherwomen face to face. It took 45 days to complete the sample survey.

1.4.2. Case studies¹

On completing the sample survey the author selected nine fisherwomen for in-depth interviews and observations to prepare case studies (Appendix 1). The selected women represent the various types of women found in the villages. Though many women are involved in fish marketing, only one case study on a fish vending woman was done, in order to provide information about other fish vending women. Though only a few women belonging to the fishing community sell illicit liquor, a case study was conducted on one of them to draw direct attention to their plight.

The choice of the case study women was also dictated by their willingness to cooperate in sharing information about their village and about their personal lives.

The analysis in this report is mainly based on the information collected through the case study method. The assimilation of case data was done over a period of six months in order to observe and discuss different happenings in the family and to cross-check the information collected. In all, nearly eight months were spent in data gathering, which included both the peak and lean fishing seasons.

Observations were recorded while interviewing the fisherwomen and while staying in the villages. Other than the regular field visits, the author lived in each of the villages for a minimum of ten days with the families of fisherwomen selected for case studies. Living in the villages not only helped the villagers, especially the women, to develop confidence in the author, but also helped the author gain insights into the problems the fisherwomen face in their daily lives. The author was also able to meet and talk to fisherwomen who did not come under the purview of the sample size.

Group discussions were organized with fisherwomen and fishermen. The author also discussed the women's position in the village with the village leaders.

2. PROFILES OF THREE FISHING VILLAGES

2.1. Demographic features

2.1.1. Population

According to the *Census Report on Marine Fisheries*,² there are 476, 127 and 83 families in Thiruchinankuppam, Panaiyur kuppam and Chemmencheri kuppam, respectively. The respective total populations are 2179, 607 and 338. However, the basic survey conducted revealed some small differences.³ The number of families in the respective villages according to the basic survey are 449, 117 and 86.

2.1.2. Religion and caste

The fisherfolk in the three villages are Hindus. There is a settlement on the border of Panaiyur kuppam comprising 25 Muslim families. Hardly any social interaction occurs between the fisherfolk and the Muslims, though Muslim fish traders buy fish from the fisherfolk.

Marine fishing is a caste occupation and the fisherfolk in all the three villages belong to one or the other sub-caste of the main fishing caste group of Pattinavars. The fisherfolk of Chemmencheri are Periapattinavars and those in the other two villages are Chinnapattinavars. Customs and norms designed to keep these two sub-castes distinct are rigidly adhered to, and each sub-caste claims superiority over the other. Many spirited tales of feuds between the two sub-castes are narrated with gusto by village elders.

¹ In all, nine case studies were prepared. Only three representative studies, however, are included in this paper (Appendix 1)

² *Census Report on Marine Fisheries*. Directorate of Fisheries, Government of Tamil Nadu. Madras. 1982. p. 1b.

³ The basic survey was conducted by the author with the assistance of fisherwomen link workers, as described in the introductory chapter. Any reference to "basic survey" in this report refers to this survey.

2.2. Infrastructure facilities

2.2.1. *Housing*

Panaiyur kuppam was selected for the implementation of a government housing scheme under which each family is entitled to a cement concrete house, free of cost. The house comprises a room and a kitchen. Of a total of about 120 families in the village, about 80 have been covered under the scheme. Preparations for this scheme such as plot allocation, were made in 1978. Since then, a few more families have settled in Panaiyur kuppam and many newly-wed couples have set up their own homes. These people have not been included within the scope of the 1978 scheme and local leaders are trying to get them also included as beneficiaries of the scheme.

The fisherfolk of Thiruchinankuppam managed recently to acquire legal rights over the lands on which their huts stand. There are only seven terraced houses in the village and the remaining are thatched houses. Adding to the problem of inadequate housing in this village is the annual occurrence of sea erosion. Huts are washed away every year and erosion reduces the land area available for reconstruction.

In Chemmencheri kuppam, five houses are terraced, 15 tiled and the rest are thatched.

2.2.2. *Sanitary facilities*

Women in Chemmencheri have to walk a kilometre to reach the casuarina groves where they can answer nature's call in some seclusion. Women in Panaiyur have to walk a kilometre and a half to reach a huge pit for the same purpose. Women from Thiruchinankuppam can choose to either walk a kilometre to a roadside public toilet, where they have to pay Rs. 0.15 as service charges, or they can go to an area filled with thorny bushes, where they choose the latter as it is free.

There are make-shift bathrooms made of old tin sheets, tarpaulin and thatches in almost all the households.

2.2.3. *Water*

In Thiruchinankuppam, a single tap near the main road caters to the drinking water requirements of all the households in the village. There are two wells in each of the other two villages and these are used by all the villagers to draw drinking water. Some economically better placed households have dug bore wells and installed hand pumps and these are at times made available to neighbours for washing, bathing and cleaning.

2.2.4. *Electricity*

In Chemmencheri 10 houses have been electrified. Panaiyur homes do not have the benefit of electric power yet, though lamp posts stand on roads. In Thiruchinankuppam, power is supplied to six houses, but not to the roads yet.

2.2.5. *Roads and transport*

All three villages have access to the main road. In the case of Thiruchinankuppam, the huts have in fact encroached the main road, creating traffic problems. In the other two villages, unmetalled roads of 10 m width and half a km length link the village with the main road. These unmetalled link roads create problems for cyclists and pedestrians, especially during the rainy season.

State government buses ply on the main road. There are comparatively fewer buses to Chemmencheri than to the other two villages.

2.2.6. *Balwadis, schools and adult literacy centres*

Balwadis (day care centres for children below the age of five) function in all three villages. These are run by the government and a few non-governmental organizations. A new government programme – the Chief Minister's nutritious noon meal scheme – has been implemented in Thiruchinankuppam and Chemmencheri.

There is a government primary school in each of the three villages. The school at Chemmencheri was set up in 1983 with the help of extension workers of the Fisheries Department and the BOBP, while in the other two villages, the schools have been functional for the past five

years. There are only one or two teachers in each of these schools. For example, in Panaiyur, there are two teachers and in Chemmencheri, only one teacher.

Adult education classes for fisherwomen are conducted in Thiruchinankuppam and Panaiyur kuppam under the auspices of non-governmental organizations.

2.2.7. Medical facilities

For serious ailments, the fisherfolk go to the Government General Hospital in Madras. For other ailments, they visit a primary health centre situated within six to eight km from their village. Panaiyur kuppam has a health worker — a uisherwoman trained by a non-governmental organization — who treats minor ailments.

The fisher-folk set great store by “godmen”, male and female, whose “medicine” includes sacrifice of a fowl to the village deity, or cooking sumptuous meals for the needy. Native healers who dispense herbs are also patronized.

2.2.8. Community halls

Community halls have been constructed in Panaiyur and Chemmencheri with the help of voluntary agencies and the BOBP.

2.3. Fishing assets, economy and credit facilities

Fishermen in all three villages follow traditional fishing methods. In Panaiyur kuppam, except for two households all others own means of production — nets and kattuniarams. In Chemmencheri two single-member households comprising only women do not own any means of production. In Thiruchinankuppam, a rough estimate reveals that only 25% of the households own production assets while the remaining 75% contribute only labour. The fishermen labourers are either those who are indebted to a net owner and, therefore, bonded to work only for him, or those who are not indebted but still have to work for net owners, as they do not own their means of production.

Fisherwomen are involved in fish marketing, fish processing, net making, prawn peeling and other shore-based fishing activities. Some of them are self-employed as vegetable or sweet-meat vendors, etc.

2.3.1. Fishing craft and gear

There are no mechanised boats in any of the three villages. The most commonly used craft is the kattumaram.¹ A few households own masula boats,² used mainly for beach seining. However, government reports, on which Table 2.1. is based, do not reveal the presence of masula boats in any of the villages.

Table 2.1
Types of craft and gear in the three fishing villages

Village	Type of craft			Gear.
	Kattumaram	Canoe	Total	
Thiruchinankuppam	233	1	224	310
Panaiyur	96	16	112	222
Chemmencheri	80	—	80	224

Source: Census Report of Marine Fisheries, Madras, 1982, p. 29

¹ The kattumaram is basically a raft of three to five logs fastened with ropes. It is suitable for surf-ridden beaches. (See *Marine Small-Scale Fisheries of Tamil Nadu. A General Description*, BQBP/INF/5, Madras, 1983. p. 3.)

² The masula boat is a double-ended craft made of planks stitched together with coir and/or polyethylene twine. The craft is propelled by oars and is mainly used for setting beach seines in calm weather. (See *Marine Small-Scale Fisheries of Tamil Nadu. A General Description*, BOBP/INF/5. Madras, 1983. P. 3.)

The gillnet is the most widely used gear. Of the small-mesh gillnets made of nylon yarn, “kavalai valai”, “arai valai” and “thatakavalai” are the most commonly used. Beach seines and “thoori valai” – a small boat seine made of cotton – are also operated.

2.3.2. *Sharing the catch*

Income from fishing is determined on the basis of a crew member's individual contribution of the means of production. The total catch is divided among the crew members in proportion to their contribution of production assets. The sharing of catch differs according to the type of net used. For example, in gillnetting, the catch is divided into two shares – one for the net and kattumaram owner and the other for the crew members.

Coolie fishermen of Thiruchinankuppam are paid on the basis of catch, irrespective of the hours of work put in.

2.3.3. *Marketing*

Fish marketing is done by fisherwomen and cycle traders. As soon as the kattuniarams land with the catch, the catch is sorted and auctioned. From each basket of fish, a small quantity (5-10%) is kept aside as a contribution to the village. This fish is auctioned at the end and the money collected from it is called “village money” and is controlled by local leaders.

In Thiruchinankuppam, the auctioning is done by two women appointed by village leaders. They are paid Rs. 5 per day from the village money and are also entitled to a handful of fish from each basket auctioned. An accountant records the name of fishermen, the auctioned amount and also the amount received from auctioning “ooru meen” (village fish). She receives Rs. 7 per day. Auctions are irregular in Thiruchinankuppam mainly due to allegations about misappropriation of village money by a few leaders. The fisherwomen, therefore, sell the catch in nearby markets or in markets located in the northern suburbs of Madras city. Some of them sell fish door to door in the newly established industrial estates.

In Panaiyur, a fisherwoman selected by village elders conducts the auction. She is paid Rs. 6 per day from the village money and is entitled to a handful of fish from every basket auctioned. An elderly man works as the accountant and he is paid Rs. 7 per day. The Muslim cycle traders from an adjacent cluster are involved in fish marketing. They carry the catch to distant markets while the fisherwomen supply nearby agricultural villages and local markets. Some fisherwomen selling fish in agricultural villages have to stay there overnight and return only the next morning.

In Chemmencheri, auctioning and accounting are done by male members of a Harijan family residing in the agricultural village nearby. The auctioner is paid Rs. 2 per day from the village money and is entitled to a handful of fish from each basket auctioned. The fisherwomen sell the catch in inland villages or local markets. Cycle traders also buy fish at the auction and serve distant markets.

The barter system is not dead yet. Fisherwomen who market fish in neighbouring villages sometimes get in return not cash but commodities such as paddy, vegetables, tamarind and red chillies. The catch is transported on foot by headload, or by bus or cycle by male traders. Fisherwomen occasionally use passing trucks for transportation by paying the driver a small sum of money.

2.3.4. *Credit and financial institutions*

Credit for fisherfolk, usually called ‘advance’, is made available by net owners and other comparatively wealthy fishermen. Cycle traders and prawn dealers also provide credit. Though no interest is charged, the indebted fisherman is bound to repay the amount by working exclusively for the net owner or by selling his catch exclusively to the dealer giving the loan.

Credit can also be obtained by pawning jewellery, utensils, ration cards, etc., and an interest of three per cent per month is charged on such loans. Giving and obtaining credit is chiefly the job of women. There are no banks in any of the three villages. Further, fisherfolk seem to regard banking procedures as too complex.

2.3.5. Cooperative society

Fishermen cooperative societies have been functioning in all three villages for more than a decade now. These societies have helped fishermen obtain credit for the purchase of gear and kattumarams. The societies are trying to obtain mechanized craft for those members who have deposited a fixed amount with the societies for this purpose.

All three villages have fisherwomen's cooperative societies as well. The first such society was established in Thiruchinankuppam. The other two villages have had these societies since 1983. Though fisherwomen's cooperative societies are multi-purpose societies, they have mainly served to channel institutional credit to fisherwomen involved in fish marketing.

2.4. Social and political leadership

Decision making in the three villages is exclusively in the control of men. The women cannot participate, directly or actively, in decision-making; in fact, they cannot even attend village meetings.

2.4.1. Caste panchayat

Leadership in the caste panchayats is hereditary. The leaders are called "periathanakkaar" and "chinnathanakkaar". The terms, 'mudalthanakkaar" (first wealthy man) and "irandam-thanakkaar" (second wealthy man) are also used to refer to these leaders. The caste panchayat comprises the thanakkaars and a few other fishermen included for their influence, age, ability, education, etc. The caste panchayat is a strong body empowered to settle disputes among its members and administer the observance of social norms. It acts as an instrument to check non-conformity and, therefore, serves to reinforce traditions and taboos.

2.4.2. Politics and elections

Fisherfolk in Thiruchinankuppam are active in party politics. Political parties have their offices in this village. The other two villages are less active in party politics.

Fisherfolk in Chemmencheri and Panaiyur abide by the decision of their leaders on the political party to be supported during an election. In Thiruchinankuppam, people owe allegiance to different parties and vote according to party loyalties.

2.4.3. Parallel leadership

In all three villages a new leadership, based on wealth combined with political backing and even education, is emerging. Traditional caste panchayat leaders hold on to their positions either as puppets of these new leaders or by virtue of political support. In Thiruchinankuppam, the caste panchayat leaders are mere figureheads. The real power is wielded by officers of the cooperative society backed by political parties. In Panaiyur, a set of young leaders (25-35 years old) has forcibly taken over from the rather ineffectual traditional leaders. In Chemmencheri, where the caste panchayat is still powerful due to the fact that its leaders are also office bearers of the cooperative society, the first elder lives outside the village and, therefore, the responsibility of leadership rests with the second elder.

2.5. Basic Information on fisherwomen In the three villages

According to the basic survey, the number of fisherwomen (of age 13 years and above) is 743 in Thiruchinankuppam, 192 in Panaiyur kuppam and 124 in Chemmencheri kuppam.

2.5.1. Age and marital status

The age and marital status of fisherwomen in three villages is given in Table 2.2. About a third of the fisherwomen are in the youngest age group, 13-20. Of these, a third are married. In the next two age groups, 21-30 and 31-40, 85-90% of the women are married. In the age group 41-50, roughly half of women are married and the remaining half either widowed or separated. In the higher age groups up to 70, for every married woman there are two widowed/separated women. Overall, 61% of the women are married, 23% single, 15% widowed and one per cent separated.

Thanakkaar' means wealthy man Peria" is senior and "Chinna" is junior Thus "senior wealthy man' and junior wealthy man

Table 2.2
Fisherwomen by age group and marital status in
the three fishing villages

Age group	Marital status				Total (%)	N
	Single (%)	Married (%)	Widowed.(%)	Separated (%)		
13 – 20						
Thi	64.2	35.8			100.0	257
Pan	65.0	35.0			100.0	60
Chem	60.0	40.0			100.0	35
Total	64.0	36.0			100.0	352
21 – 30						
Thi	8.8	86.3	2.9	2.0	100.0	204
Pan	—	95.4	2.3	2.3	100.0	44
Chem	8.6	88.6	—	2.8	100.0	35
Total	7.4	88.0	2.5	2.1	100.0	283
31 – 40						
Thi	—	85.2	13.9	0.9	100.0	122
Pan	2.3	76.7	20.9	—	100.0	43
Chem	—	93.8	6.2	—	100.0	32
Total	0.5	84.8	14.2	0.5	100.0	197
41 – 50						
Thi		51.7	45.7	2.6	100.0	116
Pan		56.5	43.5	—	100.0	23
Chem		33.3	66.7	—	100.0	18
Total		50.3	47.7	2.0	100.0	157
51 – 60						
Thi		30.3	69.7		100.0	33
Pan		55.6	44.4		100.0	9
Chem		33.3	66.7		100.0	3
Total		35.6	64.4		100.0	45
51 – 70						
Thi		15.4	84.6		100.0	13
Pan		57.1	42.9		100.0	7
Chem		100.0	—		100.0	1
Total		33.3	66.7		100.0	21
71 and above						
Thi		100.0	—		100.0	2
Pan		—	100.0		100.0	2
Chem		—	—		—	—
Total		50.0	50.0		100.0	4
All age groups						
Thi	24.5	59.7	14.7	1.0	100.0	747
Pan	21.3	62.8	15.4	0.5	100.0	188
Chem	19.4	66.9	12.9	0.8	100.0	124
Total	23.3	61.1	14.6	0.9	100.0	1059

Thi: Thiruchinankuppam. Pan: Panaiyur kuppam. Chem: Chemmencheri kuppam.

2.5.2. Literacy

Seven out of every 10 fisherwomen are illiterate (see Table 2.3). The highest level of literacy among fisherwomen is found in Thiruchinankuppam (31%) and the lowest in Chemmencheri

(20%), with Panaiyur occupying a position in between. Thiruchinankuppam is located close to Madras city and hence offers access to schools whereas there was no school in Chemmencheri till a year ago. In all three villages, women in the younger age groups are more literate than those in the older age groups.

In Panaiyur, the literacy level in the middle age group of 31-50 is distinctly higher than the corresponding figures for the other two villages. One possible reason for this, according to the fisherwomen themselves, is the fact that many of the fisherwomen in this age group hail from Madras where they learned to read and write.

Table 2.3
Fisherwomen by age and literacy level
In the three fishing villages

Age Group	Literacy level		Total (%)	N
	Literate (%)	Illiterate (%)		
13 — 20				
Thi	45.5	54.5	100.0	257
Pan	35.0	65.0	100.0	60
Chem	34.3	65.7	100.0	35
Total	42.6	57.4	100.0	352
21 — 30				
Thi	39.7	60.3	100.0	204
Pan	29.5	70.5	100.0	44
Chem	28.6	71.4	100.0	35
Total	36.7	63.3	100.0	283
31 — 40				
Thi	14.8	85.2	100.0	122
Pan	23.3	76.7	100.0	43
Chem	9.3	90.7	100.0	32
Total	15.7	84.3	100.0	197
41 — 50				
Thi	8.6	91.4	100.0	116
Pan	21.7	78.3	100.0	23
Chem	—	100.0	100.0	18
Total	9.6	90.4	100.0	157
51 — 60				
Thi	9.0	90.9	100.0	33
Pan	—	100.0	100.0	9
Chem	—	100.0	100.0	3
Total	6.7	93.3	100.0	45
61 — 70				
Thi		100.0	100.0	13
Pan		100.0	100.0	7
Chem		100.0	100.0	1
Total		100.0	100.0	21
71 and above				
Thi		100.0	100.0	2
Pan		100.0	100.0	2
Chem		—	—	—
Total		100.0	100.0	4

Table 2.3 (Contd.)

All age groups				
Thi	30.7	69.3	100.0	747
Pan	26.0	73.9	100.0	188
Chem	20.2	79.8	100.0	124
Total	28.6	71.4	100.0	1059

Thi: Thiruchinankuppam. Pan: Panaiyur kuppam. Chem: Chemmencheri kuppam.

2.5.3. *Employment*

The term “employment” generally refers to paid work but it is used here in a broader sense.

In all three villages, a large number of women engage in shore-based activities such as fish processing, handling and selling and net-making. However, many of them do not get paid for the work they perform. Many fisherwomen, for example, sell the fish caught by members of their family, but the proceeds are usually credited to male members of the family. The work put in by women in fish marketing is assigned no value whatsoever. Only those women who buy fish at the auctions and market them at a profit are able to set a value on their labour.

In the basic survey, this clear distinction between the two categories of women was not drawn and, therefore, the data presented in Table 2.4 do not give an accurate picture of the number of women engaged in fish marketing. However, it can be seen from the table that 44% of the fisherwomen in the three villages are employed. The highest figure for employment is in Chenimencheri (65%) and the lowest in Thiruchinankuppam (40%). Only a few (11%) unmarried women are employed, as unmarried women are by tradition confined to their homes.

Table 2.5 gives details of the type of work done by employed fisherwomen. A large majority of them (82%) are involved in fishing-related activities, such as fresh and dried fish marketing, net-making and prawn peeling. About 17% are involved in activities not related to fishing, such as vegetable and sweetmeat vending, and selling rice or firewood. In Thiruchinankuppam, a few women work as onion peelers in an onion export company. There are also a few beedi workers, plastic wire basket makers, tailors, balwadi teachers, cooks and ayahs. A few women (one per cent) are involved both in fishery and non-fishery activities.

Of the 28 single women employed in the three villages, Thiruchinankuppam accounts for as many as 24. Of these, nearly three-fourths engage in fishery-related activities. A few work as prawn peelers in a prawn export company 2 km from their village. Some are involved in trawl net making: Thiruchinankuppam is near Kasimedu, a major fish landing centre for trawlers.

Table 2.4
Fisherwomen's marital status and employment in the
three fishing villages

Employment status	Marital status																			
	Single				Married				Widowed				Separated				Total			
	Thi	Pan	Chem	Total	Thi	Pan	Chem	Total	Thi	Pan	Chem	Total	ThE	Pan	Chem	Total	Thi	Pan	Chem	Total
Employed (%)	13.1	2.1	12.5	11.3	45.5	56.8	78.3	51.8	58.2	69.0	75.0	61.5	50.0	—	100.0	50.0	39.5	46.8	65.3	43.8
Not employed (%)	86.9	97.5	87.5	88.7	54.5	43.2	21.7	48.2	41.8	31.0	25.0	38.1	50.0	100.0	—	50.0	60.5	53.2	34.7	56.2
Total (%)	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0
	183	40	24	247	446	118	83	647	110	29	16	155	8	1	1	10	747	188	124	1059

Thi: Thiruchinankuppam. Pan: Panaiyur kuppam. Chem: Chemmencheri kuppam.

Table 2.5
Type Of employment of fisherwomen and their marital status
in the three fishing villages

	Marital status																			
	Single				Married				Widowed				Separated				Total			
Employment	Thi	Pan	Chem	Total	Thi	Pan	Chem	Total	Thi	Pan	Chem	Total	Thi	Pan	Chem	Total	Thi	Pan	Chem	Total
Fishing related activity (%)	70.8	—	33.3	64.3	80.3	77.6	96.9	83.0	81.2	90.0	91.6	84.4	75.0	—	—	60.0	79.7	79.5	92.6	81.9
Non-fishing related activity %	25.0	100.0	66.7	32.1	19.2	22.4	3.1	16.7	17.2	10.0	—	13.5	25.0	—	100.0	40.0	19.3	20.5	6.2	17.2
Fishing and non-fishing related activity (%)	4.2	—	—	3.6	0.5	—	—	0.3	1.6	—	8.3	2.1	—	—	—	—	1.0	—	1.2	0.9
Total (%)	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0
N =	24	1	3	28	203	67	65	335	64	20	12	96	4	—	1	5	295	88	81	464

ThE: Thiruchinankuppam. Pan: Panaiyur kuppam. Chem: Chemmencheri kuppam.

3. FACTORS INFLUENCING THE ROLE AND STATUS OF FISHERWOMEN

3.1. Background Information

Ten per cent of the fisherwomen in each of the three villages were interviewed in the sample survey. In all, 108 fisherwomen — 75 from Thiruchinankuppam, 20 from Panaiyur kuppam and 13 from Chemmencheri kuppam — were interviewed.

Almost all the fisherwomen interviewed were uncertain about their own age, and that of their children, the number of years they had been married, etc. Many of them related these dates to important events in their lives, such as a marriage in the family, a clash in the village or an event of national importance. Statements such as, "My first son was born when my husband's brother's marriage was fixed," or "my marriage took place on the day one of the leaders — I think Nehru — died," were fairly common. Ten fisherwomen, most of them young and newly married, refused to name their husbands: this was considered disrespectful.

3.1.1. Age and marital status

Of the 108 fisherwomen interviewed, 100 are in the age group 21-60. Two-thirds of them are in the 21-40 age group. A little over 75% of the women are married, about 16% widowed, two per cent separated and the remaining (6%) unmarried. Most of the unmarried women are in the age group 20 and below (Table 3.1). In Chemmencheri kuppam, only one woman above the age of 20 is unmarried and that because of financial constraints. In Thiruchinankuppam, five fisherwomen are not married in the legal sense though they consider themselves married. And there is a couple that has been cohabiting for ten years and has four children but would like to undergo a formal marriage in a temple.

3.1.2. Literacy and employment

The literacy levels and employment status of the women interviewed are set out in Table 3.2. Eight out of every 10 women are illiterates, and of them only 30% do not work. Even if we consider the entire fisherwomen population of the three villages, the percentage of women not working is about the same. The majority of the employed women engage in fish marketing. Two women from Thiruchinankuppam auction fish at Kasimedu, a major fish landing centre in Madras. Eleven per cent of the women are self-employed as fruit and vegetable vendors, etc.

3.1.3. Skills possessed by fisherwomen

The skills possessed by fisherwomen relate essentially to fishing and allied occupations. One in four possesses no skills (Table 3.3). Of the remaining, seven out of every 10 fisherwomen are skilled in net making. Though it is not usual to see fisherwomen making nets, some of them make nets to order in their homes. A few private companies and individual fishermen give the fisherwomen yarn for net making. This is not a regular job and the women are paid piece rates for the work they do.

A few women make baskets from plastic wire for their own use, as these do not enjoy market demand.

3.1.4. Place of origin of the fisherwomen

Whether the fisherwomen interviewed are natives or immigrants has an important bearing on some of the survey parameters. For example, those who emigrated from the city would have had relatively better access to educational facilities than those who were born and brought up in villages.

Table 3.4, which lists the places of origin of the fisherwomen interviewed, reveals that 44% of the fisherwomen continue to live in the village of their birth even after marriage. The proportion of natives in Thiruchinankuppam is relatively high, because its population is large, enabling families to contract marital alliances within the village. In other villages immigrants are distinctly more numerous than natives. Of the women immigrants, the majority come from Madras city; others belong to neighbouring villages or other towns and cities.

Table 3.1
Fisherwomen Interviewed, by age and marital status

	Age group															
	13 – 20				21 – 40				41 – 60				For all groups			
Marital Status	Thi	Pan	Chem	Total	Thi	Pan	Chem	Total	Thi	Pan	Chem	Total	Thi	Pan	Chem	Total
Unmarried	75.0	50.0	50.0	62.5	—	—	9.1	1.5	—	—	—	—	4.0	5.0	15.4	5.6
Married	25.0	50.0	50.0	37.5	95.1	100.0	81.8	94.0	53.3	33.3	—	51.5	74.7	85.0	76.9	76.8
Widowed	—	—	—	—	4.9	—	—	3.0	43.3	66.7	—	45.5	20.0	10.0	—	15.7
Separated	—	—	—	—	—	—	9.1	1.5	3.3	—	—	3.0	1.3	—	7.7	1.9
Total (%) =	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0	—	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0

Thi: Thiruchinankuppam. Pan: P2naiyur kuppam. Chem: Chemmencheri kuppam.

Table 3.2
Fisherwomen interviewed, by employment and education

	Illiterate								Education – no. of years of schooling											
					1—3				4--.6				7—9				Total			
	Thi	Pan	Chem	Total	Thi	Pan	Chem	Total	Thi	Pan	Cheni	Total	Thi	Pan	Chem	Total	Thi	Pan	Chem	Total
Employment																				
Nil (%)	29.2	30.8	33.3	29.9	—	50.0	—	25.0	42.8	80.0		50.0	50.0		—	33.3	30.7	45.0	23.1	32.4
Fresh fish selling (%)	55.4	53.8	55.6	55.2	100.0	—	100.0	50.0	28.6	20.0	100.0	35.7	50.0	—	—	33.3	53.3	40.0	61.5	51.9
Dry fish selling (%)	1.5	—	—	1.1	—		—	—			—	—	—	—	—	—	1.3	—	—	0.9
fish auctioning (%)	4.6	—	—	3.4	—	—	—	—	14.3	—		7.1	—		—		5.3	—	—	3.7
Non-fishing related self-employment activities (%)	9.2	15.4	11.1	10.3	—	50.0	—	25.0	14.3	—	—	7.1	—	—	100.0	33.3	9.4	15.0	15.4	11.1
Total (%)	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0
Total N =	65	13	9	87	1	2	1	4	7	5	2	14	2	—	1	3	75	20	13	108

Thi: Thiruchinankuppam. Pan: Panaiyurkuppam. Chem: Chemmencheri kuppam.

Table 3.3
Fisherwomen's skills

		No. of respondents (%)			
Skills		fbi	Pan	Chem	Total
Net making		74.7	55.0	76.9	77.3
Plastic wire basket weaving,		1.3	5.0	7.7	2.8
Nil		24.0	40.0	15.4	25.9
		100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0
Total	N =	75	20	13	108

Table 3.4
Place of origin of fisherwomen interviewed

		No. of respondents (%)			
Place of origin		Thi	Pan	Chem	Total
Born in this village		52.0	30.0	23.0	44.4
Came from another village		16.0	20.0	30.8	18.5
Came from Madras city		26.7	40.0	38.5	30.5
Came from other town/city		5.3	10.0	7.7	6.6
		100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0
Total	N =	75	20	13	108

Table 3.5
Reasons for fisherwomen changing place of stay

		No. of respondents (%)			
Reasons		Thi	Pan	Chem	Total
Marriage		66.7	85.7	100.0	76.6
Quarrel with family		5.5	14.3	—	6.7
To seek better standard of living		16.7	—	—	10.0
Other		11.1	—	—	6.7
	%	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0
Total	N	36	14	10	60

More than 75% of the fisherwomen emigrants left their natal homes because of marriage (Table 3.5). This accords with the general custom that the bride joins her husband's family after marriage. All of Chemmencheri's immigrant women came here because they married fishermen here. A sixth of the Thiruchinankuppam immigrants have been motivated by hope of a better livelihood. Some left their natal homes because of family quarrels or other reasons.

3.2. Role and status of fisherwomen

The status of fisherwomen has two components: Status in the family and status in the community. Status in society depends on the various tasks performed by fisherwomen in relation to the main occupation of fishing. Traditionally, fishermen capture fish, the women engage in shore-based activities. The tasks performed by men are considered productive and, therefore, superior and indispensable, while those performed by women are considered insignificant and inferior. Household labour and other unpaid work done by fisherwomen is considered secondary and their economic activities are almost totally ignored. It is, nonetheless, a fact that the role played by fisherwomen is vital not only to their families but also to the village economy, as they are the main sellers and distributors of fish.

The most important indicators of the role and status of fisherwomen are literacy; employment; health and nutrition, mortality and morbidity rates; the social organization, which includes type of family, stereotyping of sex roles and division of labour; inheritance and involvement in decision-making at various levels.

3.2.1. Literacy

A majority of the fisherwomen in the three villages are illiterate. Though more girls attend school now than before, the number of girls attending schools is much lower than the corresponding number for boys.

3.2.2. Employment

Most of the fisherwomen in the three villages take part in shore-based fishery-related activities. These activities are not usually assigned any cash value. Fisherwomen thus perform unpaid work both at home and outside. But some women are self-employed in non-fishery activities.

Though fisherwomen who earn a specific daily income enjoy a better status within their families, their labour-income contribution does not help improve the status of fisherwomen as a group, nor does it significantly improve women's control over the course of their own development.

3.2.3. Health and nutrition

No conclusions regarding mortality and morbidity rates of fisherwomen could be arrived at because of insufficient data. This is because women do not consider themselves ill unless they are bedridden. They take seriously only the ailments of male members of the family which would affect family income. The ailments of women are neglected or ignored.

It is customary for women to eat only after serving men and children in the family. Fish, the only cheap protein available, is served mainly to men and children. Only if there is some fish left over do the women get to eat it. It can, therefore, be safely concluded that nutritional deficiency among fisherwomen is greater than among men.

All physical ailments are in the first place attributed to the wrath of the family deity or goddess. Remedies are, therefore, sought from 'godwomen' and priests.

Such is the hold of superstition that women tend to neglect their physical ailments. Child bearing, along with domestic and other chores, causes women great physical strain, especially in view of their poor nutritional intake.

3.2.4. Family planning

The study did not aim at finding out the exact number of women who have undergone sterilization. It was, however, ascertained during general discussions that sterilization after the fourth child is an increasing trend. Having four children is considered ideal.

Women in the three villages are aware of the various methods of family planning. Some of them have undergone sterilization of their own accord while others have been persuaded by neighbours and friends. Only one man, from Panaiyur, has undergone vasectomy. No such case was noted in the other two villages. There is a general unfounded belief that vasectomy leads to ailments and debility. It is believed that a fisherman should stay fit and virile and should not undergo the strain of an operation, while there is no reservation about a woman being exposed to the after-effects of a sterilization operation.

3.2.5. *Social organization*

Nuclear families and arranged marriages are common in all three villages. Women are generally expected to marry before the age of 20. As a matter of fact, the better-off families usually marry off their daughters a year after they reach puberty. It is the poor who put off the marriage till they can save or borrow enough money.

The process of socialization is geared to helping a girl grow up into a woman who will conform to the existing set roles of a woman in the family. Loud talk and questions are discouraged. She is taught to take care of the male members and the children in the family. The socialization process clearly delineates the sex roles a girl/woman has to perform. She is not allowed to touch the net or the kattumaram during the menstrual period and is not allowed on the beach when fishermen set out to fish. Women are, in short, not expected to be involved in any activity directly connected with fishing. Other than household chores, a woman is expected to engage only in shore-based activities like fish marketing and drying.

3.2.6. *Inheritance*

Fisherwomen do not inherit any property. In the rare cases where the fisherwoman is an only child, she inherits from her natal family. All family assets are considered to be the property of the male head of family; thus he controls the economic resources. Even the jewellery and household articles a fisherwoman brings from her natal home at the time of marriage, are deemed to be the property of the male head or her husband.

3.2.7. *Decision-making in the village*

Decision-making at the village level is restricted to fishermen. Fisherwomen are non-entities and cannot assume any leadership position in the village; they are expected to abide by the decisions made by male leaders of the village.

3.2.8. *Summary*

From the indicators discussed, it can be concluded that women do not enjoy a status equal to that of men in the three villages. They are not allowed to participate in decision-making. Fisherwomen's claim on production assets in the family does not equal that of men. They are socialized into accepting roles subordinate to men in the family and the village. Various factors contribute to the assignment of a secondary position to fisherwomen. These are discussed in the next section.

3.3. Factors influencing the role and status of fisherwomen

There are two categories of factors influencing the role and status of fisherwomen – group factors and individual factors. Among the group factors are: economy and technology, asset ownership pattern, socio-cultural and traditional values, and social and political awareness. Individual factors include employment status, age, marital status and educational level.

3.3.1. *Group factors*

Proximity of the village to the city has a lot of influence on the outlook and way of life of fisherwomen. For example, Thiruchinankuppam is close to Madras and well connected to it by buses. The fisherwomen of this village, therefore, are exposed to women in the city and can observe different role models such as lady doctors, policewomen, etc. This gives them an idea of the varied functions women can serve in society. On the other hand, fisherwomen in the interior villages do not have similar access to the city, and fishermen are their only links to the outside world. Some fisherwomen in these villages engage in marketing but their markets are in villages nearby with a similar socio-cultural set-up.

Thiruchinankuppam fisherwomen are also exposed to the influence of mass media like radio, television and films. Many of them are ardent filmgoers, and their values are significantly influenced by films. Though by and large they appreciate films which reinforce traditional norms and values, they are not immune to the more contemporary values propagated by some films.

The mechanisms of social control in the three villages vary, largely due to their different sizes. Thiruchinankuppam is a large village, and consequently the caste panchayat there has only limited control over the affairs of individual families. There are too many families for the 10-member panchayat to function as an efficient arbiter of social norms. The other two villages are much smaller and, therefore, more tightly knit. In Panaiyur and Chemmencheri, even intra-family disputes are handled by the caste panchayat.

In a small village even the most minute deviation from the social norm gets magnified. In Chemmencheri, a young girl went out fishing with boys in her age group. This was promptly stopped by the panchayat. Thiruchinankuppam is relatively liberal about marriages; inter-caste and love marriages are not unusual in this village. No such case was observed in the other two villages. Fines and social disapproval are used effectively in Panaiyur and Chemmencheri to check non—conformity.

3.3.1.1. Economy and technology

When the village economy was a subsistence economy, the economic role of fisherwomen was an active one. The fish caught was largely for domestic consumption, and the surplus was bartered for the other necessities of life. Since women were active in barter, their position in the family was better than it is now, though their work did not bring in any cash income. The development of the market economy, however, has diminished the status of women. The fish catch was seen as a commodity to be exchanged and work started being equated with wage labour. Since family needs can be met only with money, the availability of work for money becomes a critical issue. At the same time, the marketing of fish brought in by husband/sons becomes a low status occupation since it does not bring in any additional income. Simultaneously, society also attaches a low status to wage labour in general and fish marketing in particular. Some of these trends can be discerned in the case of Machagandhi (Case study No.1), whose son does not allow her to market fish.

The primary role of fishermen is as fishermen, i.e., their worth is primarily assessed on the basis of their productive contribution. Only secondarily are they fathers, etc. On the contrary, the primary role of fisherwomen is in the household and, consequently, they are often seen as being non-productive. Income from fishing is thus seen as arising from the work of men alone though women contribute substantially to the family's finances.

The auction system for selling fish is a relatively recent innovation. There were no auctions a decade ago. The introduction of the auction system was made necessary for various reasons. For example, in Chemmencheri, auctions were introduced to augment village money for fighting a legal battle. In Panaiyur, the auction system was resorted to so that a part of the profits realised by Muslim cycle traders might be returned to the village. Auctions in Thiruchinankuppam were started for reasons similar to those in Chemmencheri.

The auction system has had both beneficial and adverse impacts on the fisherfolk. On fisherwomen, however, the impact has been more or less adverse. Fisherwomen are not usually able to outbid male cycle traders in auctions. The contribution they used to make to the family's coffers has, therefore, ceased. Instead, the male head of family receives the income directly from the traders who buy the catch at auctions. Since women no longer contribute directly to the family's finances, their role and status are further diminished. Paradoxically, however, within the village their status has improved somewhat, because it is considered prestigious not to work for money. The fact remains, however, that the dependency of fisherwomen on men has increased.

The demand for fish in urban areas has increased substantially, and this is reflected in the higher prices paid by traders who serve urban markets. Women are not usually able to compete with these traders. Those fisherwomen who live by marketing fish find the cost of serving distant markets very high; they confine their operations to nearby villages. Here again, since the good quality fish is almost exclusively bought for urban consumption, only

fish of a poorer quality, and, therefore, of lesser value, is available for local consumption and sale. These factors have led to fisherwomen giving up fish marketing, thus further diminishing their status within the family.

The development of improved technologies for fish capture has also affected fisherwomen. Prior to the introduction of machine-made nylon nets, fisherwomen had a substantial role to play as net-makers. With the introduction of mechanized net making, however, the number of women making nets has gone down substantially. The introduction of every new and improved technology makes certain existing skills redundant and there is a premium on learning new skills. Mechanized net-making has also had such an effect. The impact in this case, however, has been disproportionately more adverse on women than on men. Training opportunities for developing the new skills required have been channelled more towards fishermen than fisherwomen.

By disallowing fisherwomen access to the new technology, the myth that women are less capable than men in acquiring mechanical skills is perpetuated. This is further reinforced by the low literacy levels among women who cannot read the instructions and thus cannot easily be trained in machine operations.

Result; young fisherwomen of today are totally ignorant of the various types of nets. Older women used to make nets before net-making machines came into vogue, and therefore, possess a working knowledge of various types of gear. The knowledge of craft and gear is, therefore, slowly becoming a male preserve.

The introduction of improved net-making techniques has also had an adverse economic impact on fisherwomen. The new nets have pushed up catches, but these can no longer be handled by fisherwomen. This is especially so in the prawn trade, where big traders with refrigerated trucks have more or less completely edged out fisherwomen. Women associated with the prawn trade work mostly as unskilled labour – as sorters and peelers in prawn factories. Their wages are low, their working conditions very poor.

Improved transportation seems to have hit fisherwomen. While it has opened up distant markets, it has made transport of the catch to these markets expensive. Cycle traders are able to outbid women at auctions because of their better purchasing power; and since they do not incur transportation costs, they are able to undercut the women in sales. Unable to afford transportation costs, many fisherwomen still have to walk long distances to their markets, carrying headloads of fish. Cases of assault on fisherwomen walking to their markets are not uncommon.

Changes in the economic structure and improvements in technology have thus had unintended consequences on the status of fisherwomen, in society and in the family.

3.3.1.2. Asset ownership pattern and indebtedness

The role and status of women depend on their families' economic position, and the assets owned by them. Women from a better-off family rarely engage in household chores or in manual work such as transporting headloads of fish. They are able to hire other women to do these jobs and supervise them. This enhances their status in the village. Fisherwomen from poorer families, on the other hand, not only perform all the household chores (with assistance from their daughters) but also have to carry headloads of fish to the markets themselves.

More than 50% of the families of fisherwomen interviewed in Thiruchinankuppam do not own any means of production. (In the village as a whole, the percentage is 75.) In Panaiyur and Chemmencheri, however, the situation is different and only about 10% or less of the families belong to the category of non-owners (Table 3.6). Most families that own production assets own only a kattumaram and one or two types of nets. There are a few large owners who possess shore seines, masula boats, big kattumarams and different types of nets.

A fisherwoman's status in her husband's family can be significantly enhanced if her natal family owns production assets. In the case of one fisherwoman, her natal family is able to help her occasionally because it owns a trawler. Further, at the time of her marriage, the family gave a kattumaram and a net to the husband who did not own these assets. Though these assets are now owned by the husband, the fisherwoman enjoys a better status than other fisherwomen who did not bring such gifts from their natal homes.

Table 3.6
Fisherwomen families, by ownership of the
means of production

Ownership of means of production	Thi	Pan	Chem	Total
No	54.7	10.0	7.7	40.8
Yes	45.3	90.0	92.3	59.2
	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0
Total	N	75	20	13
				108

Thi: Thiruchinankuppam. Pan: Panaiyur kuppam. Chem: Chemmencheri kuppam.

Nearly all the women interviewed during the survey said that they did not personally own any assets. The jewellery, household articles, etc., presented by a fisherwoman's natal family at the time of marriage, all belong to the husband. Even those articles that a woman buys out of her own earnings are deemed to be owned by the husband. In general, women cannot own any assets individually. The only exceptions are separated women without children and women whose husbands are mentally deranged.

Fisherwomen do not inherit any property from their natal homes; it is claimed that their marriage is a heavy financial burden. Another reason is the fact their husbands are entitled to an inheritance from the husband's family. If the fisherwoman is an only child, she does inherit her parents' property, but even this is passed on to her husband at the time of marriage. A widow does not inherit her husband's property; her male children do. If these children are too young to handle the responsibility, the woman administers the property but has no right to any of it. In some cases, the brothers of her husband step in as administrators of the estate.

Even the jewellery worn by the fisherwomen is not their own. If a fisherwoman's husband wishes to pawn her jewellery, she has no option but to part with it. In sum, men have total control over all the assets in the family, including those brought in by women, while women have no claim over any of the assets owned by their husbands. The argument is that since all production assets are operated by men, fisherwomen can have no right over them. But the same argument does not apply when the question of fishermen's control over assets operated by fisherwomen, such as household articles or jewellery, arises.

No fisherwoman in the three villages studied has been able to obtain institutional credit for the purchase of craft or gear. The authorities concerned obviously do not take the question of women owning production assets seriously. It is further argued that since women will not be able to operate the craft or gear on their own, there is very little point in making credit available to them.

Indebtedness is another major problem faced by fisherfolk in the three villages. Of the fisherwomen interviewed, 94% belong to families that are in debt. Three out of every 10 families are indebted to the tune of Rs.1,000-2,000 and one family in five has an outstanding debt of Rs.2,000-3,000. One family in seven has debts ranging from Rs.5,000 to Rs.10,000 (Table 3.7). The families in the last category are big owners and have sufficient assets to pawn.

Moneylending is a lucrative business, as the interest rates charged are around 36% per annum. In the case of loans given without surety, the interest is as high as 120% per annum. These loans are usually given by "marwaris" or pawnbrokers. The loans given by net owners or traders, called 'advance' are nominally free of interest, but the borrower has to work for the lender till the debt is discharged.

Table 3.7
Fisherwomen families: indebtedness

Amount indebted (Rs)	Thi	Pan	Chem	Total
UptoRs.1,000	23.0	11.1	—	18.6
Rs. 1,001 — Rs. 2,000	33.9	33.3	10.0	31.4
Rs. 2,001 — Rs. 3,000	12.2	22.2	80.0	20.6
Rs. 3,001 — Rs. 4,000	9.4	22.2	10.0	11.8
Rs. 4,001 — Rs. 5,000	4.0	5.6	—	3.9
Rs. 5,001 — Rs. 8,000	9.4	5.6	—	7.8
Rs. 8,001 — Rs. 10,000	8.1	—	—	5.9
	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0
Total N =	74	18	10	102

Thi: Thiruchinankuppam. Pan: Panaiyur kuppam. Chem: Chemmencheri kuppam.

Most loans are taken from marwaris/pawnbrokers (Table 3.8), and the loan amounts are fairly large. Loans obtained from net owners or traders bond the fishermen to work for the owner or sell the catch exclusively to the trader till such time as the loan is repaid in full. In Thiruchinankuppam and Chemmencheri, loans have been sanctioned by banks and are usually channelled through cooperative societies. These loans are mainly for the purchase of gear or, in the case of fisherwomen, for fish marketing. Most of the loans taken are consumption loans for occasions like weddings, illness, etc (Table 3.9). Very few families in Thiruchinankuppam borrow to buy production assets. Active fishermen in Chemmencheri and Panaiyur borrow for purchasing nets, mainly because institutional credit is available only for this purpose. Families borrow small amounts from neighbours and relatives occasionally for day-to-day household expenses.

Most loan transactions, other than bank loans, are handled by women. Women have got involved in loan transactions because it is considered beneath the dignity of a man to borrow money.

Table 3.8
Fisherwomen families: source of loans (multiple answers)

Source of loan	Thi	Pan	Chem	Total
Marwari/Pawnbroker	64.9	66.7	40.0	62.7
Net owner	54.1	55.6	—	49.0
Prawn trader	—	61.1	—	10.8
Neighbour/relative	28.4	66.7	20.0	34.3
Cooperative society	47.3	—	100.0	46.0
Fish trader	1.3	—	—	1.0
Total N =	74	18	10	102

Table 3.9
Fishorwomen famillies purpose of loans (multiple answers)

Purpose of loans	Thi	Pan	Chem	Total
<i>Productive purpose</i>				
Buying craft and gear	16.2	61.1	100.0	32.3
For recruiting coolies	4.0	—		2.9
Fish vending	1.3	—	10.0	1.0
Advance to fishermen for fish	4.1	5.5	—	3.9
<i>Non-productive purpose</i>				
Medical expenses	28.4	38.9	30.0	30.4
Marriage expenses	37.8	33.3	10.0	34.3
Household expenses	27.0	33.3	30.0	28.4
Hut/house repair and building	6.6	—	10.0	5.9
Religious rituals and festivals	8.1	27.8	20.0	12.7
Death ceremony expenses	5.4	—	—	3.9
To pay chit fund instalments	8.1	22.2	10.0	10.8
Repay loan to net owner	4.0	—	—	2.9
Total	N = 74	18	10	102

Savings in the three villages are almost exclusively through the mechanism of chits. Only one woman out of the 108 interviewed had a savings account in a nationalised bank. Having studied in the city, she was aware of the services offered by banks and, therefore, chose to save through them. Others use the chit fund system in either of its two forms – the lottery chit or the auction chit. The system works in the following way. Each month a group of women contributes a fixed sum towards the chit. The person most in need of money is allowed to draw the month's total collection after deducting a discount. Each member can draw the money only once during the lifetime of a chit. There are chits for utensils, clothes and furniture.

Women are the main organisers of chits. The organiser of a chit has to exercise care in selecting the members as she is solely responsible for any default. As organiser, a woman gets the privilege of drawing the full chit amount without foregoing any money as “discount.” The popularity of chits is largely due to their informal nature. Savings through chit funds range from Rs. 50 to Rs. 250 per month per member and the total chit amount varies from Rs. 500 to Rs. 5,000. The majority of fisherwomen use chit fund savings to repay earlier loans or for consumption expenditure. In Panaiyur and Chemmencheri, some families use chit fund savings for the purchase of gear. (Table 3.10).

Table 3.10
Purpose of chits (multiple answers)

Purpose	Thi	Pan	Chem	Total
Repayment of debts	59.1	31.6	16.7	47.8
Purchase of jewels	9.1	10.5	—	8.7
Purchase of nets	4.5	31.6	66.7	17.4
Marriage expenses	22.7	26.3	16.7	23.2
Repayment of expenses incurred during illness	4.5	—	—	2.9
Others	6.8	10.5	—	7.2
Total	N 44	19	6	69

To sum up, women are involved in loan transactions to a very significant degree. This involvement, however, diminishes their status as borrowing is considered *infra dig*. Further, since the status of a family depends on its ownership of the means of production, even essential chores performed by fisherwomen such as borrowing money, household work and fish marketing, are assigned a very low status.

3.3.1.3. Socio-cultural and traditional values

Fisherfolk adhere strongly to a set of socio-cultural values and norms. The community has developed a system of coercive and adaptive mechanisms, such as moral precepts, religious beliefs and rationalizations, which exert a controlling influence on the fisherfolk.

Traditionally, the role of the breadwinner is assigned to the male, even though women contribute substantially to the family's income. This is accepted by fisherwomen themselves. Even those fisherwomen whose fish marketing activities are the major, or only, source of family income, tend to belittle their own role.

Fisherwomen play a significant role in the family both as home managers (as mother, wife and daughter) and as earners (in fish marketing and net making – Table 3.11). Men do not help out in home management, and women feel that men should not dabble in these tasks. A man or woman who breaks this 'rule' of division of labour invites ridicule.

Table 3.11
Involvement of fisherwomen in sale of catch brought in by family members

Response	Thi	Pan	Chem	Total
Not involved	78.7	75.03	30.8	72.2
Sometimes involved	20.0	20.0	30.8	21.3
Involved	1.3	5.0	38.5	6.5
Total %	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0
Total N	75	20	13	108

Fish marketing is considered a low-status occupation and men do not normally engage in it. Traders who market fish are usually members of other castes. However, the strong export demand for prawns in recent years has led to some fishermen giving up fishing to take up the functions of prawn agents.

Superstitions play their part in keeping the role and status of fisherwomen low. Fisherwomen are considered 'impure' at certain times — during menstruation or confinement. At such times women are expected to keep away from craft and gear lest ill-luck should befall the fishing effort. During the menstrual period, young unmarried girls are kept in seclusion. Women should not cross the path of men going out to fish; consequently, it is seldom that women venture out of their homes in the morning.

The type of family also influences the role and status of fisherwomen. There are fewer extended families than nuclear families in the three villages. Women from nuclear families have to work harder than in extended families where the work load can be shared with other women. Table 3.12 shows that nearly eight in every 10 families in the three villages are nuclear families. There are more extended families in Thiruchinankuppam than in the other two villages, mainly due to a shortage of houses.

Table 3.12
Fisherwomen interviewed, by size
and type of family

		Type of family											
		Nuclear				Extended				Total			
No. of family members		Thi	Pan	Chem	Total	Thi	Pan	Chem	Total	Thi	Pan	Chem	Total
1 — 2		3.6	6.2	16.7	5.9	—	—	—	—	2.7	5.0	15.4	4.6
3 — 4		44.6	25.0	25.0	38.1	5.3	—	—	4.2	34.7	20.0	23.1	30.5
5 — 6		25.0	25.0	33.3	26.2	21.0	25.0	—	20.8	24.0	25.0	30.8	25.0
7 — 8		23.2	37.5	16.7	25.0	31.6	50.0	100.0	37.5	25.3	40.0	23.1	27.8
9 — 10		3.6	6.2	8.3	4.8	26.3	25.0	—	25.0	9.3	10.0	7.6	9.2
11 and above		—	—	—	—	15.8	—	—	12.5	4.0	—	—	2.8
Total	%	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0
	N	56	16	12	84	19	4	1	24	75	20	13	108

The family size depends upon family type, nuclear families being smaller than extended families. Among nuclear families, 38% have three or four members and 50% have five to eight members. Among extended families, 75% have seven to 12 members. The average family size is 4.6 in Thiruchinankuppam, 4.1 in Chemmencheri and 4.8 in Panaiyur. For coastal villages in Chengalpattu district, the average family size is 4.6.1

The trend in the three villages is towards more nuclear families. According to Table 3.13, there are approximately 30% each of nuclear families having one, two or three earning members. A third of the extended families have three earning members each and a fourth, either two or four earning members.

1 Census Report on Marine Fisheries, 1982, p 16.

Table 3.13
Fisherwomen Interviewed, by type of family
and number of earners in the family

		Type of family											
		Nuclear				Extended				Total			
No. of earners in the family		Thi	Pan	Chem	Total	Thi	Pan	Chem	Total	Thi	Pan	Chem	Total
One		30.3	18.7	33.3	28.6	—	—	—	—	22.7	15.0	30.8	22.2
Two		32.1	31.2	16.7	29.8	21.0	50.0	—	25.0	29.3	35.0	15.4	28.7
Three		26.8	43.7	25.0	29.8	31.6	50.0	—	33.3	28.0	45.0	23.1	30.5
Four		7.1	6.2	25.0	9.5	26.3	—	100.0	25.0	12.0	5.0	30.8	13.0
Five		3.6	—	—	2.4	21.0	—	—	16.7	8.0	—	—	5.5
Total	%	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0
	N	56	16	12	84	19	4	1	24	75	20	13	108

Decision-making in the family is of two types: relating to home management and relating to occupation and production. Usually, fishermen hand over their income to fisherwomen, after keeping back a certain amount for pocket expenses, and fisherwomen make all the decisions about using the money to meet various essential needs. However, this "power" to decide is illusory since the options are very few. For example, if a family with four children earns Rs. 10 per day, at least 90% of the income has to be set apart for food.

Purchase of clothes, jewellery and durables is usually a joint decision of husband and wife. Decisions about the education of children are usually taken by women, though in many families these too are joint decisions. Savings and credit are women's responsibilities, and women decide on how much, and with what chit fund group, to save. Data pertaining to decision-making on the utilization of chit amounts are presented in Table 3.14. In about half the cases, these decisions are joint ones and in 20% of the cases, the decision is made by women alone. In the remaining cases, the power of decision-making is exercised solely by men. As far as credit is concerned, men direct women to borrow certain amounts for certain purposes; the responsibility for raising the loan and repaying it rests with women.

There appears to be no consultation between couples about limiting family size. A few women who have undergone sterilization, have done so without the express approval of their husbands. Fisherwomen, by and large, feel that their husbands would desert them if they underwent sterilization, or even discussed the possibility of limiting family size.

Decisions regarding occupation and production are chiefly taken by men. Men decide as to the type of craft and gear to be bought, and it is then up to women to arrange loans for this purpose. A few women have, however, gained enough knowledge about craft and gear, mainly through their involvement in fish marketing, and are able to discuss these matters with male members of their families.

Of the fisherwomen interviewed, 51% engage in selling fresh fish. Of these, only nine per cent had to obtain their husbands' permission to do so; the others decided on their own and later informed their husbands. In these cases, the fact that the income generated by fisherwomen was necessary for their families, gave women a strong decision-making capacity within their families. Fisherwomen self-employed in non-fishing areas constitute 11% of the total and they

too did not obtain their husbands' permission. Though the number of families engaging coolie fishermen is small, it was observed that a few women took part in decisions regarding the recruitment of coolie fishermen. This was mainly because fisherwomen were better informed than their husbands.

Table 3.14
Person in the family deciding the utility purpose of chit

Person deciding	Thi	Pan	Chem	Total
Respondent	13.6	15.8	33.3	15.9
Mother	2.3	5.3	16.7	4.3
Father	2.3	—	—	1.4
Husband	9.1	47.4	33.3	21.7
Husband and respondent	65.9	31.5	16.7	52.2
Others — joint	6.8	—	—	4.3
Total	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0
	N	N	N	N
	44	19	6	69

A major cause of indebtedness in families is the marriage of daughters, as the major share of wedding expenses is borne by the bride's family. And this despite the fact that the dowry system does not exist among fisherfolk in Chengalpattu district. Result: girls are looked upon as liabilities. It is felt that a girl takes away a part of her natal family's assets to her husband's family.

The common form of marriage is arranged marriage. Usually, the bride does not have the right to refuse marriage with a match selected by her family. There are some rare examples of marriages being arranged after the boy and girl showed a liking for each other. The general norm is to curb such tendencies, but if the two families see advantages in the alliance, they go ahead with the formal arrangements for marriage.

Love marriages do take place: the bride and groom marry without their parents' consent, in some cases after eloping. There are couples in Thiruchinankuppam who cohabit without the formality of a marriage, but the girl wears the sacred yellow thread round her neck. Such women face social ostracism. Sometimes village elders persuade them to go through a formal wedding ceremony.

Table 3.15 reveals that nearly nine out of 10 women underwent arranged marriages. In Chemmencheri, all the marriages were arranged marriages. In Panaiyur, there were love marriages, but these were approved of by village elders. In one case, however, the husband had to pay a fine of Rs. 500 for "having gone astray." Half the women got married between the ages of 14 and 17. Another 42% got married between 18 and 21. In all love marriages, the girl was above 13; all under-13 brides had arranged marriages. There have been a few cases of pre-puberty marriages. Inter-caste marriages are very rare. In Thiruchinankuppam, there is one case of a Harijan woman having married a fisherman. All other respondents married within their castes.

After marriage, a woman is expected to surrender control over her jewels, etc., to her husband. If money is needed for her husband's sister's marriage, she is expected to part with her jewellery. Since by custom the wife is subordinate to the husband, she is expected to play a secondary role in the family and is generally satisfied with, or resigned to, this low status.

Table 3.15
Fisherwomen interviewed, by type of
marriage and age at the time of marriage

Age of fisherwomen at the time of marriage	•Type of marriage											
	Arranged				Love				Total			
	Thi	Pan	Chem	Total	Thi	Pan	Chem	Total	Thi	Pan	Chem	Total
13 and below	8.1	—	—	5.6	—	—	—	—	6.9	—	—	4.9
14 — 17	47.5	58.8	54.5	50.6	36.4	100.0	—	46.2	45.8	63.1	54.5	50.0
18 — 21	42.6	35.2	36.4	40.4	63.6	—	—	53.8	45.8	31.6	36.4	42.2
22 — 25	1.6	5.9	9.1	3.4	—	—	—	—	1.4	5.3	3.1	2.9
%	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0	—	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0
Total N	61	17	11	89	11	2	—	13	72	19	11	102

Widows and childless women are assigned an even lower status. A widow counts for nothing unless she has sons to stand by her. Widows are also required to keep away from all auspicious functions like marriages. Women without children are considered inferior and are ill-treated by their mothers-in-law. Men do not face similar problems — though they may be as responsible as the women for the childless state.

The birth of a child, particularly a male, is an important family event since he is a potential economic asset. The birth of a son enhances a woman's status in the family. The socialization process for boys differs from that of girls. From a young age, boys are encouraged to take up tasks and responsibilities outside the house and to assist their fathers in activities related to fishing. On the other hand, girls are discouraged from going to the seashore and are trained to assist their mothers, take care of their brothers and sisters, etc.

The feeling is instilled into girls that they are liabilities. Consequently, they rarely make demands on their parents. At a young age, there is no marked difference in the way boys and girls are treated in the matter of, say, food, pocket money or school enrolment. Preferential treatment in favour of boys begins as children grow older.

Example: While the boy goes to school, the girl has to stay home and help her mother, particularly if she engages in fish marketing. If the boy helps his father with net-mending or beach-seining, he gets preference when food is being served, and more pocket money than the girl. The father and the sons get more and better food than the mother and daughters. This system of values is further reinforced by the traditional system of "Thalakkattu."¹ Village funds (for temple feasts or other celebrations) are collected on the basis of the number of "thalakkattu," or adult males in a family. In times of need (during the lean season or during crisis), when village funds are used for the welfare of families in the village, the assistance is disbursed on the basis of a certain amount per adult male. The system discounts women totally. The justification may be that because collection is based on "thalakkattu", disbursement should be similar. Though village funds now come largely from fish auctions, where women also make significant contributions, the disbursement in times of need is still based on the "thalakkattu" system.

¹ "Thalakkattu" literally means adult male who brings an income to the family.

From the time a girl attains puberty, she is subjected to rigid restrictions. A function known as the puberty **function**¹ is arranged. The girl is first isolated, as she is considered impure. Her freedom of movement is restricted. She is not allowed to move about alone, to run and play games, or shout, sing and laugh in public. She has to concentrate on house-keeping. She is made to feel that she is now ready for marriage and child-bearing, her major role in society. Changes of attire are forced on her so that she is fully covered. She has to oil and groom her hair, put on jewellery, use local cosmetics and the “pottu” mark on her forehead. A puberty function is arranged, to which friends and relatives are invited. She is blessed and given presents. She is thus exhibited as a prospective bride to parents of eligible bachelors.

A case from Chemmencheri throws light on some of the points discussed. A fisherman, who had no sons, trained his 10-year-old daughter to help him in fishing. The girl wore shirts and shorts, helped her father mend nets and often went out to sea with boys of her age. Initially, villagers viewed her with awe. Later, the village elders decided to intervene. They advised the father to ensure that his daughter was properly dressed and prevent her from playing or wandering on the sea shore. They argued that boys would start teasing and mocking the girl and this could lead to problems in the village. It did not occur to them that these boys should be punished. The father, unable to resist peer pressure, bowed to it. This instance brings out the rigorous enforcement of a sex-based division of labour.

In sum, traditional values and norms affect the role and status of fisherwomen and also act as checks to progressive change.

3.3.1.4. Political and social awareness

The cultural values prevalent in the three villages obviously discriminate against women, in that they are allowed only to discuss matters concerning their families and not those concerning the village as a whole. But the fisherfolk themselves do not think so, and fisherwomen are content to abide by them.

There is a deep-seated male resistance to women participating in caste panchayat deliberations. Even when women are called to testify before the panchayat, they rarely speak for themselves — they speak through their father, husband, brother or uncle. Women thus have no role to play in community affairs.

Party politics have begun to play a role in village affairs. Thiruchinankuppam is a divided village because different families there owe allegiance to different political parties. Political affiliation forms the basis of leadership in this village where even the traditional leaders — the “peria” and “chinna” “thanakkaars” — are backed by parties. Women in Thiruchinankuppam, by and large, support a major local party and are found to wear gold nose rings that depict the party’s election symbol.

Of the fisherwomen interviewed, 93% had voted in the previous elections. However, they voted according to their husband’s or father’s choice. Invariably, men instruct women on whom to vote for. So the voting by women does not signify their independence. In Chemmencheri and Panaiyur, the panchayat decides on the party/candidate to be supported, thus denying any choice to the fisherwomen.

With the introduction of fisherwomen’s cooperative societies in the three villages, fisherwomen now have an opportunity to enrol themselves in an organisation meant exclusively for women. Though it is too early to draw any conclusions about the efficacy of these bodies, they appear to have played only a marginal role in bettering the status and living standards of women. Men not only fail to appreciate the relevance of these women’s organisations; they try to utilise the latter to their own ends.

Example: several times the village women asked the author of this paper to arrange for financial help for a television set, a handicraft centre or for loan schemes. It was found later that the men had instigated the women to make these demands though the latter did not benefit directly from such schemes. In general, fisherwomen’s cooperative societies are in the clutches of male leaders of the village.

¹ The puberty function is conducted to mark the attainment of puberty by a girl. She is secluded and given a special type of food. After a period of 15-30 days, a religious ceremony to purify her is conducted. The girl is bedecked and bejewelled for the occasion.

The women have no voice in community decision making. Women in Thiruchinankuppam are better informed of their political rights and privileges than their counterparts in the other two villages, mainly because of the activities of political parties. Changes, however, are taking place slowly, largely because of the increasing political awareness of fisherfolk in general, and fisherwomen in particular.

3.3.2. Individual factors

3.3.2.1. Employment status

Fisherwomen take up work — either fish marketing or some petty business — not to improve their status but because it is essential. So the mere fact of employment does not guarantee them either power or privilege outside the home. It does not entitle them to an equal role in decision-making, except at home.

In general, wage labour is assigned a low status in society; a salary-earner, such as a teacher in a *balwadi*, enjoys better status. Fishing is itself considered a low-status occupation; fish marketing, which is not a production activity, is assigned an even lower status. Vending of fruits, vegetables and sweets are also low-status occupations. Even liquor selling is not rated high.

An employed fisherwoman enjoys a better status within her own family because she contributes to the family's coffers. She plays an important role in family decision-making and has greater independence of movement and action than an unemployed fisherwoman. In society, however, an employed woman has a lower status because society places greater value upon those roles of women which are related to home management.

3.3.2.2. Age

In general, the older a fisherwoman, the higher her status at home and in the village. She moves about alone or escorts young women on trips outside the village. Her advice is sought by younger women. This is especially so if the women belong to well-to-do families. Old women with disabilities like blindness or deafness are considered a liability, but an old woman who can take care of the household is accorded a high status.

3.3.2.3. Marital status

A married woman with children, especially sons, enjoys a better status in the family than other women. Her status derives entirely from her being the mother of male children. She is allowed to take part in religious ceremonies; her presence is considered auspicious. Curbs are placed, however, on the movements of a newly married woman, ostensibly to protect her from the malign influence of the "evil eye" of other villagers.

A childless woman is considered a bad omen. So is a widow. A widow is shunned, both in the family and in the village, because she is supposed to have lost the legitimate reason for her survival — her husband. She is deprived of the few rights and privileges that married women enjoy. She is barred from religious and social functions. A woman who cohabits with a man without having gone through a formal wedding ceremony is also looked down upon.

An unmarried woman is kept confined to the home. She is expected to prepare herself to perform her ordained role of wife and mother. It is believed that she cannot take care of herself; if permitted free movement, she may "go astray," break away from custom and find a husband of her own choice. She enjoys no freedom of expression; she has to obey her parents or her brothers.

3.3.2.4. Education

Many parents object to education for girls; in their view it breeds independence, and inflates expectations about life. Within the family, then, education counts for little as it does not contribute to the family's income. The number of girls attending school has, however, gone up in recent years because most parents would like their daughters to be able to read and write; also because primary schools provide free noon meals.

Within the village, education when combined with certain other factors, enhances the status of fisherwomen. Since government employment schemes give preference to educated unemployed women, educated girls have a certain measure of importance in the village.

Education also counts for posts like the chairperson of the fisherwomen's cooperative societies. Village leaders prefer educated women to head these societies, so that good schemes have a better chance of promotion, sanction and implementation.

The status of women thus depends on a host of factors each of which interacts with the others in finally assigning a definite status to fisherwomen in the family and in the village.

4. SUMMARY AND CONCLUSIONS

The findings presented in this report are based on a year's observation and study of fisherwomen in three fishing villages of Chengalpattu district, Tamil Nadu – Thiruchinankuppam, Panaiyur kuppam and Chemmencheri kuppam. The data – both quantitative and qualitative – were obtained through interviews with individual fisherwomen and group discussions. Staying with selected families in the villages helped the author gain a better understanding of the varied roles performed by fisherwomen which directly influence their status in the family and in the village.

4.1. Distinctive features of the villages

Thiruchinankuppam is located close to Madras city and has the appearance of an urban slum, largely because of poor housing conditions. The huts are located very close to the sea and the entire village gets flooded during monsoons. Sea erosion is also a major problem.

Of the fishing families, 75% do not own any production assets like kattumarams or nets. A majority of fishermen, therefore, work as coolies for those who own craft and gear.

A majority of the fisherfolk in the village are Chinnapattinavars, but there are a few Periapattinavars and Harijans as well. Since the village has a large population, traditional caste leaders are not able to enforce traditional norms, values and customs.

The fisherfolk in this village are politically conscious and owe allegiance to one or the other of the two leading political parties. The fishermen's cooperative is controlled by leaders who are backed by political parties.

Panaiyur kuppam is a medium-sized village. Nearly all the households in the village own production assets. The fisherfolk have been allotted houses free of cost by the Fisheries Department, Government of Tamil Nadu. The fisherfolk in this village are all Chinnapattinavars.

Muslim cycle traders living in an adjacent cluster and fisherwomen market the catch landed by fishermen of Panaiyur.

A group of young leaders has emerged in this village and **taken** not only the caste panchayat but also the cooperative society. The new leaders are educated, are aware of various government welfare schemes and able to take advantage of them.

Chemmencheri is the smallest of the three villages studied. The fisherfolk in this village are all Periapattinavars. Nearly all the households own production assets. Fish marketing is done by fisherwomen, cycle traders and Harijans.

The leaders of the caste panchayat, who are also office bearers in the fishermen cooperatives, play an important role in safeguarding village traditions and customs. Political parties have not yet made an impact among the residents of Chemmencheri.

An international organization has helped Chemmencheri fisherwomen to successfully petition the government for a primary school.

4.2. Role and status of fisherwomen

Fisherwomen are considered bold and outspoken. But this is not an indication of a better status in society; in fact, these traits are an index of fisherwomen's inferior socio-economic position.

The indicators of the role and status of fisherwomen in their families and village are literacy level, employment, health and nutrition, socio-cultural values and norms, inheritance pattern and decision-making power. The literacy level among fisherwomen is very low, and fisherwomen themselves do not appreciate the importance of educating their daughters. The tasks performed

by fisherwomen at home and outside are assigned very little value. Fisherwomen neglect their own medical and nutritional needs and consider the needs of their husbands and sons as paramount.

The low value assigned to the tasks performed by fisherwomen is a consequence of existing socio-cultural values and norms. The socialization process is geared to preparing girls to grow up as women who will not question the validity of existing roles and norms. The roles prescribed for fisherwomen are considered subordinate and inferior to those prescribed for fishermen. By custom, fisherwomen cannot inherit any assets including production assets. Fisherwomen generally make decisions related to home management in consultation with the male head of the family. However, since the family income is limited and the priorities fixed, the power of decision-making might be illusory. Women are not involved in making decisions concerning purchase of production assets and related matters. However, if fishermen decide to buy craft or gear, it is up to the fisherwomen to raise the required loan.

All decisions regarding village matters are made by men. Women are not even permitted to attend village meetings.

In sum, then, fisherwomen as a group are assigned a low status in society. If a fisherwoman contributes to her family's earnings, her status is enhanced, but only within the family.

4.3. Factors influencing the role and status of fisherwomen

These factors can be grouped under two heads — those that are relevant to fisherwomen as a group; and those that are applicable to individual fisherwomen.

Fisherwomen as a group are assigned a high or low status on the basis of the following factors.

- the prevailing economy and technology,
- ownership of assets,
- tradition and socio-cultural factors.

The prevailing economy and technology: The introduction of the money economy. When the subsistence economy was in vogue, fisherwomen bartered fish for paddy, vegetables, clothes and other essential articles. With the disappearance of the barter system, fisherwomen could no longer obtain their essential family needs through sale of fish. This attenuated their economic role in the family.

— Urbanization led to greater demand for fish in towns and city markets. The cycle traders who bought fish in the villages and had access to distant towns and city markets started playing an important role in fish marketing. Fisherwomen engaged in fish marketing could not offer as high a price as the cycle traders could.

— Improved technology (like nylon nets and the introduction of nylon net fabrication machines) directly influenced the role and status of fisherwomen. Nylon nets netted bigger catches that could not be handled by fisherwomen. This was especially true of the prawn trade. Fisherwomen started losing out to big traders who transported prawn in large refrigerated vans for sorting and export. And the nylon net fabrication machines displaced fisherwomen from the traditional activity of net-making.

Ownership of assets: The tasks of the fisherwomen depend also on the economic position of their families, which in turn is strongly influenced by its ownership of productive assets. The fisherwoman from a family without any productive assets has to help earn or augment the family income. She engages in actual marketing of fish — sometimes by carrying a headload of fish and walking to distant inland villages. The fisherwoman from a family that owns a variety of nets and kattumarams, however, is not usually directly involved in fish marketing. She hires women to carry head loads of fish: she travels to town and city markets where she supervises the women selling fish.

In brief, tasks that entail labour are assigned a low status in the village. But indirect involvement in fish marketing, which calls only for handling money and supervising the hired workers, is accorded a high status in the village. Within the family, however, both types of women enjoy a better status, because of their role as income-earners in the family.

Tradition and socio-cultural factors greatly influence the role and status of fisherwomen. The myth of man's inborn superiority over woman is reinforced by sex-based division of labour. Norms pertaining to family and marriage also assign a low status to women. The process of

socialization keeps a check on the younger generation so that they conform to roles prescribed by the community. Religion is invoked to rationalize and sanctify tradition.

Cultural norms also prohibit women from taking part in decision-making at the village. Politics and decision-making are considered the domain of men. The non-participation of women in decision-making at the village level is sought to be justified on intellectual and educational grounds – women are supposed to be deficient in both.

The status of individual fisherwomen is determined by their employment position, age, marital status and educational level. These assign a superior or inferior position to a specific fisherwoman. It should be noted that these factors generally interplay with factors that influence fisherwomen as a group in finally determining the status of a fisherwoman in the village.

4.4 The role fisherwomen can play in the process of social change

Though fisherwomen reflect the traditions and values of the villages, they are often the group most responsive to change. Their role in promoting social change is significant because of their socializing influence on children and thus on future developments.

Earning an income is a necessary, but not a sufficient, condition for improvements in women's status. The formation of small women's associations would also be necessary. These associations, coupled with higher income-generating opportunities for women, could initiate attitudinal changes in women. They could also help in redefining women's roles – and also those of the men – in the family and the community. The existing fisherwomen's cooperative societies could provide a forum for discussing these issues and for formulating and implementing action plans.

Appendix 1

CASE STUDIES

1.1 K. Machagandhi

President of a fisherwomen's cooperative society

Age	: 47 years
Education	: 5th standard (5 years of schooling)
Occupation	: Housewife. At times markets the fish caught by her sons
Marital status	: Married
Age at marriage	: 16 years
Religion	: Hindu
Caste	: Chinnapattinavars (a sub-caste of Pattinavars)
Family planning status	: Underwent sterilization operation after her tenth delivery.
Position held in the village	President of the fisherwomen's cooperative society
Husband's occupation	Traditional fishing
Ownership of means of production (family)	: Four types of net including "Peria valal" (shore seine), masula boat and two kattumarams
Type of house	: Presently living in a temporary thatched hut. Will be shifting to a cement concrete house being constructed (free of cost) by the government.
Village	: Panaiyur kuppam (coastal village)
Location	: Chengalpattu district, Tamil Nadu, India

Machagandhi Ammal¹ is the president of the newly formed fisherwomen's cooperative society in Panaiyur village. She is 47 years old. She is thin and her face is furrowed with lines of thought reflecting problems she had faced through the years. She is a reliable and sincere woman. She believes that hard work alone will help her improve the living conditions of her family.

Position held in the village

Fisherwomen cooperatives are multipurpose cooperatives with the following main objectives:

- to provide credit for marketing,
- to develop leadership among women,
- to help organize transport facilities for marketing,
- to initiate adult education for women, and
- to establish fair price shops.

Machagandhi was selected as the president of the fisherwomen cooperative society by the Fisheries Department officials and the village leaders after she attended the fisherwomen linkworkers training on community organisation organised by the FAO/BOBP. The village elders and leaders play a key role in selection in nearly all the villages. The villagers do not disagree with or question the selection procedure but abide by the decisions taken by the elders and leaders

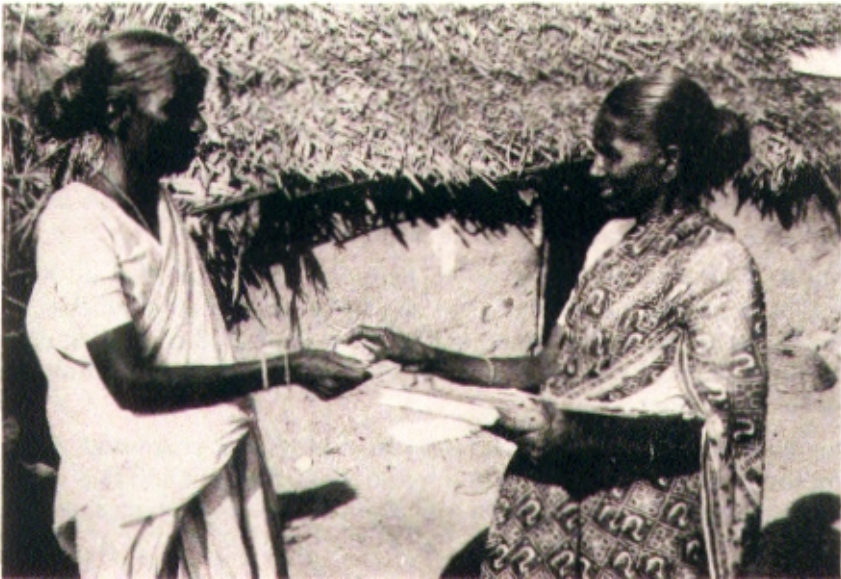
The selection of the president of the fisherwomen's cooperative society by officials of the Fisheries Department and village leaders denies to fisherwomen their democratic right to elect a president and other office bearers. According to the officials, there is tremendous pressure on them to make the cooperative society functional as quickly as possible and this forces upon them the need to select, rather than elect, the office bearers. Officials say that unless the cooperative society starts functioning soon after inception, fisherwomen tend to lose trust in governmental efforts which would affect future government programmes as well.

In the case of village leaders, the procedure of selection enables them to gain control over the newly formed society. Being chary of the fisherwomen's cooperatives developing into formidable rivals of the fishermen's cooperatives, the leaders naturally prefer that the leadership of the former should be vested in women they can control. Machagandhi fits the bill admirably as

¹ Ammal – A Tamil term denoting respect for elderly women. Literally, the word means mother.



K. Machagandhi (right), president of the fisherwomen's cooperative society in Panaiyur kuppam village. Below: Machagandhi collects loan dues from a resident of Panaiyur. The loans advanced by the cooperative society are to be repaid in daily instalments.



Machagandhi is a diligent housewife.

her husband is a close associate of the president of the fishermen's cooperative society.

The selection of loanees is based on the fisherwomen paying Rs. 11 (Rs. 10 as share amount and an admission fee of Re 1) to enroll themselves as members of the cooperative society. The fisherwomen cooperative provides loans to the women for fish marketing. The repayment of the loan is done on a daily basis. Each member of the cooperative board is assigned the task of collecting the amount to be repaid from a group of women. Every evening around five, the member goes to the houses of the women who have to repay the loan. She has a book in which she notes the amount repaid and the date of repayment.

Machagandhi is very polite in asking the women whether they have earned enough income for the day to repay or whether they would require a postponement of repayment to the next day. The women in turn seem to appreciate her, though at times they feel she is very prompt and firm in getting them to repay. Machagandhi herself feels that this particular task of getting them to repay is very frustrating, and she is discouraged. She continues with the task, hoping that the women would one day voluntarily come to her house and pay, instead of her going from house to house. She is able to perform her task well since her husband and son are very cooperative. They do not object to her going from house to house to collect the money, though there is no remuneration for the task.

Machagandhi's early childhood and family background

Machagandhi was born in Royapuram, a suburb of Madras city. Her family had settled in Royapuram because her father worked as a coolie in the Madras harbour. After his retirement he went fishing in shallow waters with his "mani-valai" (castnet).

Machagandhi belongs to a big family consisting of ten brothers and sisters. Of these, one sister and one brother died as infants. Though her father had a regular source of income while he was working in the harbour, her mother was forced to do fish marketing. In fact, her mother started fish marketing at the age of 35. She went to the Royapuram market to sell the fish. Her daughters did the cooking and took care of the house. Machagandhi feels that without her mother's income the family would have had a difficult time.

Her father was educated and could read and write well. Therefore, he insisted that all his children should go to school. Her mother was illiterate but was strict with her children about school. Machagandhi proudly states that all her sisters and brothers have studied at least up to the fifth standard. One of her brothers completed 10 years of schooling and found employment with the railway department.

Machagandhi cannot remember anything striking that took place during her childhood. She can only recall how her mother insisted that she marry a traditional fisherman and live in a village. Her mother felt that Machagandhi would adjust and adapt to the new environment.

Marriage and background of husband's family

About six months after Machagandhi attained puberty, her marriage was arranged. She was only 16. Her husband, who was 24, came with his parents with a marriage proposal. The marriage plan was mooted by Machagandhi's relative who lived in Panaiyur. Her mother was keen on getting Machagandhi married to a traditional fisherman, since her other two daughters were married to men working as 'coolies' in Madras harbour. She wished that at least one of her daughters should marry a fisherman to perpetuate the traditional family occupation. Therefore, without even getting Machagandhi's consent she accepted the marriage proposal. She feared that Machagandhi would find life difficult in the village. Her mother agreed to give her gold ear studs, nose ring and a pair of silver anklets. She also gave her utensils, bedding and pillows. In turn, her husband's family gave her a pair of gold bangles and a silk sari worth Rs. 500 for the marriage.

In order to reach Panaiyur, Machagandhi and her family had to travel, by a boat down the river. From the river bed they had to walk nearly 5 km. Those days there were no roads that linked Panaiyur with the city. Panaiyur was surrounded by casuarina groves and Machagandhi initially felt lost since she had no experience of village life.

Her husband, Kattandi, is the eldest of three children in his family. He has studied up to the fifth standard and can read and write Tamil. He assists the president of the fishermen's

cooperative whenever representations have to be made to government officials and ministers. He accompanies the president to government offices for discussions and helps draft petitions.

Kattandi's father was involved in traditional fishing. His mother was one of the few women who did fish marketing (30 – 40 years back). Since she had to keep going out of the house during the day, Kattandi's father decided to get married to another woman. Though his mother objected initially, she finally consented because she felt that it would be additional help for her at home, and the problem of his father's second marriage was solved amicably. His mother went fish vending while the step mother did the cooking and all the other household chores. Kattandi cannot recollect any incident of quarrelling between the two women. They had clearly defined their tasks and carried them out efficiently. Also, problems did not arise because his step mother did not have any children of her own. In fact he was looked after by his step mother and he "loved her as much as he loved his own mother."

Machagandhi speaks very highly of her 'mothers-in-law.' Her mother-in-law got acquainted with the agricultural coolies and small and marginal farmers who regularly bought fish from her. She lent money to them. They mainly took advances from her during the ploughing and sowing season, with a promise to repay in the form of paddy after harvest. In those days her family did not have to buy rice because they stored paddy in big earthen pots. They took the daily quota of paddy for husking and grinding which was a tedious process. The practice of lending money or giving advances to agricultural workers is declining because the fishermen earn less income and are themselves indebted in many cases.

Machagandhi's husband has one brother and one sister. Both of them were looked after by Machagandhi. She arranged for their marriages, because her mothers-in-law had died. She arranged her sister-in-law's marriage with a railway worker. She says that her sister-in-law is economically well placed and has a three-storeyed house in Royapuram. She hopes that her sister-in-law will consent to give her daughter in marriage to Machagandhi's son.

Her brother-in-law does traditional fishing in a coastal village 25 km from Panaiyur. He settled in his wife's native village, because his wife felt that they can earn more in her village and also live closer to her parents.

Machagandhi admits that her husband Kattandi has taken good care of her and has provided for all material needs. But, since he started drinking she has had to look after him. She quotes instances of his fights with her which were, however, followed by quick reconciliations. Their fights have mainly been over Machagandhi not spending time with him or not fulfilling his physical needs.

Machagandhi's children

Machagandhi gave birth to eleven children including a twin. She explains that 15 years back, there were no proper roads from Panaiyur to the city. In cases of emergencies like illness or childbirth, the villagers were helpless and could not get immediate medical care. So she went to her mother's house in Royapuram, which was close to a hospital, for all her deliveries. In spite of this, she says that three of her children were born at home instead of the hospital. The delivery was conducted by a local mid-wife. Of the five children who died, three died of chicken pox while the other two died because of dysentery. Talking about chicken pox, Machagandhi says: "At times 12 to 15 children died because of chicken pox in our village. The Goddess 'Mariatha'¹ took away our children. We do not give any treatment to cure chicken pox. We let the child lie on neem leaves and keep our house clean. We wait for the rashes to disappear. When that happens, the Goddess has shown mercy and left the child."

She is fond of her eldest son. But then, he did not live up to her expectations. She feels that he let her down when she needed his support, mainly financial. Her first daughter was given in marriage when she was 18 years old. Her daughter has four children. Machagandhi has persuaded her to undergo sterilization. She lives in Madras and her husband works in the Madras harbour as a coolie. Machagandhi got her second daughter married just two months back. Her second daughter's husband lives in Pondicherry and is a traditional fisherman. Comparing the marriage of her two daughters she says:

¹ Mariatha — a Goddess who is believed to take possession of children and manifest herself in the form of measles and thicken pox.

“for my second daughter, we had to spend a substantial amount on transport charges. We had to arrange a lorry for all our relatives and close friends, so that they could attend the marriage in Pondicherry. For my first daughter it was easier because the marriage was conducted in Royapuram and we had to pay less for the transport charges of our relatives. Generally, the cost of articles and essential goods was much cheaper those days. Now the prices have shot up and we had difficulty meeting the marriage expenses. In short, ‘Ayndhu pennai pethal arasanum andi aavaan’.”¹

It is the custom to conduct the engagement function in the bride's house. The engagement expenses are borne by the bride's family while the expenses of the actual marriage are borne by the bridegroom's family. In spite of the sharing of expenses, the bride's family has to spend a large sum on buying gold and silver jewellery and household articles like utensils, bedding, cupboard and food articles. This has led to indebtedness in the family and an aversion to female children.

Fish marketing

Machagandhi was involved in fish marketing till two years back. When she married, she was responsible only for household chores, like filling water, cooking (at times) and taking care of her brother-in-law, sister-in-law and her children. Her mother-in-law was involved in fish marketing. Thirty to 40 years back, there were only a few women in the whole village who did fish marketing. A few Muslim traders settled in Panaiyur also engaged in fish marketing. These women and the Muslim traders gave ‘huge’ sums of money, commonly termed as ‘advances’,² of Rs. 500 or less for fish. This meant that the fish marketing women were entitled to the daily fish catch of the fishermen who had received the advance. They fixed the price of the catch. The fishermen could not bargain. There was no auctioning system at that time.

Her mother-in-law used to leave the house as early as eight in the morning and return by one o'clock in the night. Since there were no proper roads, she had to use boats and ‘jutkas’ (carriage drawn by horses). Her mother-in-law employed Muslim men to carry the baskets of fish. She ran along with the men to the canal. Then they took a boat. After the boat journey, they loaded the baskets into the jutkas and went to the Saidapet market. After the fish was sold they returned in the same manner. Her mother-in-law spent a maximum of five hours at home. Machagandhi feels that under the circumstances, her father-in-law was justified in marrying again because there was no one to manage the house.

She recollects that her mother-in-law incurred losses on those days when she went late to the market or when the fish got spoilt.

When she made profits, however, they were quite high. This was so because the fish her mother-in-law bought was usually for a low price that she herself fixed. Because of the ‘advance’ amount received, the fishermen were not able to bargain and, in fact, were indirectly paying high interest rates for the amount received.

Her mother-in-law kept the money that she earned and usually brought home vegetables, snacks for children, clothes and other household goods. Machagandhi says they had nearly twelve earthen pots filled with paddy, dhal, tamarind, chillies (dried), ragi and other household essentials. So they always ate well. She explains that the earthen pots have become empty after her mother-in-law died.

Machagandhi started going to the seashore after the death of her mother-in-law to ensure that the fish is sold for a good price. She went fish marketing after the marriage of her son, who began to live separately. She collected the fish from individuals to whom she had given ‘advances’ and took it to the market. The auction system was introduced recently and she got the fish by bidding in the auction. She herself carried the basket of fish and walked seven kilometres (one way) to a fish market — Medavakkam near Tambaram (about 26 km from Madras). On the way, she had to wade across a river. She sold fish to the villagers as she walked to the market. After selling the remaining fish in the market, she went to the house of

¹ Machagandhi quotes a Tamil saying: “Even a king will become a pauper if five daughters are born to him

² ‘Advances’ — Though termed an advance, it is in reality credit. The fisherman thinks he pays no interest, so it is an advance of money. This system is prevalent today especially in the sale of prawns.

an agricultural family. She ate in their house and slept in their courtyard along with the women of the house. She explains that this family has been good to her and has given her accommodation and shelter. In return, she gave them fish everyday. They did not give her any money for the fish, neither did she pay them for the food and accommodation.

She started from the village around one o'clock in the afternoon. She reached the market around 4 p.m. Then around 6.30 p.m. she wound up, took the unsold fish to the family she was eating with. She ate a simple meal of rice, curry and fish and went to sleep. Early next morning she returned to her village.

In many instances women from the agricultural households did not give Machagandhi money for the fish, but paddy, tamarind, dried chilly, coriander, vegetables, ragi, etc. Sometimes if Machagandhi had more of these items than was required for her family she sold them to her neighbours when she returned home. During this time, Machangandhi had to either give the money earned to her husband or at least account for the money spent by her.

She stopped marketing because her son, who had got married, asked her to do so. He was ashamed that his mother was involved in marketing. She says that they are now facing a lot of financial problems and she is wondering whether she should start marketing fish again. But she fears that her status-seeking son will still object.

Her daily routine

She gets up around 4.00 a.m. to pack some cooked rice kept overnight in water for her son going fishing. She then goes back to sleep.

- 5.30 – 7.30 a.m. She wakes up and has a wash. She walks 15 minutes to reach a big and not very deep pit where other women also answer nature's call since there are no toilets in this village. On returning, she sweeps the hut and cleans the courtyard. She then washes the utensils while her youngest daughter fetches water. The water is pumped from the common pump situated about 25 yards away from the house.
- 7.30 – 9.00 a.m. She goes to the shore and waits for her son to return with his catch. After the catch is auctioned, she takes home the fish kept aside for cooking. On the days when the auction price is low, she takes the fish to the market, but this is rare.
- 9 a.m. – 12.30 p.m. She serves cold rice to her children and husband. She then eats. She gets her son and daughter ready for school. After seeing them off to school – the son studies in the high school situated five miles away from Panaiyur and the daughter studies in the primary school in Panaiyur – she goes to the shop to buy rice, oil, vegetables, etc., for cooking. Twice a week she goes to collect firewood. She walks two miles to reach the casuarina groves. She returns with a headload of dried twigs, branches and leaves neatly arranged and bundled. She then starts cooking for the day.
- 12.30 – 2.30 p.m. She completes cooking by 1.30 p.m. and serves food to her husband, son and daughter and eats with them. Her daughter returns home during the lunch break.
- 2.30 – 3.00 p.m. She washes clothes.
- 3.00 – 4.00 p.m. She rests for an hour.
- 4.00 – 5.00 p.m. She washes utensils and sweeps the hut. She serves food to her son who has returned from school.
- 5.00 – 6.00 p.m. She goes out to the houses of the loanees to collect the instalment amount.
- 6.00 – 7.00 p.m. She talks with her children and gives them pocket money. She gives her husband an average of Rs. 3 per day for alcohol.

7.00 – 8.00 p.m. She serves food that is left over from the afternoon. Occasionally, she fries salted fish, if there is nothing left of the curry made in the afternoon.

8.00 – 9.00 p.m. She eats with her husband.

At times he eats alone if he is late. She always keeps aside some food and an extra share of the fish curry he likes. Then she sits around with their children and grandchildren. She puts her grandchildren to sleep by telling them stories and singing songs. She sits up for her husband to return if he is late and serves him food. It is always 10 or 10.30 p.m. when she goes to sleep.

Decision-making in the family

Machagandhi did not have any right to express her views when her mothers-in-law were alive. The mother-in-law who did marketing was the sole decision-maker when it concerned the family – food, clothing, household expenditure, etc. When it came to matters like buying a new net or kattumaram, Machagandhi's father-in-law and husband would consult between themselves and then tell her mother-in-law who in turn would arrange for the money. In fact the mother-in-law who did marketing kept all the income earned and would give pocket money to the menfolk in the family.

After her mother-in-law's death, Machagandhi had to take on the responsibility of running the household and getting her sister-in-law married. During this time her husband kept the money and gave her a fixed sum every day for the household expenses. Machagandhi had to manage the food expenses within the amount given by her husband.

Her husband started wasting his money on drink after his first son got married. So she decided that if she did not take charge of the money he earned, they would be doomed. So she persuaded her husband to give her the money, by reasoning with him that the smaller children needed to be cared for and if he was not careful, they would be on the streets. This coincided with her husband falling ill, so it helped her take charge of the finances.

Though now she has taken full charge of the income, she has to give accounts of her expenses. But Kattandi now realises that Machagandhi is careful in dealing with money. Machagandhi exclaims:

“I have no control over the money my son (second son) earns, it is just that I keep it and spend it carefully. If my husband forces me to give Rs. 5 for alcohol, I try to drive some sense into him, but if he persists I climb down. I cannot decide not to give him money, I have learnt bitter lessons when I refuse. The other day he went and borrowed Rs. 5 from my neighbour and I had to repay the amount.”

She feels that more joint decisions are being taken by her and her husband after their first son got married and started living with his wife in a separate hut. If a net has to be bought, her husband and son inform her and she tells them about the financial situation. The decision regarding the type of net to be bought is taken by her husband and son.

Her role in the family and in the village

She laughingly narrates now she fooled her husband and went to her mother's house in Royapuram and underwent a sterilization operation. After she got her first daughter married, she did not want to bear any more children. But her husband did not agree. After her daughter gave birth to a child, Machagandhi conceived. She felt ashamed and decided to put an end to having more children. So after the youngest daughter was born, she asked her sister's husband to sign the necessary papers and underwent the sterilization operation without her husband's knowledge. She decided to do this because it was her tenth delivery and she knew that she would not be able to cope up with any more child-bearing. Her husband was very angry with her but the elders in the family explained that his granddaughter was older than his own daughter and that this was not good. So he reconciled to the fact and agreed that Machagandhi did the right thing. Machagandhi boldly decides on her own, when the decision directly affects her alone. But anything concerning her family and the menfolk in particular, she discusses with her husband, but the final decision is taken by her husband.

Machagandhi is a good mother. She takes good care of her children and does all the

household work with the help of her daughters. Now that she is the president of the cooperative society, she has to represent the problems of fisherwomen to the government officials concerned. She also collects the loan amount distributed. Though she performs these tasks, she cannot express her viewpoint at any village meeting. In fact, women cannot attend any village meeting. Not even Machagandhi, who is an office-bearer in the cooperative.

Talking of the role women can play in bringing about social change in the village, Machagandhi says,

“First of all let us change ourselves and our views. We have to accept that women are capable and then we can see how the village can be changed. I agree we women have a role to play, but many years will pass before they do play it.”

1.2 P. Angamma

Fish marketing woman	
Age	37 years
Education	Illiterate
Occupation	Fish marketing (fresh and dry)
Marital status	Married (widow, remarried)
Age at marriage	16 first marriage 22 second marriage
Family planning status	Has undergone sterilization operation after the seventh delivery
Husband's occupation	Traditional fishing
Family's ownership of means of production	Nil
Type of house	Thatched hut
Religion	Hindu
Caste	Chinnapattinavar (sub-caste of Pattinavar)
Village	Panaiyur kuppam (coastal village)
Location	Chengalpattu district, Tamil Nadu, India.

Angamma is quite well-known in Panaiyur village because she markets fish. She is tall and walks erect in spite of carrying heavy loads of fish for marketing. She wears a 'thali' but does not apply a pottu² or keep flowers in her hair.

Her early childhood and family background

Angamma was born and brought up in Thennadu, a fishing village near Pondicherry.

“My mother was a non-conformist. She was a daring and bold person. She was forced to marry her maternal uncle even before she attained puberty.

My mother was brought up by her grandparents who in turn became her father-in-law and mother-in-law. She was not fond of her husband. He initially did not bother about her because she was young. But when my mother attained puberty, he expected her to bear him a child. My mother got scared and returned to her mother's house. Elders in the family persuaded her to go back to her husband, but my mother refused. After two years, my mother got acquainted with another man – my father – and they decided to run away and get married. This family members heard about their plans.

Initially, they objected, but my mother's grandfather was considerate and took the initiative to get my mother married to my father. My mother's first husband also married another woman. So the problem was solved amicably.”

Angamma's mother gave birth to 13 children. Only four survived. Angamma does not know the causes of the death of her brothers and sisters. She has heard her mother talk about one brother who was found dead in the cradle. She explains that an evil spirit had struck the child dead. Of the children in the family, only the youngest sister studied up to the fifth standard. Angamma and her brothers are illiterates.

¹ Thali: A sacred yellow thread tied round a Hindu woman's neck signifying that she is married.

² Pottu: A red or coloured mark which Hindu women apply on their forehead.



P. Angamma of Panaiyur kuppam, who is active in fish marketing. She buys fish at an auction shed in Panaiyur, carries it by headload and boat to Sholinganallur village for sale (right).



Below: Attending to her daughter, one of six children – four boys and two girls.



Angalamma's father went Kola fishing. Kola fishing is highly remunerative but risky. This fishing needs special skills and is done mainly during the Tamil month of 'Adi'. If a fisherman plans to go Kola fishing, he has to sleep on the sea-shore for seven days because he is supposed to abjure sex during this period. If the wife happens to get her menses during that time, the plan is dropped. It is believed that a menstruating woman is unclean and will bring ill-luck to men. After these restrictions are observed the men go out to sea. The kattumaram used is big in size and consists of seven logs. The fisherman takes along the paraphernalia of puja or worship, and also bundles of leaves, made up of branches of the screw-pine, leguminous shrubs and palm tree – devices to attract the Kola fish. During the period when the husband is out at sea, the women at home are expected to stay indoors and keep pure; God's wrath may hit the men at sea if the women get defiled. So the women keep indoors praying for the safe return of the menfolk.

Kola fish is generally dried and sold for a good price to traders from Sri Lanka where it is a delicacy. Angalamma's mother used to engage in curing and drying fish. She sold it to Sri Lankan traders, and spent the money on food and household items. Angalamma's father never asked her mother about how she spent the money. The two took joint decisions on whether a craft or gear should be bought.

Angalamma attained puberty at the age of **15**. immediately, her 'jadhagam' was written. The puberty rites were done and her family started looking for a suitable man for her.

Marriage and family background

At the age of **16** Angalamma's marriage was arranged. Her husband was 20 years old. Her parents gave her a pair of gold ear studs and silver anklets. The wedding ceremony was simple, and as weddings go, a frugal affair.

Her husband was a very hardworking fisherman and earned a good income. The only problem was that for the first two years of married life, she did not conceive. Her husband's relatives ill-treated her and threatened that they would get him married again to beget a child. But fortunately she became pregnant in the third year of her married life. A son was born and she was happy. After the birth of her son Angalamma developed a burning sensation in the lower part of her feet. Therefore she was treated with 'kallu' tapped from a tree every morning. This treatment helped. But just when she was recovering, her husband fell ill. He contracted jaundice; and the Indian medicine treatment failed and he died.

Angalamma felt helpless when it dawned on her that she had become a widow at the age of 19. Her mother-in-law took care of her and the baby for a few months. But Angalamma wanted to earn her own living. At this time, her mother and brothers were persuading her to live with them. Though she hesitated initially, she agreed because she felt that her son had to be cared for.

She put up a pavement snack stall. She made iddlies, dosais, vadai, appam, etc. The sales were good. Her younger sister helped with the work. Angalamma earned up to Rs. 5 per day. With her earning she managed to buy jewels for her sister and also arranged for her marriage. She looked for a good bridegroom for her sister and got her married.

Her brothers were living separately with their families. On seeing their sister Angalamma earn, they decided that they should get her married again. This was because Angalamma had her own money and it was felt that she was becoming far too independent. They told her:

"We cannot take responsibility for you. You are still young and you have money of your

¹ Kola – Flying fish

² 'Adi' – Mid-july to mid-August

³ 'Puja' – Fishermen worship their deity with flowers, incense and coconut. They pray for protection from dangers and for a good catch

⁴ 'Jadhagam' – Horoscope. This is analysed before a person's marriage is fixed. If the horoscopes of the boy and girl "match", they get married.

⁵ 'Kallu' – Toddv

⁶ Popular South Indian snacks made of boiled and black gram ground in various proportions

own. Men will use you and you might fall into their trap. This will bring a bad name to the family. So it is our duty to get you married."

Angamma disagreed but they were very persistent.

Her second marriage

Finally, Angamma's brothers met a 35 year-old widower in the same village who agreed to marry her. No gold was given, as in the first marriage. Against her will, Angamma got married to Perumal at the age of 22. To avoid possible problems, she left her son with her mother and started living separately with her second husband.

Angamma does not talk to her brothers any more. She is angry with them because they forced her into marriage, without caring to find out whether she liked the man selected. Her main complaint is that her brothers earn well because they have craft and gear while her husband has none. And while her sisters-in-law stay at home she has to work hard to contribute to the family income.

Her husband and children

Her husband Perumal worked as a coolie fisherman for a net owner who had lent him Rs. 2,000 when Perumal's father fell ill. Perumal could go out fishing only with this net owner, unlike those fishermen free from debt who could choose any net owner (employer) and enjoy some flexibility about working hours and days.

Perumal at one time evinced keen interest in party politics and supported a particular political party, but he has now lost interest in politics. He calls all politicians 'crooks' and feels cheated by them, because they have not fulfilled promises made to the people.

Perumal and Angamma have six children: four boys and two girls. After the birth of their first two sons, Angamma wanted a female child. She visited temples and prayed for a female child. This is uncommon because fisherfolk usually pray for sons. Angamma says: "I wanted a female child to help in the household work, just as sons help the father in fishing."

Just as she hoped, her third child was a girl. Unlike Angamma, she is dark in complexion and villagers teasingly call her 'Karuppi' ('blacky').

Angamma's two sons are sturdy young men who go fishing regularly. Perumal himself rarely goes out to sea. He has taken to liquor; he enjoys staying at home, confident that his sons will earn enough to keep the family going.

Migration to Panaiyur

In Thennadu, Perumal was a member of the Janata Party, while the majority of the villagers supported the Congress.⁽¹⁾ A quarrel took place between supporters of the two parties. Perumal was actively involved in the fight. To escape retaliation, Angamma brought Perumal to Madras. They stayed in Ayodhyakuppam – a fishing settlement in Madras city. The two-room house was divided in two by a partition, one portion was occupied by the owners and the other by Angamma and family. For this portion, Angamma paid Rs. 300 as rent advance and Rs. 30 as rent every month. Since they had come away from Thennadu, Perumal's creditor forced him to repay his Rs. 2,000 loan. Angamma borrowed the money from a distant relative at a monthly interest rate of 10% and gave it to the net owner. Living in Ayodhyakuppam proved to be expensive, and Perumal earned only a meagre sum by going out to sea as a coolie fisherman.

Perumal and Angamma were on the look-out for another place, when they met a family from Panaiyur kuppam. They had come to Madras to attend a wedding and the family asked Perumal and Angamma to visit Panaiyur. They did so and decided to shift. Reasons: they would be able to save Rs. 30 every month on rent by putting up a small thatched hut of their own and also reduce their cost of living. In Panaiyur they initially lived for three months with the family which introduced them to Panaiyur. After informing the local leader, Angamma and Perumal built their own hut at a cost of Rs. 300.

Angamma had to repay the Rs. 2,000 loan borrowed from the relative. So Perumal approached a net owner for a loan, promising to go fishing only for him. The male head of the family who

¹ The Janata and the Congress (I) are two of India's leading political parties.

introduced Perumal to Panaiyur stood guarantee for him. The net owner loaned the money, and Angamma repaid her debts. They have been living in Panaiyur for the past three years.

Perumal became irregular in going out to sea, so the net owner called Angamma and asked her to repay the loan. Perumal said he could not work hard any more because he was growing old; he suggested that two of the sons sign a bond with the net owner. Angamma and her two sons have now signed a bond and assured the net owner that the sons would regularly go out fishing for him. But in spite of the sons' labour, the income earned is not sufficient to maintain the family. The revenue from sale of catch is divided in two. One share goes to the net owner, the other is shared among the crew. The net owner generally accompanies Angamma's sons. So he not only gets 50% of the amount earned but also a share from the 50% meant for the crew members.

Angamma's fish marketing occupation

After settling in Panaiyur, Angamma realised that the children were growing up; so was their demand for food and apparel. She didn't want to set up a snack stall again despite her experience with it. She thought her children would eat up the snacks themselves and she would end up with losses. She saw women in the village going to the market to sell fish, but hesitated to go fish marketing herself, because she knew little about it.

While on this dilemma, she got acquainted with two women from the Harijan¹ colony of Sholingallur, an agricultural village five miles away from Panaiyur. These two women came to Panaiyur to sell illicit liquor. During this period Perumal imbibed heavily, and sometimes came away without paying for the liquor. So the women asked Angamma to pay up. Sometimes they felt sorry for her and took fish instead of money. They suggested to Angamma that she could sell fish and earn for the family. They asked her to sell fish in the Harijan colony itself since all its womenfolk had to go to the market, situated in the main part of Sholingallur village.

Angamma was unsure whether she should take the risk. Perumal encouraged her to take up fish marketing. Initially he accompanied her to the Harijan colony and helped her carry the headload of fish.

In a few months, Angamma picked up confidence; today she is considered a good marketing woman. On an average, Angamma markets fish five days a week. She sits under a particular tree, spreads her fish on a tarpaulin sheet in neat heaps and fixes the price on the basis of the type of fish and the quantity she has. She sells only the smaller varieties and crab: Seer, pomfret or shark command no market in the Harijan colony. She says,

"Seer and pomfret are meant only for persons earning a monthly income and not for daily wage earners. Like me, these Harijans are also daily wage earners and I cater to their needs."

On an average she invests between Rs. 35 and Rs. 50 every day on buying fish. Usually, the fish bought is around six to eight kilograms in weight. So, Angamma carries a headload of about eight kg. She walks three miles up and three miles down. Instead of taking the regular route to the Harijan colony, she takes a shorter route. That is, she crosses a river, reaches the other side, and walks two miles. She saves two miles by crossing the river; her husband helps her cross it. She says that at times the river flow is strong, and water reaches up to her shoulder. She holds on to Perumal's shoulder and he guides her when the current is strong. After crossing the river, she spends 15 minutes on the shore drying her drenched clothes. Perumal goes to the illicit liquor shop on the river bed while Angamma proceeds to the colony. She is there by 4 p.m. (She normally leaves her house around two in the afternoon.) She finishes selling by 6.30 and meets Perumal who waits for her near the river. They return home by 8.30 at night.

Angamma has regular customers. There are four families who buy fish almost every day and pay her the whole month on their salary day. There are six families that buy fish nearly on all days and pay her on the Saturday of every week. The others buy whatever their income for the day permits.

¹ Harijans — 'God's people,' the name given to 'untouchables' by Mahatma Gandhi. Persons belonging to the 'scheduled' castes, who are regarded as untouchables in the Hindu caste system.

On an average, if she invests Rs. 35 per day, she earns Rs. 6. But there are also days when she loses money. Her income depends on what the farm hands and construction workers who live in the colony earn. On the day she loses money, she borrows from Panaiyur residents who lend money at a monthly interest rate of 10%. She borrows regularly from two persons and they lend because she repays promptly.

On certain days — when the people in the Harijan colony are without work — she returns home with a large chunk of her fish, sometimes as much as 50%, unsold. She immediately cleans the fish and salts it, so that she can dry it out in the sun the next day. Whenever the auctioned fish is of the expensive variety, beyond the reach of her customers, she takes the dry fish to the Harijan colony for sale. She earns on an average Rs. 2 per day when she sells dry fish.

On certain days, when she is ill, for example, she buys the fish and sends it through her husband to the colony. A woman from the colony, a close friend of Angamma, lays out the fish exactly the way Angamma would. Perumal gives her a heap of fish, sells the rest and returns with the money.

Angamma keeps the money she earns through fish marketing. All of it is used to buy food articles for the family.

Her daily routine

Angamma wakes up around 5.30 in the morning to ensure that her sons go fishing. At 6a.m. she has a wash and walks some distance to answer nature's call. About an hour later, she serves cold rice soaked in water to the children and her husband. By 7.30 am. she is on the sea shore waiting to observe the day's catch. She also enquires from the women sitting around her about whose kattumarams have returned and how many are yet to come. Once she has this information she goes to the auctioning shed. Baskets with fish are lined up for auctioning. She glances around to see the type of fish the men are sorting out. The auction begins and she carefully notes the quantity, type of fish and the price it is going for.

Depending on the number of kattumarams that have returned, she decides whether to bid for a basket of fish or wait. She usually waits till the last few kattumarams arrive because she sets out only around 2 p.m. and wants the fish to remain fresh. She spends nearly four hours on the shore. At about 11.30 am. she returns home. She buys the food articles for the day and gives her daughter instructions about what has to be cooked; she occasionally helps with the cooking herself. Then she serves her sons, who return from fishing, with cold rice.

Around noon she spreads the salted fish for drying. Her youngest son keeps her company as she chats with passersby or calls out to her daughter who is cooking. At times she goes out to gather fuel.

Around 1.30 p.m. she serves her children and husband with lunch, then eats herself with her daughter. Around 2 p.m. she gets ready for the market. She arranges the fish neatly in the basket so that it does not get crushed, and waits for her husband. It is 8.30 p.m. before husband and wife return from the colony. They eat the rice and the curry left over from the afternoon's cooking. Then they sit around and chat. By 10 p.m. they go to sleep.

Angamma's role in the family

There is a good deal of task-sharing in the family. Angamma's main task centres on market-going. Her husband assists her. Her Sons go fishing regularly. Her daughter takes care of the cooking, while Angamma helps. She also buys the groceries — her daughter can be cheated by the shopkeeper. The daughter takes care of the younger children when the parents go out.

Decision-making in the family

Angamma keeps the family income with her. Her sons give her their daily income, while she gives them the pocket money they demand. Her sons are reasonable and take less money when the income is low. Her sons, husband and she discuss how much they should put aside for the chit funds, how much they should spend on clothes for the children and on loan repayments. All decisions are taken only after the main family members are consulted.

Though her husband does not contribute to the family income, he is consulted because “anyway he is the head of the household” (to quote Angamma). Her sons occasionally question her on why she has diverted some of the family income into her fish marketing business. But they do not ask her how much she earned and how much she spent. They feel that since all of them contribute equally to the family income, they have an equal right to express their view.

Problems faced by Angamma and her family

Since she has been in Panaiyur village only three years, Angamma has not been allotted a government-built house yet. She bemoans her ill-luck and curses her husband because the village leaders brand him irresponsible. She hopes she would be allotted a house so that at least her son will live in a better place.

Angamma is a family-loving woman and rarely talks about village problems. Being a recent immigrant to the village, she is not well-versed with the happenings of the village. Being a woman, she does not attend the village meetings. In spite of her economically active role, she has no right to voice her opinions in the villages, like she does in the family.

1.3 J. Vedavalli

Housewife

Age	26 years
Education	6th standard (6 years of schooling)
Occupation	Housewife. Rarely engages in fish marketing
Professional skills	Net-making and plastic wire basket making
Marital status	Married
Age at marriage	16 years
Family planning status	Underwent sterilization after the birth of fourth child.
Position held in the village	President of the fisherwomen's cooperative society
Husband's occupation	Traditional fishing
Ownership status of the family	Four types of nets, television set, small two-roomed tiled house
Type of house	Concrete, tiled house
Religion	Hindu
Caste	Periapattinavar (sub-caste of Pattinavar caste)
Village	Chemmencheri kuppam (coastal village)
Location	Chengalpattu district, Tamil Nadu, India.

Vedavalli is a small-built woman with a serious face. She smiles occasionally. She is 26 years old and has done six years of schooling. Being one of the few educated women in the village, she is contacted whenever officials pay a visit. She talks to them boldly and considers it her responsibility to represent the problems of the villagers and of fisherwomen in particular.

Early childhood

Vedavalli was born in Nochikuppam, a fishing settlement in Madras city. Her mother gave birth to 11 children of whom three died when they were young. Her parents emphasized the need for education and sent all their children to school. They hoped that the boys would find good jobs and that the girls would at least know to read and write. Vedavalli had to discontinue her studies because she fell ill. After recovering she wanted to continue school. But unfortunately she was not permitted to because she had attained puberty. She was confined to the house. There were curbs on her going out or even talking to neighbours.

Vedavalli's father was a traditional fisherman. His catch was sold by her mother. After his death, Vedavalli's mother began buying fish at the auction for marketing.

Vedavalli's four elder brothers are married and live separately with their families. Her two younger brothers and her sister live with her mother. The entire family maintains itself on the mother's fish marketing income. Her brothers occasionally contribute some money to the family expenses.



I. Vedavalli (above) is the president of the fisherwomen's cooperative society in Chemmencheri kuppam. Right: She measures a net made by a village woman for her husband Jayabalan.



Vedavalli gets her youngest son ready for the "balwadi".



Vedavalli does not think highly of her younger sister. She says: "My sister is a very different type of a person. Though she had the opportunity to study up to the 7th standard she did not utilise the opportunity. My sister enjoys going out shopping with my sister-in-law. She also goes out to see films without my brother's knowledge. I was not allowed to even stand near the door and watch the happenings in the street. but now after my father's death, my sister is given a lot of freedom to do what she wants."

Her marriage

Vedavalli was married when she was only 16. Her eldest brother and mother arranged the marriage. Her parents-in-law who lived in Chemmencheri kuppam did not demand gold or other household articles. They asked Vedavalli's mother to give whatever she could give. So, Vedavalli was given gold jewellery – chain, nose ring, a ring and ear studs. She was also given silver anklets. Other than the jewellery, she was given a cot, wooden cupboard and kitchen utensils and a full set of the materials needed for "puja" (worship) of the family God every week. She does not know how much money was spent on her wedding.

The wedding ceremony expenses were borne by the bridegroom's family, the "pariyam" (engagement) expenses by the bride's family. During "pariyam," the bridegroom gives either a gold chain or a pair of gold bangles to the bride. This is usually taken back by the husband's family after the wedding.

Vedavalli's mother and brothers also gifted her a radio for the 'Thalai Deepavali'. Through these gifts, Vedavalli's natal family prestige was kept up.

Her husband Jaya ba/an

Jayabalan is a sturdy young man, who is considered a good fisherman in the village. Though he has studied only up to the 6th standard he reads and writes fluently in Tamil. These merits have helped him take up leadership roles in the village. In fact, he is one of the highly respected young leaders of the village.

Jayabalan is the youngest son in his family. His two brothers also live in Chemmencheri kuppam with their families. His parents initially lived with Jayabalan and Vedavalli; recently they started living separately.

Jayabalan goes out to work on all days except the days he is ill or has to attend to some work outside the village. He owns four types of nets – "Medhappa," "Kavalai," "Thattakavalai" and "Tharavalai." He says that they are worth nearly Rs. 7,000. He does not own a kattumaram but shares it with his neighbours. He and two of his neighbours go fishing together. Generally 10% of the money earned goes to pay for use of the kattumaram; the rest is equally shared among the crew since all of them take their nets along.

Her married life

It is 10 years since Vedavalli and Jayabalan got married. As is the custom, Vedavalli started living in Chemmencheri with her husband after her marriage. She rarely visits her mother who lives in Nochikuppam.

Jayabalan and Vedavalli lived with Jayabalan's parents for nearly nine years after their wedding. During their stay together, Vedavalli's mother-in-law did not treat her well. There were constant problems between the mother-in-law and the daughter-in-law. Jayabalan always took a neutral position and supported neither his mother nor his wife. This aggravated the problem. Immediately after marriage, the house was managed by Vedavalli's mother-in-law. Vedavalli did the cooking, while the purse strings were held by her mother-in-law. Soon after the birth of the first child, Vedavalli started asserting her rights in the family. She demanded that she should be given the money so that she could run the household affairs more efficiently. Finally, a part of her father-in-law's and husband's earnings was handed over to her. This was for food expenses alone. The rest of the money was kept by her mother-in-law.

1 Thalai Deepavali – the first Deepavali after marriage. The newly married couple is invited by the bride's parents to spend Deepavali with them. The bride's family presents new clothes (and sometimes a gold ring as well) to the bridegroom. Subsequent Deepavalis are celebrated in the bridegroom's house.

Vedavalli started managing the household affairs and her mother-in-law was relieved of these responsibilities. However, this caused a lot of friction between the two. The mother-in-law and father-in-law now live separately.

Her children

Vedavalli and Jayabalan have four children. The first son is eight years old and is in the second standard in the local school. The second son is six and mentally retarded. He has just started walking. He is not able to talk. He recognises people and is very attached to his grandfather. Vedavalli recalls how her second son was a very healthy baby when he was born. She explains:

“When he was one year old, he developed high temperature. I immediately took him to the local “Maruthuvachi” (midwife). She asked me to apply a herbal oil to make the fever subside. But the fever continued to rise and finally the boy fell unconscious. After that we rushed him to the hospital. The fever came down but the child became inactive and symptoms of retardation appeared.”

With the help of the BOBP social worker, Vedavalli put him in a residential school for the mentally retarded. After six months Vedavalli brought him back, because she missed him and preferred that he stay with her.

Her third child, a girl, is four years old. She goes to the village balwadi. Her youngest son is two and a half years old. He too goes to the balwadi along with his sister. Both Jayabalan and Vedavalli hope that they will study and find “office jobs” instead of having to go fishing.

All the children were born in the Government hospital in Madras. Vedavalli would go to her mother's house in Madras for every delivery because she felt that “it would not be safe to trust the local midwives.” There was a gap of two years between each of her children. Her first child was born when she was only 17 years old. For three months after the first child was born she stayed with her mother who took great care of her. Her mother presented her first baby with silver anklets and a silver belt for the waist. But the other children got only clothes and money and not jewels.

Vedavalli asks her eldest son to go to the seashore and wait for Jayabalan to arrive. He is to help sort out the fish and mend the nets. She asks her daughter to help in sweeping the house and washing the dishes. She chides her daughter for playing too long on the seashore. Slowly, she is getting her daughter to conform to the unwritten code of conduct for women in fishing villages.

Vedavalli's family planning status

Soon after the third child was born, Vedavalli wanted to undergo sterilization. But both her husband and her mother objected. Her husband felt that four children is the ideal number for a fishing family. Therefore she underwent sterilization after the birth of her fourth child.

As Vedavalli was brought up in Madras, she is familiar with family planning slogans. Her mother's financial and health problems resulting from a large family have induced Vedavalli to limit her family size.

She complains of having become weak after the sterilization operation. She is not able to carry headloads of fish or walk long distances. She feels giddy very often. She attributes all her health problems to the sterilization operation she underwent.

On being questioned as to why her husband did not undergo vasectomy, she explains that it would decrease his strength and energy. She feels that a fisherman should not undergo a family planning operation because he has to work hard at sea.

A woman has to get her husband's consent before undergoing sterilization. If the husband disagrees, she cannot go against his wish. So the woman takes a decision on her own only in rare cases.

Family savings

Vedavalli was one of the few women who readily accepted the presence of the BOBP social worker in the village. The latter initiated a savings scheme, and Vedavalli took active part in

enrolling members. The savings scheme formed an activity of the "Mahalir Mandram" (women's organization). The mandram's office bearers collected savings and recorded the amounts in specially printed books and an interest of 5 per cent per year was paid on savings of Rs. 100 or more. In all, 35 members were enrolled in the savings scheme. Credit facilities were also made available at a later stage to women at 2% interest.

To begin with, women participated actively in the scheme but at present the enthusiasm is dying down. It is because the villagers feel that savings through a chit fund¹ is better. The savings scheme gives them only a low rate of interest and the credit provided is also meagre. The chit fund makes available a larger sum of money because it aggregates contributions of more than one person. Secondly, it is like an interest-free loan. A member can bid and collect the entire amount in an auction chit fund system even before paying the total amount. But he/she keeps paying monthly instalments toward the chit fund till all the members get the total amount once.

Family debts

Vedavalli does not borrow large sums of money because Jayabalan and she save through the chit system. In case of dire need, she pawns her jewellery in Madras city and gets the money. The interest is fixed at 3 per cent per month.

Through the fisherwomen's cooperative society, Vedavalli has borrowed Rs. 300. The amount is to be repaid within three months, in daily instalments of Rs. 3. For the amount borrowed she has to pay an interest of Rs. 2.50. The women have to pay the share amount of Rs. 10 and an entrance fee of Re. 1 to be eligible for the loan.

Vedavalli did not use the Rs. 300 for fish marketing, the purpose for which the loan was given. She deposited it into a bank to enable her husband to receive a Rs. 2,000 loan under the Integrated Rural Development Programme for purchase of nets.

Most of the women who receive the loans do not utilise them for fish marketing. They buy gold jewellery, or a kilogram of net. A few others use it for household expenditure.

Women who engage in marketing need loans only when they lose money in their business. Generally the women pay for the auctioned fish only after they return from marketing.

The office bearers of the cooperative society have to go from member to member to collect the loan repayment. Initially they pay regularly, but they slacken over a period of time. A few loan recipients complain that the office bearers collect instalments regularly from them but do not remit it promptly. In fact it is rumoured that with this money they give out individual loans at an interest of 5 per cent per month and generate some personal income. The validity of this statement has not been verified.

Vedavalli's occupation

Vedavalli seldom goes fish vending. She goes only on those days when the price of fish at the auction is very low. She was never involved in 'fish marketing' — that is, buying fish at an auction, then selling it in markets for a profit. This would give her a personal income, while selling fish caught by her husband does not give her any income. The amount she gets by selling the fish is handed over to her husband; she can only claim the bus fare and coffee expenses. Vedavalli feels that selling fish is an additional responsibility and not an income-generating activity in her case.

Role and tasks performed by Vedavalli

Vedavalli mainly performs the roles of a housewife and a mother in the family. She does the cooking and collects water. She goes out to collect fuel when the children are in school and when her mentally retarded son is asleep. Vedavalli has the additional task of looking after her mentally retarded son who has no control over his bowels and keeps dirtying himself and the house.

¹ A chit fund is a saving and fund-raising device very popular in South India. A few persons get together and agree on a certain sum they pay every month. The month's collection goes to one person — a different person every month

She feels that the most difficult task is to manage the household expenditure within the fixed amount given by her husband, which is now Rs. 12 per day. With this amount she has to provide two meals, consisting of rice and fish curry, and has to give pocket money of 25 paise each for the children. She says that her husband has very conveniently forced this task of making both ends meet on her with the limited finance available. Jayabalan at times earns more than Rs. 12 but gives her only Rs. 12 every day. He feels that his wife is a spendthrift.

Decision-making

What about decision-making? Vedavalli is consulted on matters concerning the family. But the final decision is taken by Jayabalan. Even though she complains to her husband that Rs. 12 per day for household expenditure is insufficient, he does not give her more money. She says the amount is too small for her to make any decisions about priorities. All the money has to be spent on necessities.

Jayabalan does not permit Vedavalli to give her mother any money, but he gives his own mother money every week without consulting his wife. Jayabalan allows Vedavalli to question him to a limited extent; for example, she can ask him whether he is going out at four in the evening or the next day. But she cannot ask him where he is going, or for what purpose. He also does not wait for her consent. Vedavalli, on the contrary, cannot do anything without his consent. She has to even ask him whether she should go for fuel collection in the morning or in the afternoon.

As for decision-making in the village, women are totally excluded. They cannot participate in village meetings when decisions concerning the village are taken. They cannot represent directly to the village panchayat, they can do so only through their husband, father or brother. Women get to know the matters discussed at the panchayat but they have no right to express their views or criticise any decision. Fisherwomen in general have accepted this norm and do not question it at all.

Vedavalli's leadership position

Vedavalli is the president of the fisherwomen's cooperative society. Like the other office bearers, she too collects the daily instalments from members. She was selected because she can read and write, but the older women of the village question this selection. They feel that she has come to Chemmencheri as a daughter-in-law and does not originally belong to the village. They also think she is too young to be a leader.

Vedavalli talks boldly at women's group meetings. Given her city background she is able to grasp and digest information quickly, especially those concerning government schemes and programmes.

Her daily routine

Vedavalli has to wake up when her husband goes fishing, whether it be 4 a.m. or earlier. After he leaves, she goes back to sleep.

- | | |
|-------------------|---|
| 6.00 – 7.30 a.m. | She wakes up and buys a cup of tea from the shop opposite her house. Then she wakes up her children and asks them to drink their tea. She bathes her retarded son, then goes to a casuarina grove to answer nature's call. On her return she sweeps the courtyard, then has a wash. |
| 7.30 – 9.00 a.m. | She washes utensils and fetches water from a water pump 20 yards away from the house. She then serves the children cold rice soaked in water. |
| 9.00 – 9.30 a.m. | She prepares the children for their school or balwadi. Then leaves the younger ones in the balwadi which is five minutes away on foot from her house. |
| 9.30 – 11.30 a.m. | She serves her husband cold rice soaked in water when he returns from fishing. Then she goes to collect fuel. She leaves her mentally retarded son on the verandah of the house and he sleeps there. |

11.30 – 1.30 p.m.	She returns from fuel collection, then starts preparing lunch. She gets the Rs. 12 from her husband and buys provisions for the day's cooking. She finishes cooking, serves food to her husband and feeds her mentally retarded son. She also eats herself.
1.30 – 3.00 p.m.	She cleans the utensils, washes the kitchen. Fills all the containers with water, washes the clothes.
3.00 – 3.30 p.m.	She sits around and chats with a few women.
3.30 – 4.30 p.m.	The children return and she gives them a wash. They pester her for money and she gives them pocket money to buy biscuits and sweets.
4.30 – 5.30 p.m.	She goes for loan collection.
5.30 – 6.30 p.m.	She supervises the children while they study.
6.30 – 7.00 p.m.	She serves the night meals, which is always the food left over from the afternoon meal.
7.00 – 9.00 p.m.	The family owns a television set and villagers trouble them to switch it on. The programme is watched for an hour. jayabalan sends his son around to collect 10 paise from every viewer.
9.00 p.m.	She puts her mentally retarded son to sleep. The other children also go to sleep.
9.30 p.m.	Vedavalli and jayabalan go to sleep.

Appendix 2

INTERVIEW SCHEDULE FOR THE SAMPLE SURVEY

Name of village. _____

Interview schedule: _____

1. **Respondent's personal data**

1.1 Name of the Respondent: _____

1.2 Name of the head of the family: _____

1.3 Respondent's age:

13—20	—1
21—30	—2
31—40	—3
41—50	—4
51—60	—5
61—70	—6
71 and above	— 7

1.4 Respondent's marital status:

Unmarried	— 1
Married	— 2
Widowed	— 3
Separated	— 4

1.5 Respondent's educational background;

Illiterate	— 1
* Know to read	— 2
* Know to read and write	— 3
1st — 3rd standard	— 4
4th — 6th standard	— 5
7th — 9th standard	— 6
10th — S.S.L.C	— 7
Above S.S.L.C.	— 8
Others	— 9

1.6 Occupation of the respondent:

Nil	—1
Fresh fish vending	— 2
Dry fish vending	—3
Fish processing	— 4
Fish auctioning	— 5
Others — self-employment activities	— 6
Others	— 7

1.7 Respondent's income: (Per month)

Nil	—1
Rs. 50 and below	— 2
Rs.51 Rs.100	—3
Rs. 101 to Rs. 150	— 4
Rs. 151 to Rs. 200	— 5
Rs. 200 and above	— 6

But did not attend school

1.8	Do you own (purchase and control) any assets?	
	Yes	—1
	No	—2
1.8.1	If yes,	
	Jewels	—1
	Vessels	—2
	Land	—3
	House	—4
	Livestock	—5
	Watch	—6
	Radio	—7
	Others	—8
1.9	Other skills possessed by the respondents.	
	Net making	—1
	Plastic basket weaving	—2
	Embroidery	—3
	Sewing	—4
	Others	—5
1.10	Caste:	
	Periapatti navar	—1
	Chinnapattinavar	—2
	Others	—3
1.11	Religion:	
	Hindu	—1
	Muslim	—2
	Christian	—3
1.12	Place of origin:	
	Born in this village	—1
	Came from another village	—2
	Came from Madras	—3
1.12	If migrated, give reasons for migrating:	
	Marriage	—1
	Quarrel with family	—2
	Others	—3
	If married:	
1.13	How old were you when you got married?	years
1.13.1	How old was your husband when you got married?	years
1.13.2	Was your marriage	
	An 'arranged marriage'	—1
	'Love marriage'	—2
1.14	State the number of years you have been living in this village	
	10 and less	—1
	11 — 15	—2
	16 — 20	—3
	21 — 25	—4
	26 — 30	—5
	31 — 35	—6
	36 and above	—7

2. Family Data

2.1

No.	Relationship to Respondent	Age	Sex	Marital status	Educational background	Occupation	Others (members of panchayat etc. note)
-----	----------------------------	-----	-----	----------------	------------------------	------------	---

Type of family _____ Family size _____ No. of earners _____

2.2 Assets owned by the family;

Yes —1
No —2

2.2.1 If yes

Fishing gear owned; Total No. _____

No.	Name of the gear	Its worth in rupees (present value)
-----	------------------	-------------------------------------

2.2.2 Fishing craft owned;

Total No. _____

No.	Type of Craft	Size	Its worth in rupees (present value)
-----	---------------	------	-------------------------------------

2.2.3 House/Hut

Concrete — 1
Mud walls and thatched roof — 2
Thatched

2.2.4 Land;

Hut/house site — 1
Cultivable land — 2
Others — 3

2.2.5

Livestock: Number
Chicken — 1
Goats — 2
Others — 3

2.2.6 Others

2.3 Explain with whom the male members of the family go for fishirig, arid other relevant informatiion

2.3.1 Explain how the day's earning/catch is shared by the crew (consisting of your family members)

2.4 Explain how the catch is disposed of/marketed. How are the female family members involved in marketing?

2.5 Indebtedness

2.5.1 Does the family have any outstanding loans?

Yes
No

—2

2.5.2 If yes,

		Amount		Year of borr- owing	Purpose of taking	Rate of Interest
No.	Person giving the loan	Borrowed	Outstand- ing			

2.6 Health

2.6.1 What are the common ailments in the family?

No.	Common ailments	Adult		Frequency		Child		Frequency	
		male	female	Male	Female	Male	Female	Male	Female

2.6.2 Birth in the family (1982-1983)

No.	Name	Age	Sex	Place of delivery/other details
-----	------	-----	-----	---------------------------------

2.6.3 Deaths in the family (1982-83)

No.	Name	Sex	Age	Marital Status	Cause of death
-----	------	-----	-----	----------------	----------------

2.7 Savings

2.7.1 Does your family save?

Yes
No

—1
—2

2.7.1.1 If yes, with which formal organisation?

Organisation
Bank
Post Office
Others

Amount . Rs.

3 Decision-Making in Family

No.	Decisions	Husband	Wife	Adult male (state)	Adult female (state)
<i>Regarding production/employment</i>					
1.	Purchase of gear and craft				
2.	Employing of coolie and wage fixing				
3.	Member of cooperative society				
4.	Take up part-time job-women in the house				
5.	Take up part-time job – women primary occupation				
6.	Sale of catch				
<i>Regarding family management</i>					
7.	Expenditure on food				
8.	Expenditure on clothing				
9.	Hut renovation/improvement				
10.	Purchase of jewels/vessels				
11.	Children's schooling				
12.	Pocket money – children				
13.	Pocket money – husband				
14.	Medical care				
15.	Allocation of tasks in family				
16.	Savings – bank, post office				
17.	Family size				
18.	Leisure time activity				
19.	Chit fund – savings				

4 Division of Labour

No.	Tasks	Husband	Wife	Adult male (specify)	Adult female (specify)	Child male	Child female
<i>Tasks related to occupation/employment</i>							
1.	Net mending						
2.	Net making						
3.	Marketing fish – fresh fish, dry fish						
4.	Sorting						
5.	Curing and drying fish						
6.	Other self-employment activities						
<i>Tasks related to family/house management</i>							
7.	Fuel collection						
8.	Water collection						
9.	Cooking food						
10.	Shopping-household articles						
11.	Hut repairs/building						
12.	Cleaning surroundings						
13.	Maintenance and stitching of clothes						
14.	Care of children						
15.	Care of sick						
16.	Guidance of children						

Codes: Applicable for Division of Labour and Decision Making Tables

Entirely responsible – E
 Mainly responsible – M
 Equally shared – ES
 Some responsibility – S
 No responsibility – N

5 Participation in decision-making in village organisations

5.1	Did you vote in the last elections?	
	Yes	—1
	No	—2
5.1.1	If no, give reasons	
5.2	Are you a member of any political party?	
	Yes	—1
	No	—2
5.3	Are you a member of the fisherwomen's cooperative?	
	Yes	—1
	No	—2
5.3.1	If no, why?	

- 5.4 Why are women not allowed to be members of the local panchayat?
- 5.4.1 Do the male members of your family discuss issues that are being dealt with in the panchayat?
- Yes —1
No —2
- 5.4.1.1 If no' why?
- 5.5 Do you belong to any chit fund group?
- Yes —1
No —2
- 5.5.1 If yes, how much do you save?
- Rs. _____ per month
Rs. _____ total amount
- 5.5.2 For what purpose do you use this amount saved?
- 5.5.3 Who decides as to how the amount should be utilised?
- 5.6 Do you have any other local women's group in the village?
- Yes —1
No
- 5.6.1 State name, aims and membership details of the group:

6 Opinions and attitudes

- 6.1 Nutrition and serving pattern:
- 6.1.1 Why do you think that a woman should eat only after the male members have finished eating?
- 6.1.2 Why do you serve more and better food to the male head of the household?
- 6.2 Socialisation
- 6.2.1 Why is a male child taught to follow his father's activities and skills?
- 6.2.2 Why is a female child kept restricted within the house and not allowed to do things on her own?
- 6.2.3 Do you make a difference while bringing up your children — male & female
- Yes No
- For example:
Quantity of food served
Schooling
Pocket money
Involvement in family/household work
Clothing
Leisure time activities
- 6.2.4 Do you prefer to have a male child or a female child
- Male —1
Female — 2
No preference — 3
- 6.2.4.1 Why?
- 6.3 Inheritance:

- 6.3.1 Are you entitled to get a share of your father's property?
- | | |
|-----|----|
| Yes | —1 |
| No | —2 |
- 6.3.1.1 Why? Give reasons
- 6.3.2 Is a fisherwoman entitled to her husband's property after his death?
- | | |
|-----|----|
| Yes | —1 |
| No | —2 |
- 6.3.2.1 Why?
- 6.3.3 Do you think women should possess and use certain assets needed for producing income?
- | | |
|-----|----|
| Yes | —1 |
| No | —2 |
- 6.3.3.1 Why?
- 6.4 Rituals and customs:
- 6.4.1 What are the various traditional rituals performed for a girl?
- 6.4.1.1 Why?
- 6.4.2 What are the gods that women specially worship and why?
- 6.4.3 Do you perform 'puja' in the house everyday
- | | |
|-----|----|
| Yes | —1 |
| No | —2 |
- 6.4.3.1 Why?
- 6.4.4 How often do you go to the temple?
- 6.4.4.1 Why?
- 6.5 Marriage:
- 6.5.1 Do you think a woman should remain subordinate to her husband?
- | | |
|-----|----|
| Yes | —1 |
| No | —2 |
- 6.5.1.1 Why?
- 6.5.2 Do you think inter-caste marriages should be encouraged?
- | | |
|-----|----|
| Yes | —1 |
| No | —2 |
- 6.5.2.1 Why?
- 6.5.3 Do you think women should be encouraged to choose their husbands?
- | | |
|-----|-----------|
| Yes | <u>—1</u> |
| No | <u>—2</u> |
- 6.5.3.1 Why?
- 6.5.4 If unmarried, would you prefer an 'arranged marriage' or 'love marriage'?
- 6.5.4.1 Why?
- 6.6 Household tasks:
- 6.6.1 Should the men also directly involve themselves in household chores?
- | | |
|-----|----|
| Yes | —1 |
| No | —2 |
- 6.6.1.1 Why?

6.6.1.2 What are the household tasks that you would like the men to do?

6.7 Employment (ask non-working women):

6.7.1 Why do you not go to work?

6.7.2 Would you like to work if an opportunity is provided and your family gives you permission to work?

Yes —1

No —2

6.7.3 Do you consider that women's first priority should be to be a good housewife and then take up a job?

Yes

No

6.7.3.1 Why?

6.7.4 Were you working earlier?

Yes —1

No —2

6.7.4.1 If yes, what were you working as?

6.7.4.2 Why did you give up working?

6.7.5 Though not working are you given a part of your husband's/father's/brother's income for household expenses?

Yes —1

No —2

6.7.5.1 Why?

6.7.6 Consumption pattern: (per month)

No	Items	Amount spent
----	-------	--------------

(Ask working women)

6.7.7 Did you have to get permission to work?

Yes —1

No —2

6.7.7.1 Whom did you get permission from?

6.7.8 How often do you go for work in a month?

6.7.8.1 Where is your workplace/market?

6.7.9 Have you always been doing this (work involved in at present) job?

Yes —1

No —2

6.7.9.1 If no, what were you working as and why did you give up that work?

6.7.10 Did or does your mother also work?

Yes —1

No —2

6.7.10.1 If yes, what was/is she working as?

6.7.11 Can you keep and use the income you earn?

Yes —1

No —2

6.7.11.1 If no, who controls the income?

6.7.12 Is your household work shared by other members in the family?

Yes
No

6.7.12.1 If yes, who shares the tasks and what do they perform?

No	Person sharing tasks	Tasks performed
<hr/>		
<hr/>		

6.7.13 Consumption pattern. (per mOnth)

No.	Items	Amount spent
<hr/>		
<hr/>		

6.8 Physical strength — women inferior:

6.8.1 Do you think men are physically stronger than women?

Yes —1
No —2

6.8.1.1 Why?

6.8.2 Hence do you think women should perform only certain tasks?

Yes —1
No —2

6.8.3 Do you think women should always obey the commands of the male?

Yes —1
No —2

6.8.3.1 Why?

6.8.4 Do the men beat women (wife, daughter) in the family?

Yes
No

6.8.4.1 If so, how often?

6.8.4.2 Why do they beat them?

6.9 Problems:

6.9.1 What are the main problems that you face as a fisherwoman?

6.9.2 Do you think these problems can be solved by you and other fisherwomen?

Yes —1
No —2

6.9.2.1 Why?

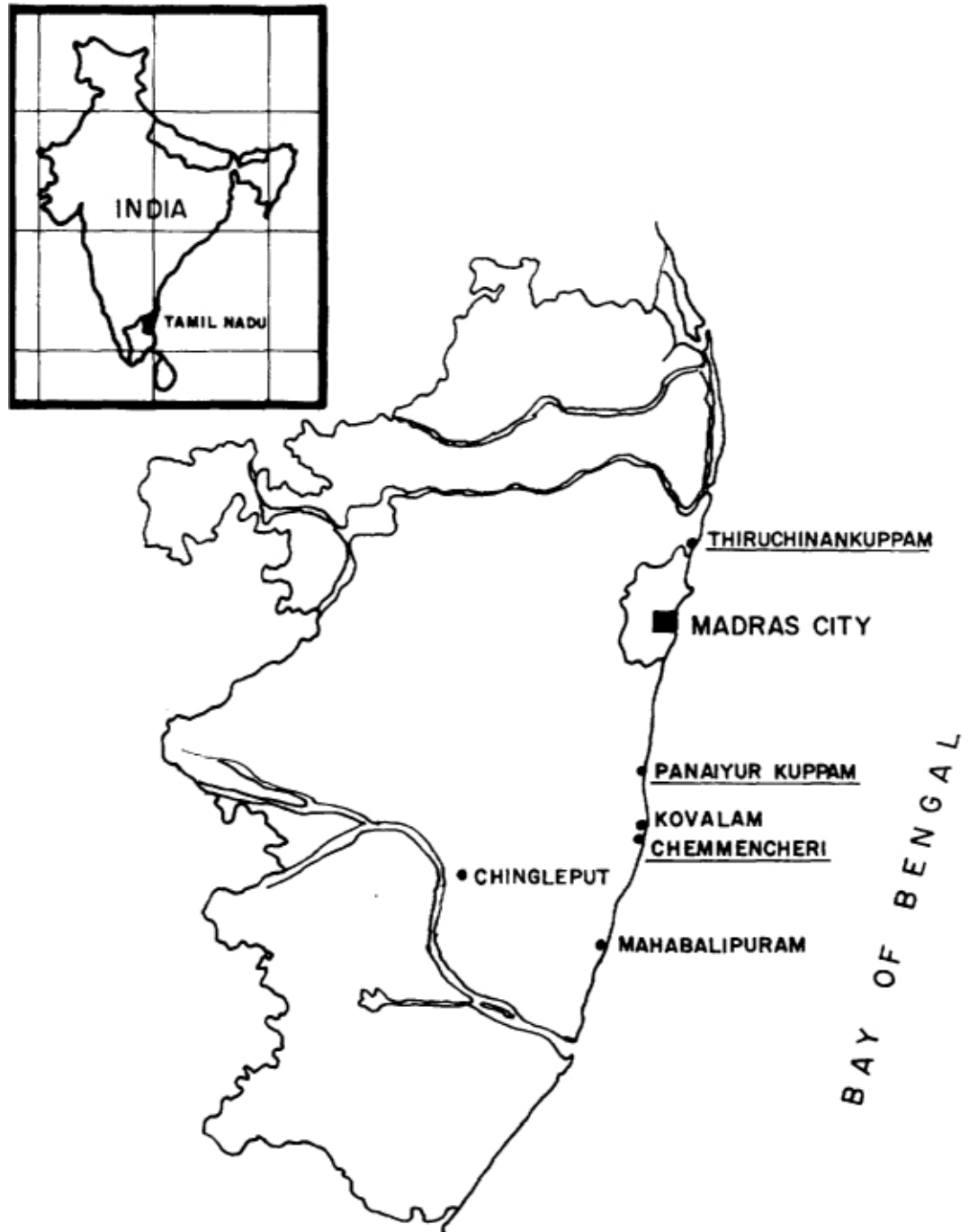
6.10 Do you think women have an important role to play in bringing about change and growth in the village?

Yes —1
No

6.10.1 Why?

6.11 Other observations, etc.

Appendix 3:
LOCATION OF THE VILLAGES STUDIED



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