

STUDY OF KERALA WOMEN WORKERS IN  
FISH PROCESSING IN 3 STATES OF  
INDIA

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I.S.S.T

Bangalore, 1987.

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## CHAPTER I

### 1 INTRODUCTION

Kerala is one of the leading marine states in India. It has a long coastline of 590 kilometres and a network of rivers, lakes and water areas which make it ideal for fishing. The waters of Kerala are by far the richest in the country. The coastline is spread with 304 fishing villages amounting to almost a village every 2 kilometres along the coastline. The fishing population of Kerala as a whole is about 6,39,672 forming 99,894 households.<sup>1</sup>

According to 1981 survey, 92 per cent of fishing people live below the poverty line. The fisher folk live on the seashore, since their work is connected with the sea. During the monsoon, the houses are in danger of being washed into the sea.

In 1952, an Indo-Norwegian project introduced mechanized fishing at Neendakara in Quilon, a coastal district of Kerala. At this time, prawns had a high value in the export market. In order to catch prawn on a large scale for exports ground trawling was introduced in Kerala. In the fishing industry ground trawling is termed as destructive fishing process. Therefore, when introduced in Norway in 1936, it was accompanied by certain government controls related to the number of nets to be used, the size of the mesh and the distance upto which they could operate. But no such controls were imposed when trawling was introduced in Kerala. Immediate gains was the only guiding principal

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1 Facts and figures of Kerala Fisheries 1980, CMFRI.

of the merchants and middlemen who owned the trawlers<sup>s</sup>. In 1975, purseiners were introduced. However, the need for similar controls were ignored even in the case of purseiners. As a result of these developments the total catch went upto 450,000 tonnes in 1975 at the cost of destruction of fish resources and local ecology.

At the same time that is early 70's a shift in occupation occurred in the coastal areas. The traditional occupation of the rural families in the coastal areas of Kerala was mainly coir making and fishing. With the decline in employment in coir making industry in early 70's <sup>and boom in fishing</sup> the people employed in this industry joined the fishing industry, ~~as fishing was in boom that time.~~ With the increase in prawn catch many processing units were set up in Quilon and Cochin districts, which generated employment for a large number of the people *specially women*.

In 1973, fish production was at its maximum but from 1980 onwards the depletion ~~had~~ set in. Between 1960 and 1982 there has been (a) an increase in production in mechanized sector by 177%, (b) a decrease in total catch and (c) a decrease in the catch in the traditional sector by 60 per cent. As a result of the decrease of catch in the traditional sector as well as total catch, the poor fisherfolk became poorer. Besides, ~~there was a surplus of labour and~~ many <sup>women</sup> workers working in fishing industry were unemployed, <sup>and there was a surplus of labour</sup>

It was around this time several fish processing units were started in various other coastal states. Initially the seafood companies in other States sought help for technical expertise from Kerala <sup>but</sup> and in course of time, a large number

of Kerala women have been seeking employment in such processing units. The women migrate to various States for approximately 9 months during the fishing season. During monsoon, they return to Kerala, as the catch is either of a very small quantity or nil due to disturbances in the sea.

The problems faced by these young girls <sup>working in fish processing units of</sup> Gujarat was brought to the attention of Labour Ministry at the Centre by one of the largest trade unions in Gujarat the Majoor Mahajan Sangh. ISST, Delhi was requested to conduct a <sup>Survey</sup> study to look into the situation particularly with the objective of finding a solution to some of the problems faced by these women.

## 1.2 BACKGROUND OF THE STUDY

In 1983, ISST had undertaken a research study sponsored by the Ministry of Labour on young Kerala girls employed in the fish processing units of Veraval district in Gujarat State. The purpose of study was mainly to look into the working and living conditions of migrant women workers. The major findings of the study were:

- 1 Due to unemployment in Kerala, poverty and large family size the Kerala girls skilled fishing related activities were forced to take up jobs outside Kerala in other states;
- 2 If provided with job opportunities in Kerala, majority of the women workers preferred to stay in Kerala rather than migrating to other states;
- 3 The migrant women workers from Kerala provided a totally captive labour;
- 4 They usually worked for more than 10 hours a day without getting the benefit of overtime;

- 5 The Minimum Wage Act, Inter State Migrant Workers Act and Bonus Act <sup>found to be</sup> were violated;
- 6 The migrant workers were not paid displacement wage for the unemployed period;
- 7 Living conditions were found to be far from satisfactory.

Later, the Institute of Social Studies organised a Round-Table Conference in Trivandrum on 2nd January 1984 to discuss the findings of the study and to look into various alternatives that could help to reduce the distress and exploitation of the migrant women workers working in Veraval fish processing industries. Besides ISSI staff, the participants of the round-table conference were: Senior officials from fisheries and Labour Department of Kerala as well as Centre, Researchers, ~~and academics~~, representatives of union and Marine Export Development corporation and the social workers working with the women of coastal and rural areas of Kerala. The findings of the study were presented with two-fold objectives:

- 1 The possible absorption of the Kerala women workers in Kerala itself at the same wage rate offered in Gujarat. This was done with a view to prevent the hardship of migrant workers from Kerala, who lead an isolated perhaps unhappy life in a <sup>linguistically</sup> linguistically and culturally far away place in Gujarat.
- 2 To draw attention of the participants and make them aware of the unsatisfactory working and living conditions of the migrant women workers. Thereby, suggesting alternatives to improve the working and living conditions.

However, the first alternative was ruled out as there was consensus in the group that Kerala State at present is not in a position to absorb or offer employment to these women workers due to various reasons like shrinking of fishing ~~as well as~~ <sup>and</sup> ~~the~~ <sup>coir</sup> industry and decline in other industries due to unionization.

The group felt that the only alternative would be to improve the working conditions and create a healthy climate for the Kerala women workers in Veraval. For details on various suggestions <sup>and recommendations generated</sup> see appendix I.

As a follow up programme a similar kind of IInd Round Table Conference was organized on 2nd February 1965, in Ahmedabad, Gujarat. The major aim of this conference was, firstly, to discuss the findings of the study and then to evolve a plan of action as a follow up programme in order to improve the working and living conditions of <sup>the</sup> migrant women workers. Various recommendations and suggestions were generated by the group (See Appendix II). Later on, keeping in view the recommendations certain specific immediate and long term action plan was chalked out (see appendix II). Unfortunately, till now none of the action plan has been carried out or implemented.

However, one of the action-plans was that the Institute of Social Studies would co-ordinate a set of similar studies in the other coastal States of India to get a comparative and holistic picture of the plight of Kerala women migrant workers employed in fish processing industries. It was against this background that the study of ~~Women Migrant Workers~~ <sup>Women Migrant Workers</sup> in Fish Processing Industries with special reference to Kerala women in three States of India viz., Karnataka, Maharashtra and Tamil Nadu was taken up.



### 3 Organization of The Report :

The objectives and Methodology followed for the study are presented in the next chapter. This is followed by an analysis of the field data on Socio-economic characteristics of the households in Kerala, in chapter III. Survey findings on the working and living conditions of the Kerala migrant women workers in ~~3 states~~ the fish processing units of three states are presented in chapter IV. This is followed by the findings based on interviews and observations during field survey in chapter V. The last chapter VI contains summary of findings and ~~Concise~~ recommendations.

## CHAPTER II

### OBJECTIVES AND METHODOLOGY

2.1 The development planning policies have been mainly framed with a simplistic assumption that economic development once achieved, the benefits will automatically improve the economic status of women members of the community along with the households. Moreover, it is also believed that women as a whole are a homogenous entity and that as such all women benefit equally from policies aimed at improving women's economic status. However, various microlevel studies have conclusively stated that women have been displaced from the developmental process instead of becoming participants in it.<sup>1</sup>

In a patriarchal society women are considered secondary at home and they are also considered secondary in the formal labour market. This discrimination has taken a deep root in the wage market, keeping her wages pegged at artificially low levels. Due to pressures of poverty and lack of alternative employment opportunities women remain at a lower level economically as it is evident from the existence of large number of low paid, manually labour intensive jobs. The assumption that women are incapable of handling more sophisticated technology, have tended to keep them restricted to these low paid tasks, without much of horizontal or vertical mobility in the occupational structure. Many more women are pushed into the unorganised and exploitative trades characterized by inhuman wage and employment conditions i.e. the lowest rung of "occupational hierarchy with insecurity and discrimination".<sup>2</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Maitreyi Mukhopadhyaya - Silver shackles pg. 40.

<sup>2</sup> Kumud Sharma et - Women in Focus (CWDS AND ORIENT LONGMANS 1984).

Moreover, there is always the threat of unemployment dangling all the time before them. Most of the female labour is concentrated in the unorganised sectors of the wage economy, including the informal production sectors, whereby their incomes tend to lose all the benefits of any protective legislation, i.e. the benefits of the Minimum Wage Act, Labour Welfare provisions etc. and they continue to suffer the economic exploitation and remain poverty stricken. *Same is*

*working in fish processing industries*  
The story of the Kerala Women Migrant workers ~~is very similar to this situation.~~

*in the past*  
Although many studies have been conducted <sup>to</sup> look into the socio-economic situation of <sup>the</sup> fishing communities in India, ~~in the past~~, there is a paucity of detailed and extensive data on the working conditions and nature of work of migrant women workers employed in fish processing industries. Hence, the present study tries to explore the nature of employment pattern of the Kerala migrant women workers in the fish processing industries.

## 2.2 The principal objectives of the study are:

- 1 To survey the comparative wages, working and living conditions of the women workers in fish processing industries of 3 coastal states namely: Maharashtra, Tamil Nadu and Karnataka.
- 2 To study the supply and demand position of the skilled and semi-skilled women workers (using these 3 States as demand area).
- 3 To compare the rate of growth of average real earnings of fishing processing industries with the wages of the labour.
- 4 To examine whether there is an increase in the wage with the growth of skill.
- 5 Lastly, to assess the socio-economic conditions of the households in Kerala from where the labour is drawn.

### 2.3 METHODOLOGY

The entire study was designed in two phases: first was the household surveys conducted in Kerala from which the women labour migrates to other coastal states and the second phase included survey of 3 states (Maharashtra, Tamil Nadu and Karnataka) to look into the employment pattern and working and living conditions of these migrant women workers.

In order to assess the situation, available facilities for organising field surveys and to obtain a general idea of fishing villages, a visit to Kerala was undertaken in June 1986. The visit was very useful to pre-test the draft questionnaire for the survey and also to identify and locate the pockets in each coastal districts from which the labour is drawn.

### 2.4 Problems of Data Collection:

The field survey team faced many problems during the survey in Kerala as well as the three States. In Kerala, it was very difficult initially to locate the pockets from which the labour migrates to other states. Neither the Labour Department nor the contract labour board had names and addresses of the women contract workers migrating to other States. Not only it was difficult to find the list of contract workers but even the total number of girls leaving the State each year was not available. Therefore, it was difficult to start even a preliminary enquiry to estimate the extent and range of contract workers in order to draw up a sample and interview them. In Kerala, we got over this problem by just landing up in a coastal village in Ernakulam District and meeting the Parish Priest. The Parish Priest helped the research team to locate the households in that particular village and to get the local support.

Then onwards the village people helped us in identifying the villages and households in various districts from which the women labour migrates. Even then, the team was looked at very suspiciously by the household members. The word had spread in the nearby villages about the team's visit and enquiries. It was gathered later that the household members were threatened by the contractors not to disclose any information. However, these instances occurred only in few villages of Alleppey district.

The similar kind of problems occurred in the three sample states during field visits. The Labour Department could not provide information about the number of processing units in each State employing Kerala women for processing fish. In Karnataka (Mangalore) the senior labour officials were not even aware that the Kerala girls seasonally migrate to the processing units situated at coastal areas. It was a news to them. However, the Labour Department in respective states <sup>could atleast</sup> ~~made special efforts~~ to provide information on number of companies operating at the time of survey as well as the addresses of the companies. To overcome the problem <sup>of identifying the units which employed Kerala girls</sup> the research team just landed up in any one of the processing units ~~in each state~~. Surprisingly enough it was found that the Kerala women were employed in the Company. Later on, it was observed that all processing units in Maharashtra, Tamil Nadu and Karnataka employ Kerala women <sup>for grading</sup> ~~for~~ either ~~processing~~ or peeling <sup>or both</sup>.

The other problem that arose during the State surveys was of entry into the processing units to interview the women workers. The contractors, in-charge of the Kerala Women Workers are also like production managers. They were suspicious and did not appreciate the research team interviewing the women.

The research team sought permission of the management to interview the women worker, <sup>ASPCA?</sup> so the contractors were not in a position to prevent it. However, they tried to remain present at the time of interview. So the research team decided to follow two strategies; one was to interview the women workers at their residences in the absence of contractors thereby getting more information. The other was that one of the investigators interviewed the contractor in order to keep him busy, and avoid his interference while interviewing the women workers.

Another problem that arose was related to the profit and loss account of the processing units. Initially as outlined in the research proposal that the selection of the processing units would be made on the basis of profitability. It was decided to select few highly profitable companies and few loss making units. However, due to unavailability of balance sheet from the processing units as well as from any other source, a deviation in the methodology of selecting sample companies <sup>was</sup> made in the final sample selection. A list of processing units in the three States was obtained from the Marine/Export Development Authority (MPEDA) with <sup>Products</sup> export quantities and value for the last 5 years. This data was used to select more productive and less productive companies.

2.5 SAMPLE: COVERAGE IN KERALA

During preliminary field visits it was gathered that majority of the Kerala girls migrate from Alleppey and Ernakulam, the coastal districts of Kerala. Very few migrate from Quilon district probably due to the availability of employment in the local fish processing units. In fact, quite a few Kerala girls from Alleppey district work in Quilon Fish Processing industries. In total, 22 villages were selected from these 3 districts on the basis of the following criteria:

- (i) Main occupation - fishing and Non-fishing villages, as it was found that women from non-fishing occupation also migrate to other States although very few in number.
- (ii) Religion: Hindu as well as Christian dominated villages.
- (iii) Accessibility of the villages.

Keeping the above criteria in mind, 10 villages were selected in Ernakulam, 7 in Alleppey and 5 in Quilon. As there was comparatively less migration in Ernakulam more number of villages had to be selected in order to get the desired sample household. Alleppey district has a total of 39 fishing villages and many girls migrate from all the villages. Hence only 7 villages were selected for the study. In Quilon, it was found difficult to identify the villages, besides, comparatively fewer girls migrate from these villages. Therefore, only 5 villages were chosen for the study (See Table 1.1).

The purposive sampling method was used to select the households. In the absence of any listing of the villages or addresses of the migrant workers it was difficult to identify houses. Only those households from where these girls migrate were selected for the study.

Table 1.1: Distribution of Sample Households in the Coastal Districts of Kerala

Sl.No.	District	No. of villages	No. of Households	No. of girls interviewed
1	Ernakulam	10	93	120
2	Alloppy	7	114	156
3	Quilon	5	25	35
	Total	22	232	311

## 2.6 SAMPLE COVERAGE IN 3 STATES

During the second phase of the study visits to the processing units of 3 States viz. Maharashtra, Karnataka, and Tamil Nadu were made in order to study the employment pattern and the working and living conditions of the migrant women workers. As mentioned earlier, that a list of processing units in the three States was obtained from the Marine Export Development Authority (MPEDA). The MPEDA also provided with the data on export quality, quantity and value of each of the companies. These data were used to select the more productive and less productive companies. Table 1.2 shows the total number of processing units in each State and the number of units selected for the study.



Table 1.2: Distribution of Fish Processing Units in 3 States

Sl.No.	Name of the State	Total number of Processing Units	Number of Processing units selected
1	Karnataka	8	6
2	Tamil Nadu	30	17
3	Maharashtra	26	16
	Total	64	39

In Karnataka the fish processing industries started in the early 1970's. In 1974-82 there were 14 fish processing units. During 1985-86 it was reduced to only 8 units due to scarcity of prawn catch in the region.

Tamil Nadu has about 997 kms. of coastline spread over 8 coastal districts. The 30 processing units are spread over Madras, Ramnad, Thirunelveli and Kanyakumari districts. Sample Units were selected from all these coastal districts for indepth study. Since 60 per cent of these units were situated in Madras, 9 units in Madras, 3 in Ramnad, 3 in Thirunelveli and 2 in Kanyakumari were selected for study.

Maharashtra State has a coastline of 720 kms. spread over 4 coastal districts namely Thane, Greater Bombay, Colaba and Ratnagiri. Fish Processing units were located in these 4 districts. 16 Sample units were selected from Thane, Colaba and Bombay districts.

In each of the selected company, Kerala Women workers, both peelers and graders were interviewed. It was kept in mind to interview atleast

20% of the total number of girls employed, which is a reasonable representative of the sample. However, the number interviewed exceeded much above 20 per cent (See Table 1.3). <sup>The total number of girls interviewed from 39 sample units were 472</sup> The percentages and number of women workers interviewed varied in each State due to following reasons:

Table 1.3: Distribution of Migrant Women Workers in the Sample Processing Units

Sl.No.	State	Total No. of units selected	Graders		Peelers		Total No. interviewed
			Total No. of Kerala girls employed	Total No. of Kerala girls interviewed	Total No. of Kerala girls employed	Total No. of Kerala girls interviewed	
1	Karnataka	6	165	76	350	74	150 (29%)
2	Tamil Nadu	17	313	147	11	5	152 (47%)
3	Maharashtra	16	670	152	55	18	170 (23.4)
Total		64	1148	375	416	97	472

- (i) In Karnataka out of 6 units visited 5 units employ graders as well as peelers only from Kerala, whereas, only in one company the graders employed were from Kerala and the peelers were local women. Therefore, even though the number of units (6) visited are much lower than Tamil Nadu (17) the total number of girls interviewed are more or less the same (See Table 1.3). <sup>except in 3 units</sup>
- (ii) In Tamil Nadu, the peeling job in most companies are done by local people. Moreover, local girls are also employed as graders, besides having Kerala girls.
- (iii) In Maharashtra, out of 16 companies visited only two units employed Kerala women as peelers. The rest of the units local girls did the peeling job. Even in the position of graders local Maharashtra girls were employed. However, the number of graders employed from Kerala were greater than the local girls.

## 2.7 Collection of Data

A structured questionnaire was prepared to interview the migrant <sup>women</sup> workers in the 3 States as well as for household survey in Kerala (Appendix III). However, a combination of methods were used for collecting data - like structured questionnaire, observation and long indepth interviews. The format of interview was flexible. The girls were asked about their problems at work, previous experiences in other companies, problems of unemployment and finding jobs, nature of work, consciousness of their rights and unionisation, family background etc. During interviews the questions elicited orchestrated replies. Answers to questions were given by other women workers too, who had gathered around and who prompted and supported the respondents. It was like the whole group participating in group discussion exercise. These interviews were of great relevance to sub study findings which are <sup>6</sup> beyond the scope of a structured questionnaire.

## CHAPTER III

### FINDINGS: SURVEY IN THE VILLAGES OF KERALA

As has already been mentioned earlier, the household survey conducted in Kerala was oriented towards a sample households, selected purposively. The adults of the family either male or female were canvassed for information on their socio-economic status, their reactions to the system of contract labour and towards the contractor and their awareness of the problems faced by the girls migrating to other States.

The survey covered a total of 232 households, of which 163 were fishing and 69 non-fishing households. The households engaged in fishing activity only and not any other activity are defined as fishing households, whereas non-fishing households are those who are engaged in activities other than fishing.

During household survey, it was found that the majority of the girls migrating to other states were from fishing households. Girls from Kerala migrate to other States mainly from four coastal districts viz., Quilon, Alleppey, Ernakulam, Calicut and Tiruvalla. The maximum concentration of migration was found to be from Alleppey district followed by Ernakulam, Calicut, Quilon and Tiruvalla.

Table 3.1: Distribution of Sample Households in 3 Districts of Kerala by Caste/Religion

Religion	<u>Eranakulam</u>		Total	<u>Alleppey</u>		Total	<u>Quilon</u>		Total	<u>Grand Total</u>
	Fishing HH	Non-Fishing HH		Fishing HH	Non-Fishing HH		Fishing HH	Non-Fishing HH		
Hindu	3	8	16	49	31	80	1	-	1	97(41.81)
Christian	55	22	75	31	-	31	16	8	24	130(56.04)
Muslim	2	-	2	3	-	3	-	-	-	5(2.15)
<b>Total</b>	<b>63</b>	<b>30</b>	<b>93</b>	<b>83</b>	<b>31</b>	<b>114</b>	<b>17</b>	<b>8</b>	<b>25</b>	<b>232(100)</b>

HHs: Households

Figures in brackets indicate the percentage of caste composition of the total sample.

### 3.1 Socio-Economic Background

In the ensuing paragraphs the socio-economic characteristics of the household in terms of caste, educational level, family size, income and assets have been summarized.

#### 3.1.1 Caste-Religion Composition

The Fishing population in Kerala are represented by Hindus (Avaya), Christians and Muslims. The sub-castes among Hindus are Ezhavas (majority), Acharis, S.C. and S.T. According to 1981 census, in Kerala, Hindu, Christian and Muslim Fishing Population are distributed in the ratio of 40:35:25. The caste-composition of the sample fishing

Table 3.1 should come here

households are presented in Table 3.1. It can be seen that the caste of the majority of the households of migrating women workers were Christian (56.04%) followed by Hindus (41.81%) and Muslim (2.15%).

In an earlier study<sup>1</sup> of Kerala Women Workers migrating to Gujarat fish processing industry it was found that the majority of the girls going out of Kerala to work belonged to Christian Community, whereas, the majority of girls working in fish processing units within the State were Hindus. On the basis of the findings of the two studies on migrant women workers it can be concluded that the majority of the migrant women workers are Christians.

However, the district-wise caste distribution pattern reveals an interesting finding that is the majority of the girls migrating from Ernakulam District are Christians whereas, in Alleppey they are Hindus. This could be possible because of the predominance of the Christian fishing households in Ernakulam district.

### 3.1.2

#### Family Size, Age and Sex Composition

The size of the family in the 232 sample households is shown in Table 3.2. Nearly 42 per cent of the households fall under the family size of less than 5 members. The overall average family size in the sample <sup>was</sup> 6.33. It is interesting to note that there <sup>was</sup> no significant difference in the size of the

*1. Employment of Women from Kerala in the Fish Processing Units of Gujarat, Published by Institute of Social Science, New Delhi, March 1984.*

households between Hindus and Christians but in the sample Muslim households the size was larger compared to the other two. The tendency among Christians and Hindus is to set up nuclear families, while the Muslims continue to live in joint families.

Table 3.2: Size of the Sample Households in 3 Districts

District	Size of the Households				Total
	Upto 5 members	5 to 7 members	7 to 10 members	10 and above members	
Ernakulam	38(40.9)	33(35.5)	14(15)	8 (8.6)	93 (100)
Alleppy	47(41.2)	43(37.7)	22(19.3)	2 (1.8)	114 (100)
Quilon	12 (40)	6(24)	5(20)	2 (8)	25 (100)
Total	97 (41.8)	82(35.3)	41(17.7)	12(5.2)	232 (100)

In the case of age and sex composition the total sample population was 1469 comprising of 596 males (40 per cent) and 873 females (60 per cent). One noteworthy feature in these households is that the difference in the sex ratio is higher in the age group of 15 to 30 years (See Table 3.3). The sex ratio in the age group 15 to 30 years is 33:67 and in the age group of 35 to 60 years it is 45:55. This shows that the female population is higher in the age group of 15 to 30 years and the majority of the migrant girls fall under this age group. Hence, one of the reasons for the girls to go out of State could be the absence of male adult earning members in the family and, therefore, faced with less income and poverty.

Table 3.4: Age and Sex Distribution of Total Population of the Sample Households in the 3 Districts of Kerala

District	Sex	Children			Adults			Aged		Total
		0-6 Yrs	7-14 Yrs.	15-20 Yrs.	21-30 Yrs.	31-40 Yrs.	41-50 Yrs.	51-60 Yrs.	60 years and above	
Ernakulam	Male	31	41	41	52	22	19	20	9	243
	Female	20	27	106	92	36	36	19	13	357
Alleppey	Male	23	56	54	49	31	22	35	14	204
	Female	14	70	120	91	40	40	31	11	417
Quilon	Male	5	9	10	16	2	10	5	4	69
	Female	7	15	30	23	5	13	4	2	99
Total	Male	59	106	113	117	55	51	60	27	596
	Female	49	112	256	206	81	89	54	26	873
Total		108	218	369	323	136	140	122	53	1469

### 3.1.3 Literacy Levels

In spite of its high density, Kerala stands ahead of the rest of the States in the country in terms of literacy. Taking into consideration the education of the heads of sample households only 32 per cent were found to be illiterate (See Table 3.5). In Kerala, the difference between male and female literacy level is not significant. Moreover, the rural-urban literacy differentials are also quite narrow.<sup>1</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Census of India 1981.



Table 3.5: Distribution of Households showing the Educational Level of the Head of the Household

Districts	Illiterate	Primary	Higher Primary	Secondary	Above Secondary	Total
Ernakulam	23 (23)	58(56)	9 (12)	3 (4)	-	93 (100)
Alleppey	45 (39.4)	54(47.4)	13 (11.4)	2 (1.8)	-	114 (100)
Quilon	7 (24.7)	14(62.4)	3 ( 9.7)	1 (3.2)	-	25 (100)
Total	75 (32.3)	126(54.3)	25 (10.8)	6 (2.6)	-	232 (100)

Figures in parenthesis indicate the percentage to the total.

Looking into the literacy level of the migrant women workers, it is interesting to note that only 8 per cent of the girls are illiterate, whereas, 39 per cent and 36 per cent have received primary and higher primary education respectively. About 17 per cent have had secondary level education (See Table 3.6).

Table 3.6: Literacy Level of Migrant Girls

District	Illiterate	Primary	Higher Primary	Secondary	Above Secondary	Total
Ernakulam	8	61	40	11	-	120
Alleppey	18	50	60	28	-	156
Quilon		11	11	13	-	35
Total	26 (8)	122 (39)	111 (36)	52 (17)	-	311 (100)

Figures in parenthesis indicate the percentage to the total

### 3.1.4 Employment and Income:

Among the fishing households fishing is the main occupation of the men. They work mostly as labourers in the mechanized boat or do fishing in their own traditional boats. However, due to depletion in fish resources the men in the villages are employed only a part of the year that is about 3 to 5 months. During off-season there is no work except for very few who collect sand for the builders. Men in the non-fishing households work as agricultural labour and other casual labourer. In these occupations too, there are not enough jobs and opportunities for everyone. Besides, shrinking of fishing industries, many other industries in Kerala which could have provided employment was also on the decline due to unionisation. The recent trend has been to start industries in other southern states by the Kerala businessmen to avoid the union activities and save overheads. In fact, during field survey in Tamil Nadu and Karnataka it was observed that 90 per cent or more of the processing units belonged to Keralites.

While walking through the coastal villages in Kerala, the research team often saw the young boy of 16 to 25 years of age playing cards during the daytime and the middle-aged men sitting idle at home.

Like men, the employment conditions were found to be similar in the case of women. Wherever the opportunity existed they worked as pealors and graders only for 3 to 4 months in a year. Besides being

engaged in household activities some women were also employed in net repairing and rope and coirmats making. However, these type of jobs <sup>were</sup> not regular as there are not much demand for such products.

Table 3.7 gives a comparative picture of the employment pattern of the members of sample households in three districts according to their age group. The highest rate of employment was found to be in Alleppey district followed by Ernakulam and Quilon. It is very interesting to note that the comparatively higher rate of employment in Alleppey and Ernakulam district is mainly because a large number of girls in the age group of 15 to 30 years are employed. As mentioned earlier that a large number of girls from both fishing and non-fishing households of Ernakulam and Alleppey district migrate to other States to work in the fish processing industries, whereas, in Quilon district the girls are employed in the local fish processing industry.

At the same time, looking at the unemployment pattern of the sample households for both males and females, it is quite disappointing to note that the highest percentage of unemployment is in Ernakulam (38 per cent) and Quilon (38.28 per cent) followed by Alleppey (12.10 per cent). Here again, it was observed that among the unemployed girls belonging to the age group of 15 to 30 years from a major portion of the unemployed youth. The lower unemployment rate in Alleppey district is quite likely due to the fact that from every family, 2 or 3 girls

Table 3.7: Number of Persons Employed, Unemployed and Employed Part of the Year in the Sample Households

Age Group in years	ERNAKULAM DISTRICT								ALLEPPEY DISTRICT								QUILON DISTRICT																													
	Employed		Employed part of the year		Unemployed		Total		Employed		Employed part of the year		Unemployed		Total		Employed		Employed part of the year		Unemployed		Total																							
	M	F	M	F	M	F	M	F	M	F	M	F	M	F	M	F	M	F	M	F	M	F	M	F	M																					
15-20	31	53	-	1	8	49	39	103	26	99	15	6	19	19	60	116	6	18	2	-	11	10	19	(51.45)		(20.50)	(48)		(85.34)	(32)	(9.48)		(64)		(57)	(36)										
21-30	37	57	1	1	14	38	52	96	48	80	3	2	4	5	55	67	10	17	-	-	6	6	16	(59.37)		(27)	(40)		(92)	(7.3)	(5.74)		(74)		(37.5)	(26)										
31-40	18	15	1	1	4	19	23	35	28	37	-	2	3	2	31	41	2	1	-	-	-	4	2																							
41-50	18	14	2	2	4	17	23	33	22	38	-	2	-	2	22	42	6	4	-	4	3	4	9																							
51-60	13	3	4	4	7	11	24	18	32	22	1	-	2	6	35	28	1	1	2	1	1	2	4																							
Above 60	7	4	1	4	3	5	11	13	10	4	-	3	5	7	15	14	-	-	2	2	2	-	4																							
Total	123	146	9	13	40	139	172	298	166	283	19	15	33	33	218	328	25	41	6	7	23	26	54	(71.51)	(49)	(5.23)	(4.36)	(23.26)	(46.64)	(100)	(100)	(76.14)	(85.36)	(8.72)	(4.57)	(15.14)	(10.07)	(100)	(100)	(46.3)	(55.40)	(11.11)	(9.46)	(42.59)	(35.14)	(100)

Figures in parenthesis indicate the percentage of sample household members employed to the total.

work as migrant workers. During survey it was observed that if a household had three girls between the age of 15 to 30 years then all the 3 girls were employed as peelers or processors in the fishing units of other States.

The employment pattern in the 3 districts was reflected in the income pattern (See Table 3.8). The household income was found to be much higher in Alleppey district followed by Ernakulam and Quilon.

Table 3.8: Annual Income of the Household in 3 districts - Kerala

Annual Income	Alleppey	Ernakulam	Quilon	Total
Upto 2,000	7 (6.03)	12(12.90)	1(4)	20
2001-3000	4 (3.5)	11(11.82)	6(24)	21
3001-4000	15 (13.15)	11(11.82)	4(16)	30
4001-5000	8 (7.20)	24(25.83)	7(28)	39
5001-7000	22 (19.30)	12(12.90)	4(16)	38
7001-10000	24 (21)	8(8.6)	2(8)	34
Above 10000	34 (29.82)	15(16.13)	1(4)	50
<b>Total</b>	<b>114 (100)</b>	<b>93(100)</b>	<b>25(100)</b>	<b>232</b>

Table 3.8 states the income of the household as reported by the members. However, during field survey in Ernakulam district extreme poverty was observed during the months of August and September when the fish catch was very poor. Quite a few household members revealed that they had not

taken food for the last 2 or 3 days and were surviving on black tea. As such they have only one meal a day consisting of Kanji (made of rice and water). However, during the fishing season that is 3 to 4 months a year they consume a good meal consisting of rice and fish.

### 3.2 Housing Condition and Land Ownership

In general, the living conditions of the fisher people were found to be very poor, with inadequate or no drinking water and extremely poor sanitation. The housing condition of the sample households differed from village to village in each district. Majority of the houses were small huts with thatched roof made up of coconut leaves needing frequent repair or replacement. However, in some villages people took loans to build pucca houses at high interest rate (12 to 14 per cent). Loan was taken from various sources; like, Matsya Federation, Fishermen Welfare Corporation and Housing Board. The repayment of loan was found to be poor and untimely.

Comparatively the housing condition was found to be better in Alleppey district followed by Ernakulam and Quilon. One of the reasons could be the regular income of their migrant daughters. Another observation was that wherever the Church played an active role in the development programmes the housing conditions also improved. Vadakkal village in Alleppey district was an example of this. The village has a community

development centre and an union. The village is further divided into subsets, each covering 24 homes and headed by a convenor under the Union's rule. Each family is expected to pay Rs 75 in 3 years duration in any number of instalments suitable to them. After 3 years the family receives Rs 150. The union also takes care of people who are ill and cannot work by collecting money from the rest of the villagers.

Almost all the households owned 3 to 5 cents of land with few coconut trees and banana plants. After the Land Reform Act of 1971 many of the households got 3 to 10 cents of land. In some places, family houses falling within the jurisdiction of the municipality had obtained 3 cents of land and families within the jurisdiction of Panchayat received 5 cents of land.

### 3.3 Mode of Recruitment:

The processing units situated in States other than Kerala employ girls mostly through contractors who are also Keralites. Few companies have either Keralite agents or supervisors who supply the girls. The contractors approach the parents and pay an advance ranging from Rs 50 to Rs 200 or more for the girls. On a specific date and time, the girls are assembled at one place and taken. The travelling expenses to and fro are paid by the contractors. The contractors are supposed to get a license from the Government in order to take the girls. Moreover, the license needs to be renewed every year. However, it was found that the contractors

did not possess any license, neither there was any record of the number of girls leaving the State.

#### 3.4 Migration Patterns: Demand and Supply

There is no definite migration pattern of the girls. Various factors were found to be responsible for the area-wise migration pattern.

Following are some of the factors that govern the decision of either the girls or the family to migrate to a particular company or state:

- (i) Influence of the peer group: Quite often the decision to migrate to a particular state or company is influenced by the relatives (sisters and cousins) and friends who decide to work together for a particular company.
- (ii) Enterprising nature is another factor that influences their decision. Many of them like to visit different places each year and have been to West Bengal, Bombay, Orissa and Gujarat. Some of them who have not been to various cities revealed that next time they would like to go there.
- (iii) Previous experience in terms of work load, living condition and *relation* with contractors is yet another reason for selecting a particular company. The girls usually avoid those companies who try to extract maximum work after working hours and where the living conditions are poor.



- (iv) Decision to select a particular company or State is also influenced by the fact that how far it is from Kerala. Quite a few girls prefer to migrate to Karnataka than Gujarat as the travelling distance is too long.
- (v) Promised wage to be paid by the contractor also influences the decision-making. It was cited that at times the contractors raise the salary by Rs 10 to attract the girls to work for a particular company.
- (vi) In many cases the relationship of the parents with the contractors also influence the decision-making. The parents prefer to let their girls go with a particular contractor who is known to them.

Most of these girls migrating to other States are unmarried. However, some married women with children have also been going. There are instances where mother and daughter are working for the same company. Pressed by poverty, indebtedness and unemployment the girls have no other option but to take up jobs outside the State. Under these circumstances the parents are also pleased to send their daughter away, as they often remarked that "atleast my daughter would get two meals a day and clothes to cover her body, we are unable to provide even that". Moreover, in some of the families, the girls are <sup>wife</sup> the only earning members and the family depended on the income of these girls.

The existence of high rate of dowry especially among the Christians is yet another reason for these girls to take up job outside Kerala. Moreover, the urge to go to a new place and buying new clothes and jewellery is so strong that the girls do not mind going to far off places. In spite of the meagre salary some of the girls have saved money all throughout the year and made gold jewellery for themselves. In Kerala, it is considered a status symbol to have gold jewellery and good clothes. This also seems to enhance the marriage prospect of many girls. The survey team came across few families in which the girls have saved for their own dowry and got married.

In the absence of any data it is difficult to estimate the demand and supply situation of women labour in Kerala. However, interviews with the contractors revealed that due to surplus of labour, they do not face any problem whatsoever to get women workers. In spite of stagnant and meagre wages, the supply of labour has been continuously on rise. One of the contractors quite bluntly said that "It is better for them to get food and some money rather than stay hungry at home". The high participation rate of women in fish processing units reflects much more the poor economic conditions with little or no resources to fall back, hence no bargaining power.

Demand

3.5 Attitude of Parents:

As mentioned earlier that in the absence of any alternative employment opportunity coupled with poverty the parents have no other option but to let their daughters go outside of Kerala to work. Interview with the parents regarding the problems faced by the girls revealed that they were either not aware or they prefer<sup>red</sup> to remain tight lipped about it. In one or two cases where the exploitation has been of extreme nature, the girls have not taken up employment elsewhere and stayed back in home. One of the examples of such case was observed in a household in Ernakulam where a 19 year old girl employed in Maharashtra came back home pregnant after 6 months of being employed. Most of the girls do not reveal their problems at work to their parents as they feel it would be an added misery to them. Besides making their parents unhappy they also feel that it will be of no use.

The second death in Ravi Ratna Fisheries (Gujarat) of Shirley, a 19-year old girl on 20th August 1986 itself reveals that harassment exists. The parents of Shirley received her letter written on 17<sup>th</sup> August stating that she was well. However, on 20th August, she expired under suspicious circumstances. On enquiry the parents mentioned that Shirley was admitted to a hospital for fever and then she died. They never questioned why the girl was admitted in a hospital 400 kms. away from the factory when so many hospitals were situated close to the factory.

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The interviews with an ex-supervisor of one of the fish processing units in Mangalore revealed such harassment. A nurse in one of these fish processing units frankly admitted about a number of abortion cases. The local newspapers (of Kerala) which have often made scoops into the working conditions of these women have also alleged sexual harassment by the supervisors and employers. However, the women are either too frightened or threatened to admit such harassment.

To sum up, the socio-economic and <sup>living</sup> conditions of the households in Kerala <sup>were</sup> found to be miserable in the face of rising costs and unemployment and decreasing income. The fisherpeople settlements have poor houses, inadequate drinking water and sanitation. Some of the houses were found to be well constructed. The costs to construct such houses were met through loans at high interest. Unemployment coupled with poverty has forced the families to send their girls to work outside Kerala in the fish processing units. For many families, their daughters working outside Kerala were the only wageearners. *In spite of stagnant and meagre wages the supply of labour has been constantly on rise due to surplus of women labour <sup>in Kerala</sup>. The situation reflects the poor economic conditions of women workers with little or no resources to fall back, hence, no bargaining power.*

## CHAPTER IV

### FINDINGS: FISH PROCESSING UNITS IN 3 STATES

This part of the report consists of the findings of the survey on working and living conditions of the Kerala migrant workers in 3 States viz., Maharashtra, Tamil Nadu and Karnataka.

#### 4.1 Organisation of Fishing Industry

The peak season for fishing in Karnataka and Maharashtra is from August/September to April/May, whereas in Tamil Nadu, it is all throughout the year. Although the quantity of daily catch is comparatively lesser in Tamil Nadu, but it spreads all throughout the year. Hence, in Tamil Nadu the Kerala women are employed as graders for the whole year, whereas, in Maharashtra and Karnataka they are employed for about 8-9 months in a year only during the prawn catch season.

In Tamil Nadu and Karnataka, most of the fish processing units are private Limited companies and the owners of more than 90 per cent of the units are from Kerala. Before 1975, these units were situated in Kerala, but due to unionisation problem in Kerala they shifted the units to Tamil Nadu and Karnataka.

The owner or the appointed manager is overall-in-charge of the working of the processing units. The job of the manager is made much easier by appointing contractors who are from Kerala. The contractor looks after the overall production of the unit. They are assisted by 2 to 4 supervisors depending

upon the size of the company who <sup>were</sup> also from Kerala. Besides supervisors, there <sup>were</sup> are few other men who <sup>were</sup> are responsible for loading, unloading baskets of fish and keeping the packed graded boxes of fish in the freezer. In most companies, these men <sup>were</sup> are from Kerala. The major work force in all the 3 states constitute of Kerala men and women.

It was observed that in Tamil Nadu, out of 17 sample processing units only 8 units had the contract system whereas in other companies the girls were either directly recruited or through supervisors of the units or through a senior women grader. The situation was more or less similar in Maharashtra. Of the total 16 sample units in

Maharashtra 9 units appointed Kerala girls through the contractor. *However, in Karnataka, of the total 6 units sample units the Kerala girls in 5 units were employed through the contractor.*

It was also observed that the management have tremendous trust and faith on the contractors. In fact, the manager entrusts the overall responsibility of production work and managing the entire work force to the contractors. The workers both men and women directly report to contractors rather than managers. Besides looking after the production the other functions of the contractor includes

- a Bringing the women work force from Kerala and reaching them back;
- b Payment of wages, bonus, overtime etc. to the Kerala women <sup>and men</sup> workers;
- c Payment of railway fare to and fro and travelling expenses;
- d Providing all facilities like food, living and medical etc. to the women;
- e Getting the work done by all employees of the unit within the stated time period that is undertaking overall responsibility of the production.

#### 4.2 Nature of Employment and Women's Tasks

The Kerala migrant workers are engaged in two types of job in the processing units. One is of 'peeling' the prawns which can be labelled as semi-skilled task. The other is the highly skilled 'grading' the prawns according to its variety, weight and size. Many Kerala girls initially start working as peeler and with one to three years of experience become graders. Grading requires experience and skill. The whole process of peeling as well as grading needs to be done very fast so as to avoid harmful bacteria and rejection in the export market.

In Maharashtra, of the 16 sample processing units, only 2 units employed Kerala girls to do the peeling work, whereas, the rest of the companies employed local girls. For grading both local as well as the Kerala girls were employed in the ratio of 1:6. The situation was found to be similar in Tamil Nadu. Of the 17 sample processing units the local ~~women~~ girls were employed as peelers only in 3 units, whereas, for grading both the local as well as Kerala girls were employed in the ratio of 1:4. However, in 2 processing units all the graders were from Kerala. In Tamil Nadu the managers preferred Kerala girls as they felt that Kerala women were more hygienic than the Tamil women.

In Karnataka, the situation was found to be totally different. For peeling as well as grading only the Kerala girls were employed. It was revealed by the managers that it was difficult to get local girls as they were either engaged in beedi rolling or fishing related activities.

Moreover, the management preferred employing Kerala girls as the local girls were unwilling to work at night, odd hours and during festivals. They often dictated the terms rather than following the rules. In all the 3 States the management preferred Kerala girls due to the following reasons:

- (i) The Kerala girls are skilled in peeling and grading operations which determines the ultimate price of the prawn and fish;
- (ii) Besides being skilled they are also very fast at their work. Keeping in view the productivity it is obvious that the management prefer Kerala peelers and graders *from Kerala*;
- (iii) They maintain Personal hygiene as well as hygienic conditions while doing the processing work which is a crucial factor for preservation of fish;
- (iv) Very disciplined lot - during working hours they do not waste time in talking to each other.
- (v) All Kerala girls have atleast primary education which helps in counting of prawns, weighing and keeping account of boxes.
- (vi) They are docile and do not protest even if they work at odd hours or have late meals.
- (vii) Most important advantage of employing Kerala girls seems to be their availability for work/any time of the day. Usually prawns arrive from 3 PM onwards and needs to be peeled immediately and by the time grading is completed it could be well above 9 PM at night. The girls work on holidays as well as festival days without protest. They provide a totally captive labour for the season.

## 4.3

Employment Position and Wages

The ensuing paragraphs describes the comparative working conditions, wages and methods of payment of the Kerala women migrant workers in the 3 States. As mentioned earlier, in Karnataka, Kerala girls are employed as peelers and graders for a period of 9 months in a year. They usually join the



company around July/August and leave in March/April. Of the total 6 sample units only in one unit the graders were permanent *employ* and employed throughout the year with one months leave. In the rest of the units <sup>the</sup> girls were employed through contractors and were on temporary basis.

In Maharashtra, the graders and peelers <sup>were</sup> employed for only 10 months in a year. The local Marathi graders are employed all through-out the year. Moreover, they are permanent employees of the company. Out of the 16 sample units only in 3 processing units the Kerala girls working as graders were permanent employees and received all benefits. This happened only 2 years back when the girls of these 3 units joined various unions covering their area. Due to the pressure put by the unions the girls were made permanent employees of the company.

As mentioned earlier, in Tamil Nadu, the Kerala girls are employed throughout the year. Out of total 17 processing units in 7 units the Kerala girls were working as permanent graders. In the rest of the companies, they were temporary employees. Only 3 units of the total 17 units employed Kerala girls for peeling. The rest of the processing units exported prawns with shell either headless or with head and so did not need the peelers. *Besides, removing of heads were done by the graders.*

4.3.1 Wages - Graders:

Wages paid to the Kerala girls (graders) in all the 3 States were more or less the same with very slight difference (See Table 4.1).

Table 4.1: Monthly Wages of the Graders in the 3 States

State	No. of Sample units.	Monthly wages in rupees							
		300-350	351-400	401-450	451-500	501-550	551-700	701-1000	TOTAL
Karnataka	6	16 (21)	29 (64.50)	9 (11.67)	2 (2.63)	-	-	-	7 (11.67)
Tamil Nadu	17	31 (21)	65 (44.23)	37 (25)	8 (5.45)	3 (2.16)	3 (2.16)	-	10 (11.67)
Maharashtra	16	-	21 (13.82)	64 (42.0)	26 (17)	11 (7.24)	22 (14.47)	8 (5.47)	10 (11.67)
Total	39	47	135	110	36	14	25	8	39

The salary of the majority of the graders in Karnataka and Tamil Nadu were between Rs 350 to 400, whereas, in Maharashtra it is <sup>was</sup> Rs 400 to Rs 450. The cost of living in Maharashtra is also comparatively higher. As stated earlier that the graders of 3 units in Maharashtra were unionized, hence their monthly wages were also found to be higher than the graders of the rest of the units in Maharashtra. The graders salary in those 3 units ranged from Rs 500 to Rs 1000 depending upon their experience. Besides, they were given all the benefits like medical, ESI, bonus, leave salary etc. like a permanent worker.

On the whole, the wages paid to the graders in Karnataka was found to be the lowest followed by Tamil Nadu and Maharashtra.

During interviews in all the 3 States, it was observed that the Kerala girls working as graders were paid the same salary irrespective of their age, experience or skill. In the same company a 17 or 18 year old girl with one or two years experience received the same salary as a 36 to 40 year old woman with more than 8 years of experience. Experience, skill and efficiency was not considered at all while fixing the wages. In few companies, it was found that an increment of Rs 25 was paid to the graders only if the same girl joined the company again next year. However, such cases were rare and the usual practice was to recruit new faces every year except for the permanent employees. From Table 4.2 it can be affirmed that most of the graders are fresh recruits. However, those working for more than 3 years are permanent employees of the company. This is in the case of 3 units in Maharashtra which are unionized, one unit in Karnataka and 7 units in Tamil Nadu.

Table 4.2: Since How Long Working in the Company - Graders

State	1 Year	2 Years	3 Years	4 Years	5 Years and above	Total
Karnataka	42	19	5	4	6	76
Tamil Nadu	61	31	23	7	25	147
Maharashtra	67	41	11	10	23	152
Total	170	91	39	21	54	472

4.3.2 Other Benefits - Graders:

In Karnataka the graders were not paid either bonus, overtime or displacement wages. Only in one unit the graders got these benefits because they were permanent employees (See Table 4.3). During illness the girls were treated by the company physician and the medical expenses were paid. However, no sick leave was granted. Wages were deducted for the days they were absent at work during illness.

In Maharashtra, the 3 sample units employing permanent graders paid bonus, overtime, provident funds, medical benefits, uniforms (2 courses and blouses annually) shoes, bedsheets, umbrella and a woollen sweater to their employees. In the rest of the companies only medical benefits and overtime was paid. It was found that the girls were not aware on what basis overtime was calculated. During peak season, they worked daily for 2 to 4 hours over and above the fixed working hours and were paid Rs 50 to 100 per month. In ~~all the sample units~~<sup>7</sup> of *the total 16 sample units* one month's salary was paid as displacement wages.

Table 4.3: Benefits Received by the Kerala girls - Graders, in the Fish Processing Units of 3 States

State	No. of units	Bonus		Medical		Overtime		Provident Fund	
		Yes	No	Yes	No	Yes	No	Yes	No
Karnataka	6	1	5	6	-	1	5	-	6
Tamil Nadu	17	<del>10</del>	7	12	5	11	6	4	13
Maharashtra	16	6	10	13	3	15	1	3	13
Total	39	<del>17</del>	22	31	8	27	12	7	32
		17	22						

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In Tamil Nadu, the graders were comparatively better off. Out of 17 sample units, 10 units paid bonus to their employees, 11 paid overtime and 12 paid medical benefits. The bonus paid was one month's salary. Displacement wages were not paid as the graders were employed for the whole year. However, 15 days leave with salary was given to all the graders.

It was interesting to note that in 5 units of Maharashtra the Hindu Kerala Girls were given a saree or Rs 50 for Diwali. However, such practice was not found elsewhere.

#### 4.3.3 Wages of Peelers

As mentioned earlier, Karnataka fish processing units employed a large number of Kerala girls as peelers whereas, in Tamil Nadu only 3 units and 2 units in Maharashtra employed peelers from Kerala.

In Karnataka, the peelers received very meagre wages. They were paid on piece rate basis. For a basin of 3 kgs. of prawn or fish Rs 1 was paid. Their income largely depended on the fish catch per day and their skill and fitness in peeling. During interviews the peelers could not account for their monthly income as it varied from month to month depending upon the catch and material the company received. However, most of the peelers maintained a diary which contained date and month-wise the total number of basins or baskets peeled along with the value in rupees. Based on this, the peelers annual income was worked out in Karnataka. Annual income that is for 9 months in a year ranged from Rs 1,300 to Rs 2,000 depending on the speed of peeling. Most of the peelers working in Karnataka were <sup>12 to 15 years of age and</sup> from Alleppey district.

In Tamil Nadu, in one of the units a monthly wage of Rs 350/- was paid to the peelers, whereas in the other units it was paid on piece-rate basis which worked out to be approximately Rs ~~3000~~ <sup>3200 to 3400</sup> for the whole year. In Maharashtra too the peelers of the 3 sample processing units were paid on piece-rate basis. Their annual income was approximately Rs 3000 to Rs 3500 per annum or for 10 months of work.

There were also quite a few peelers in Karnataka who did not maintain a diary of daily accounts. They totally depended on contractors for their wages on piece-rate basis. They reported that at the end of the season, the contractor would pay them their total earnings.

Whenever, money needed for clothes and other necessities they borrowed from the contractor <sup>which was deducted from the wages.</sup> Many of them being new to the industry and about 14 to 16 years of age could not estimate their annual income.

Besides monthly wages the peelers did not receive any other benefit like bonus, displacement wages etc. However, during illness they were treated by the company physicians and medicinal charges were paid.

4.4

WORKING HOURS:

In Karnataka the timings for work was 9 AM to 9 PM, about 12 hours of work with one hour lunch break and 15 minutes of tea break. In Tamil Nadu and Maharashtra the permanent graders work <sup>ed</sup> for only 8 hours daily, whereas, the majority of the temporary graders work <sup>ed</sup> for either 12 hours or more, with 1 hour and 15 minutes break for lunch and tea.

Table 4.4: Daily Working Hours of Graders in 3 States

State	Number of units	8 hours	10 hours	12 hours	More than 12 Hours	No fixed timing	Total
Karnataka	6	-	-	5	-	1	6
Tamil Nadu	17	6	1	6	2	2	17
Maharashtra	16	3	2	11	-	-	16

In case of peelers there were no fixed timings. In Karnataka the situation of the young girls aged 12 to 16 years was found to be pathetic. They worked as and when the catch arrived in the peeling shed. Very often they did the peeling job from 5 or 6 PM to 2 AM at night as the prawns arrived around 4 PM and many of the units did not have the storage facilities to preserve the fish.

In Tamil Nadu and Maharashtra the girls employed as peelers in 2 and 3 processing units respectively, worked for 12 hours daily. However, at times they worked for more than 12 hours till the whole lot for that day was peeled and cleaned.

The usual practice regarding working hours in all the 3 States was found to be very interesting and flexible. The Kerala girls reported at the factory exactly at 9 AM that is the scheduled time to start work.

However, the graders usually did not work for atleast 2 to 3 hours because fish was either being cleaned or peeled during that period by the peelers. During this time the graders were required to sit in the grading room. At times, the catch did not arrive in the morning. As soon as, a lot of prawns were peeled, they started the grading work. It was often observed

that the graders worked over-time to finish the work. However, this overtime was not accounted for by the management or the contractors. They reported that "the girls had no work to do in the morning, and were sitting idle, so now they are making up for that". Same pattern was observed in the case of peelers in Karnataka. They would often have no work in the morning but would work after 3 PM till late at night.

Working hours depended on the quantity and arrival of catch. *However in majority of the companies the girls worked for 12 hours or more in a day.*

In all the 3 States, 2 to 4 days leave per month was given to the graders. The permanent graders were also given leave on national holidays but not the others. All the Kerala girls in the processing units of 3 States were given leave on Onam day, but not during Diwali or other festival days. Besides Onam leave, the peelers were not given any day off. If at all on a particular day the catch did not arrive they were free from work, <sup>but</sup> ~~however~~, they were required to stay in the factory during that period.

#### 4.5 Uniforms:

The grading and peeling work requires close contact with iced water, as before peeling or grading, fish is kept in iced water. Moreover, the grading and peeling room floors are always flooded with water. Approximately half an inch of water is always there on the floor. The peelers usually sit on a wooden plank and peel the prawns, whereas, the graders stand and do the grading work continuously for 8 to 12 hours. In such a situation a water-proof shoes and gloves are <sup>also necessary</sup> required for the graders as well as the peelers. It was often observed that the



girls suffered from skin diseases on their hands and feet. Of the total 16 units in Maharashtra only one unit provided shoes to the graders. No other processing units provided these facilities. When enquired one of the contractors said that "they are used to such conditions, at home they walk barefeet". However, it was observed that in most companies the girls wore rubber chappals bought by themselves.

In all companies of 3 states, the graders were provided with an apron, cap and a mouth covering so that hygienic conditions could be maintained. The peelers were not provided with any such uniforms. In few processing units the management provided skin ointments for the girls.

#### 4.6 Living Conditions

All Kerala women workers were provided housing facilities. Accommodation provided were either within the premises of the processing units or nearby to the working place. In Karnataka, accommodation provided to the graders were comparatively much better than to the peelers. The graders ~~lived~~ lived in pucca houses with water, electricity and toilet facilities. Out of 6 processing units 4 units provided good facilities, whereas, the other two seemed to be quite congested. However, in Karnataka, the living conditions of the peelers were quite pathetic. About 200 to 250 peelers were accommodated in 54' by 36' hall. The toilet facilities were also found to be inadequate. *Each girls was provided a floor space of 2 to 2 1/2 feet by 5 to 6 feet to sleep as well as to keep their luggage.*

The living conditions of the women workers in Tamil Nadu and Maharashtra were found to be better off than their counterparts in Karnataka. The rooms were spacious and all facilities like electricity, fans, toilets were provided.

In a few companies food was provided to the graders by the contractors and the expenses were deducted from the monthly salary, whereas, in some companies the graders themselves <sup>took charge of the</sup> ~~took management of~~ kitchen rather than depending on the contractors. The girls were not satisfied with the food provided by the contractors. The expenses on food ranged from Rs 110 to Rs 150 <sup>which was deducted from their monthly salary.</sup>

In all the 3 States the peelers were provided <sup>free</sup> ~~free~~ food but of a very poor quality. In Karnataka, where a large number of <sup>young girls working as</sup> peelers ~~work~~ were served 3 meals a day. One meal consisted of rice and fish curry, whereas the other two meals were Kanji (Rice and water). The fish was supplied from the company freezer. These fish which deteriorated in quality and had no market value were supplied to the kitchen. One sardine (6 inches length) was cut into 3 pieces and one piece with curry was served to each girl. Greens and lentils were never served, <sup>neither there was any</sup> variation in the menu. On the whole, food served by contractors <sup>was of poor quality and</sup> was disliked by both graders and peelers.

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In most of the companies except for two units in Karnataka the company provided a woman cook to cook for the girls. These cooks were also from Kerala. Their salary ranged from Rs 250 to Rs 350 and were paid by the management. Few of the cooks were married and brought their children along. Their food expenses were paid by the company.

Table 4.5: Districts in Kerala from where the Kerala Women Workers Migrated

State	Erne- kulam	Alle- ppey	Quilon	Cali- cut	Patha- nam- thitta	Kotta- yam	Tri- van- drum	Tri- chur	Pal- ghat	Canna- nore	Idi- kki	Tot
Karnataka	15	106	14	12	3	-	-	-	-	-	-	15
Tamilnadu	36	38	35	1	30	8	1	1	-	-	2	15
Mahara- shtra	96	47	5	-	15	2	3	-	1	1	-	17
Total	147	191	54	13	48	10	4	1	1	1	2	47

4.7 Socio-Economic Background:

The various districts from where Kerala women workers, both graders and peelers migrate are given in 4.5. It can be seen that the majority of girls are from Alleppey district followed by Ernakulam and Quilon. It was also interesting to note during field surveys that a large number of girls from Alleppey work in Karnataka as peelers, *whereas, most of the girls from Ernakulam work* either in Bombay or Gujarat. Girls from Quilon and Pathanamthitta usually go to Tamil Nadu. It could be possible that the contractors of a particular state processing units live in these areas and recruit girls from their own area.

Table 4.6 reveals the socio-economic background of the graders and peelers in the 3 States. Of the 472 Kerala girls interviewed in three States the majority of them *were christians* ~~came from Hindu households~~ *Hindus* followed by *Christians*. Majority of them were in the age group of 16 to 29 years. In Karnataka most of the

Table 4.6: Socio-Economic Background of Kerala Women Workers.

Type of job.	Caste				Age			Marital Status		Education			
	Christian	Hindus	Muslim	Below 15	15-20 yrs	21-30 yrs	30 yrs & above	Married	Unmarried	Illiterate	Primary	Secondary	Above
General	51	11	12	11	50	11	2	6	68	3	51	20	-
Contractors	58	18	2	1	39	24	12	14	63	1	54	20	1
Government	4	1	-	-	4	1	-	-	5	-	5	-	-
Contractors	77	66	4	-	43	86	18	32	115	2	70	75	-
Government	12	5	1	3	12	2	1	1	17	-	16	2	4
Contractors	71	78	3	-	56	80	16	32	120	1	76	74	1
Both.	271	179	22	15	204	204	49	84	388	7	272	191	2

peelers were below 20 years of age. It was interesting to find that about 18 per cent of the girls were married. During interviews it was gathered that many of the married woman had children who were locked after by their grandparents in Kerala. Few of the married woman were divorcees. Very few brought their kids along with them. During working hours they were locked after by the cook. A majority of the girls (57 per cent) had primary level education and only 1.50 per cent were found to be illiterate.

To sum up, the findings of the processing units in 3 States, it can be concluded that the wage structure, working and living conditions of the migrant workers in Karnataka was found to be pathetic than their counterparts in TamilNadu and Maharashtra. Comparatively, the peelers of Karnataka were younger (13 to 16 years) than the graders or peelers of other States. Their living condition was found to be miserable. About 250 to 300 girls were dumped in a large hall. Food supplied to them by contractors was poor in terms of quality. Their wages were abysmally low and working hours were either 12 hours or more without any fixed timing. Usually they worked till 2 PM at night. The girls were not provided any protective gears for their hands and feet. As a result of working in close contact with water for more than 12 hours a day they had contacted skin diseases. The peelers were not provided with any benefits except medical expenses. The graders in most companies of Karnataka and Maharashtra were not given displacement wages, bonus or overtime.

The problems faced by the migrant women workers in an industry which provides 30 per cent of the country's exports appears to be a sick joke.

## CHAPTER V

### FINDINGS - III

#### OBSERVATION, EXPERIENCES AND THE LABOUR LAWS

This part of the report consists of findings based on observations <sup>and</sup> individual and group interviews. These interviews revealed many common miscellaneous problems faced by most of the girls in 3 States, which were beyond the scope of a structured questionnaire. The findings are described in the ensuing paragraphs:

5.1.1 To start with the women workers had many grievances against the contractors. There were quite a few instances in Maharashtra and Karnataka, where the contractors did not pay the promised wages and the promised nature of work. Before leaving Kerala the contractor had promised the job of a grader with Rs 450 salary to the experienced and skilled girls who had earlier worked as graders. However, these girls were engaged in peeling job on piece-rate basis. They were very disappointed and disheartened lot. Besides, some of the graders in Maharashtra and Karnataka were engaged in peeling work rather than grading, although they were paid graders salary. In one of the units in Maharashtra the peelers had not been paid wages for 3 and a half months. These girls felt quite helpless and under the circumstance had no other option but to continue to work. They did not know whom to complain.

During interviews it was observed that the girls had no privacy in their residential quarters. The contractors would barge into the rooms any time of the day. In fact, in some of the units in Karnataka the contractors clothes were kept in the same room. The letters of the girls were opened and scrutinized before handing it over to them. The girls were very offended by this attitude of the contractors. In one company in Karnataka the relationship between the contractor and the women workers became so sour that he threatened them with a knife. The women workers often complained that the contractors tried to sneak and hear whatever they talk among themselves. During interviews they as well as the research team made sure that the contractors were not around, so that the girls <sup>would</sup> talk freely.

The women workers were not allowed to attend Church services or temple during Sundays or festival days. In fact, socializing with the Kerala girls of other processing units situated very closeby <sup>was</sup> also forbidden. Being migrant workers from Kerala they were unable to speak the local language and communicate with the local girls. Hence, they lived in total isolation. The girls seemed to be very frightened by the contractor.

5.1.2 A majority of the women workers felt that their wages paid were not in accordance with their skill, speed and experience. Saramma, a 28-year old grader getting Rs 425 as salary reported: "I have been working as a grader since 7 years. Earlier I worked as a peeler for two years. I am one of the best graders of this company. However, my salary is same as the other graders who have only one-year experience in grading. I have reported my



grievances to the management but the standard reply is if 'I am not satisfied with the salary to leave and join other company'."

Reena, another grader from Maharashtra narrated a similar story:

"I am working in fish processing industry since I was 9 years old. I joined as a peeler. Today I am 35 years old married and divorced with 3 kids. With years of experience I am still earning Rs 425 per month. I have nothing to look forward."

Such experiences were narrated in all the processing units, except for the very few units where the girls were permanent employees.

In fact, in a very large sized and famous processing unit in Maharashtra the graders were promised monthly wages of Rs 450 by the contractor. However, after joining the company they were paid Rs 380. So, the graders protested and 10 out of total 24 graders left the company and joined the adjoining company paying Rs 450 to the graders. Interestingly, the company they left immediately raised the salary of the graders to Rs 475. In a situation like this there was an alternative and girls were able to find a job, but in many companies in the absence of such alternative the girls usually suffer silently and continue to work.

There is yet another example of drastic action taken by the contractor of a Madras processing unit which occurred in March 1986. The monthly wages paid to the graders of this unit was Rs 325, whereas, in the other processing unit it was Rs 400 ~~was~~. As a result, the graders demanded for an

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increase in wages. After being refused by the contractor and the management, they went on strike. As a result, 50 graders were thrown out of job with an excuse that the company has closed down due to non-availability of raw material. However, after a month another batch of girls were recruited on a monthly wage of Rs 400. Such incidences keep occurring and the girls do not know whom to complain.

As stated earlier, the living and working conditions of the peolers were found to be very pathetic. Mary, a peolor in one of the largest processing units near Mangalore reported:

"I am 13-years old from Alleppey district. This is the first time I have come outside Kerala to work. My father died 2 years ago and we are very poor. I have one brother and three sisters including me. We could not afford even one meal a day, so I have come to work. I feel very homesick and often cry. Last month I earned only Rs 50 as there was not enough work. I sent Rs 40 home and spent Rs 10 on soap and oil. I am always worried about my brother and sisters. I wonder if they are getting enough food. I don't mind working at night or overtime, as long as I can earn money and send home."

Susan, another peeler working in the same processing unit revealed:

"I am 14-years old from Alleppey district. This is my second year <sup>of</sup> working as a peeler. Last year too, I was working in this processing unit and could save only Rs 700 in the whole year, as most of <sup>the</sup> time, I was sick. Half the medical expenses were paid by the company and other half was deducted from my salary. I sent all my salary home except for few rupees which I spent on 2 pair of clothes, soap and oil."

Later on, friends of Susan revealed that she was suffering from tuberculosis. However, the economic conditions of Susan's family is so bad, that she is forced to work. Her friends reported, "that here atleast she gets 3 meals a day, but at home they can afford only one meal a day."

Such pathetic stories were revealed by many of the peelers in Karnataka. As stated earlier, the food provided to them was of a very poor quality, besides they lived in very unhygienic conditions. The living quarters within the premises of peeling shed were always full of flies. The contractors felt that their responsibility <sup>was</sup> to provide only 6' by 3' space to sleep.

~~The pervasive presence of contract system allows the principal employers to remain invisible and bear no responsibility to the workers. The seasonal nature of processing work too prevents the women workers from holding full time employment. Moreover, the vulnerable position of the young women and the nature of industry prevents the women to get organised to fight for their rights.~~

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5.1.3 During survey it was found that to a large extent not only the Kerala girls were not aware of their rights but were quite surprised to know that they could avail themselves of various benefits like ESI scheme, medical leave, bonus, etc. Most of the women workers seemed unaware that the government has to make regular inspection to see if any labour laws are violated. Almost all of them stated that they were unaware of the labour officers visits to the units as they had not seen any. They were neither aware of any unions in those areas, neither they thought of approaching one. In Maharashtra, the women workers (graders) of 3 processing units were unionized. It so happened that the Marathi women workers joined the union first, and later the union made contacts with the Kerala women and after a lot of thinking, debating and clarifying matters, they joined the Union.

5.2

LABOUR LAWS

*The contractors seem to exploit and systematically undermine the rights and interests of the Kerala girls specially the peelers who are young and in a vulnerable position.*

The employment of Kerala girls working in the fish processing industries of other State fall under Inter-State Migrant Work Act 1979. This Act was formulated with an objective to eliminate the exploitation of workers by the contractors or Sardars who took them to far off places on payment of railway fare. An attempt here is made to list some of the main relevant features of the Act and analyse accordingly the employment situation of Kerala Women Workers.

5.2.1 According to the Act, the contractors who proposed to recruit or employ inter-State migrant workers are required to obtain a licence from the specified authority both of the State to which the workers belong and the State to which she is proposed to be employed. Such a licence <sup>would</sup> ~~will~~ be valid for a specified period and may be renewed from time to time on payment of certain fees and certain conditions.

During survey, it was found that most of the contractors ~~did not~~ have such a licence. Very few who have a licence do not renew it every year.

5.2.2 The Act also specifies certain role and duties of a contractor:

(i) To furnish details of number of workers recruited from various areas to both the State authorities to which the worker belongs and the State to which she proposes to work. Needless to say that such information was not provided by the contractors.

(ii) To issue to every inter-State migrant worker a pass book affixed with a passport sized photograph of the workers and indicating:

- (a) name and place of the processing unit wherein the worker is employed;
- (b) the period of employment;
- (c) the proposed rates and modes of payment of wages;
- (d) the return fare payable to the worker on the expiry of the period of her employment;
- (e) the displacement allowance payable;
- (f) the deductions made.

In Maharashtra, out of the 16 sample processing units, the Kerala girls of 3 units and in Karnataka the girls of one unit had such identity cards. However, the identity cards had only photographs, name of the worker and the name of the processing unit they were employed. Other information as prescribed by the Act was not <sup>written</sup> given. The girls of the rest of the units in 3 States had no such identity cards.

(iii) To furnish details in respect of every inter-State migrant worker who ceases to be employed to the specified authority in the State from which she is recruited and in the State in which she is employed, which shall include a declaration that all the wages and other dues payable to the worker and the fare for the return journey back to her State have been paid.

Needless to say, that no such registration or information were provided to Kerala Government or the State Authorities where the girls <sup>were</sup> ~~are~~ employed.

5.2.3 (Inter-State Migrant Workers shall in no case be paid less than the wages fixed under Minimum Wages Act).

It was quite disappointing to find out that the State Governments of Tamil Nadu, Karnataka and Maharashtra have not yet fixed Minimum wages for the workers in fishing and fish processing industries. Very recently, the labour department of Tamil Nadu have proposed to the Government to include the workers of fish-processing industries in the Minimum wage schedule.

In the absence of such a measure, it was difficult to assess whether the Kerala women workers were given Minimum wages.

- 5.2.4 Displacement Allowance shall be paid by the Contractor to every Inter-State Migrant Worker at the time of recruitment, equal to fifty per cent of the Monthly wages payable or Rs 75, whichever is higher.

It was observed that displacement wages were not paid to the girls working in the processing units of Karnataka. However, in Maharashtra 11 units of the total 16 units paid one month's salary to workers after the season or end of the year and not at the time of recruitment. In Tamil Nadu, the Kerala girls worked all throughout the year so the question of displacement allowance did not arise.

- 5.2.5 Journey allowance or the railway fare to and fro were paid to the girls by the contractors in accordance with the Act.

- 5.2.6 The Act very clearly states that the wages should be paid to the migrant workers from the day they are recruited which also includes the journey period to the working place. Needless to say that this regulation was not followed ~~at all~~ by any processing unit or the contractors.

5.2.7 According to the Act, other facilities provided by the contractors are: suitable work conditions, regular payment of wages, suitable accommodation, medical facilities free of charge and protective clothing to the workers. The findings on these facilities are described in Chapter 5.

5.2.8 Lastly, the Act states that Inspectors will be appointed by the Government for regular inspection to see that the provisions of the legislation are being complied with.

As stated earlier that the Kerala girls were not aware of any labour inspector's visit to the processing units. It could be possible that the inspector just met the management of company. However, it is quite clear from the findings of the study that no such attempts were made by the labour inspector to ensure that the provisions of the legislation ~~were~~ were being complied with.

*To sum up, it was found that the most of the legislation rules were violated by the contractors. The young women workers in the absence of any other alternative were exploited and suffered silently all the miseries.*



## CHAPTER VI

### SUMMARY AND RECOMMENDATIONS

The major objective of the present survey was two-fold: one, to study the employment pattern, comparative wages and working and living conditions of the Kerala Women migrant workers in three coastal states, viz. Maharashtra, Karnataka and Tamil Nadu. Secondly, to assess the socio-economic conditions of the households in Kerala from where the labour is drawn. The total number of girls interviewed in Kerala was 311 belonging to 232 sample households, whereas, in the three States 472 girls were interviewed, employed in 39 processing units. Using the variety of information generated by the sample survey, individual and group interviews and observation the main findings of the study are summarized below:

### FINDINGS ON KERALA

- 6.1 A large number of girls from Kerala migrate to the fish-processing units of other States mainly from Ernakulam and Alleppey followed by Tiruvalla, Calicut and Quilon.
- 6.2 Socio-Economic Background:
- (i) The majority of the households of the migrating women workers were Christians (56.04%) followed by Hindus (41.81%) and Muslims (2.15%).

- (ii) Nearly 42 per cent of the households fell under the family size of less than 5 members. The overall average family size in the sample was 6.53. No significant difference was found in the size of the between Hindus and Christians but in the sample Muslim households the family size was larger than compared to the other two.
- (iii) In the case of age and sex composition, it was found that the female population is higher in the age group of 15-30 years and majority of the migrant girls fall under this age group. Hence, one of the reasons for the girls to go out of the State could be the absence of male adult earning members in the family and, therefore, faced with less income and poverty.
- (iv) Taking into account the heads of the sample households about 32 per cent were found to be illiterate, whereas only 8 per cent of the migrant women workers were illiterate.
- (v) Employment opportunities for both men and women were found to be very scarce in the fishing <sup>as well as non-fishing</sup> households. The rate of unemployment among women was found to be higher than men in Ernakulam district. However, in Alleppey and Quilon district the situation was reverse. High rate of employment of women compared to other district was found mainly because a large number of girls in the age group of 15 to 30 years are employed in the fish processing units of other States.

(vi) The employment pattern in 3 districts was found to be reflected in the income pattern. The household income was found to be higher in Alleppey district followed by Ernakulam and Quilon. The average household income in Alleppey was around Rs 9 to Rs 10 thousand per annum, whereas, in Ernakulam and Quilon, it ranged between Rs 5 to Rs 7 thousand. Extreme poverty was observed during the months of August and September which are the non-fishing months.

(vii) In general, the living conditions were found to be very poor, with either inadequate or no drinking water and extremely poor sanitation. Majority of the houses were small huts with thatched roof made up of coconut leaves needing frequent repair or replacement. In few villages pucca houses were built by taking loans on high interest rate.

6.3 The processing units in other States employ Kerala girls through contractors who are also from Kerala. The contractors approach the parents and pay an advance ranging from Rs 50 to Rs 200 for the girls. The contractors pay the travelling expenses to and fro to the working place.

6.4 There was no definite migration pattern of the girls. Various factors were found to be responsible for the area-wise migration. These factors were; influence of peer group, previous experience with a company in terms of work load, working and living conditions, distance of the processing unit from Kerala, relationship of the contractor with parents and lastly the desire to see places (pages 13-14).

- 6.5 Pressed by poverty, indebtedness and unemployment has been the main reason for the girls to migrate to other States. In some families, it was observed that the girls were the only earning members and the family depended on their income.
- 6.6 Due to surplus of women labour in the coastal areas, the contractors or the owners of the processing units do not face any problem whatsoever to get women workers. In spite of stagnant and meagre wages, the supply of labour has been continuously on rise. The situation reflects the poor economic conditions of the women with little or no resource to fall back, hence no bargaining power.
- 6.7 FINDINGS ON FISH PROCESSING UNITS OF 3 STATES
- In Maharashtra and Karnataka the Kerala girls were employed for 8 to 9 months in a year during the fishing season, whereas, in Tamil Nadu the girls were employed for the whole year as the catch of prawn spreads throughout the year. Moreover, in Karnataka the Kerala girls are employed as graders as well as peelers, whereas, in Maharashtra and Tamil Nadu they were employed only as graders except for 2 to 3 processing units where Kerala girls did the peeling job too. In Tamil Nadu and Maharashtra the peeling work was done by the local girls.
- 6.8 The preference of management to employ Kerala girls rather than local girls were due to various reasons; willing to work at night, odd hours and during festivals, maintain hygienic conditions, disciplined lot, docile, skilled and fastness in work.

- 6.9 Wages paid to the graders in all the three states were more or less the same with very less difference. The average salary of the majority of the graders were in the range of Rs 400 to Rs 450. In very few companies of Maharashtra the graders received more than Rs 500 as monthly wages. This was so, because the graders of these units were unionized and due to the pressure of the union their salaries had to be raised.
- 6.10 The Kerala girls working as peelers received very meagre wages. The wages were paid on the basis of piece-rate. On an average a peeler in Karnataka earned about Rs 1,300 to Rs 2,000 for 9 months in a year. Only in one processing unit in Tamil Nadu the peelers were paid monthly salary of Rs 350.
- 6.11 Besides wages, most of the Kerala girls working as graders and peelers were not paid displacement wages, bonus, overtime, etc. Only medical expenses were paid to both graders and peelers. Out of the total 39 sample units only 7 units paid provident fund and 15 units paid bonus to their employees that too only to the graders and not the peelers. The wages and other benefits given to the workers were found to be comparatively better in Maharashtra and Tamil Nadu than Karnataka.
- 6.12 The majority of the Kerala women workers worked daily for 12 hours or more. Only in very few units i.e. 9 out of the total 39 sample units the girls worked for 8 hours a day.

In case of peelers there were no fixed timings. In Karnataka the situation of the young girls aged 13 to 16 years were found to be pathetic. They worked as and when the catch arrived at the peeling shed. Very often they started work at 5 to 6 PM in the evening and continued till 2 AM at night till the whole lot of prawns or fish were cleaned and peeled.

6.13 In all the 3 States the graders were provided with an apron, a cap and a mouth covering so that hygienic conditions could be maintained. The peelers were not provided with any uniform. Working continuously for more than 12 hours in closed contact with water, the girls had developed skin diseases in their hands and feet. In such a situation, a water proof shoes and gloves was necessary for the girls which had not occurred to the management of the processing units.

6.14 All Kerala girls were provided accommodation. The housing facilities provided were either within the premises of the processing units or nearby the working place. The accommodation provided to the graders were found to be comparatively better than the peelers. The living conditions of the peelers were found to be pathetic. About 200 to 250 girls were dumped in one hall. Each peeler had an accommodative space of about 2 feet by 5 to 6 feet to keep their belongings as well as bedding. The living conditions of the women graders in Tamil Nadu and Maharashtra were found to <sup>be</sup> comparatively better than their counterparts in Karnataka.

6.15 In most companies the girls were provided food by the contractors and the expenses deducted from their salary. However, in few units the girls themselves managed the kitchen. The food provided by the contractors were of very poor quality and was disliked by the women workers.

In all the 5 States the peelers were provided food free of cost but of a very poor quality. They were served fish which had deteriorated in quality and had no market value.

In most companies except for two units in Karnataka, the management provided a woman cook who were from Kerala. The salary of the cook was paid by the management.

6.16 The Kerala women workers had many grievances against the contractors. They were not paid promised wages and working conditions. Experience and skill was not accounted for while fixing the salary. A girl with one year of experience was paid same salary as the worker with 8 years of experience. Besides, the girls did not have privacy as the contractors would barge into their rooms any time of the day. Their letters were opened and scrutinized before handing over to them. Even if their health did not permit, they were forced work work at odd hours (see page 53 ). They did not know whom to complain and were silent sufferers.

6.17 The Inter-State Migrant Workers Act seemed to have no meaning to the contractors. Most of the rules and regulations under this Act were violated. Many of the contractors did not possess licence which is required to take the girls to other State.

6.18 The Kerala women workers were not provided with identity cards, neither their names were registered with the concerned authorities in Kerala before leaving <sup>to</sup> other States, which is a must according to the Act. As a result, before and after the survey the question often arose that how many young girls ~~each year~~ migrate from Kerala <sup>each year</sup> to other States. Unfortunately, there was no information available from any source.

The Inter-State Migrant Workers Act has been well laid out but unfortunately not implemented. The young women workers in the absence of any other alternative belonging to the poor households, helpless, less vocal and unorganised, were found to be exploited and their rights being systematically undermined.



6.3 RECOMMENDATIONS

Keeping in view the findings of the study, the situation and needs of the Kerala women migrant workers as well as the processing units in various States, there is an urgent need to protect the rights and improve the conditions of the Kerala girls. The existing labour legislation seems to lack regulative strength to get operationalized and implemented. An Act has no value as long it is not enforced. Same has happened with Kerala Women workers who fall under the legislation of Inter-State Migrant Workers Act.

The unique nature of fish processing industry with pervasive presence of the contractor allowing the Principal employers to remain invisible and bear no responsibility to the workers. Seasonal nature of work and vulnerable position of young migrant workers has only resulted in exploiting them in various ways.

As stated earlier that Inter-State Migrant Workers Act is totally violated by the contractors. The young women workers belonging to poor households, being helpless, less vocal and unorganised, their interests and rights are being systematically undermined. The Act has been well planned and laid out keeping in view the interest of workers and to eliminate exploitation, but unfortunately not implemented.

In the present situation, abolishing the contract system to wipe out exploitation is not a solution mainly because of <sup>three</sup> ~~two~~ factors. Firstly, the management of the processing units are totally dependant on the skilled and experienced Keralite contractors for the production as well as the supply of skilled labour from Kerala. Besides, supply of labour, the contractors also undertake overall responsibility of bringing and returning back the women workers and looking after their working, living and other necessities. With the language barriers, the management finds this system very ~~convenient~~ convenient and suitable. Secondly, without the contractor acting as an intermediary it is quite likely that the management may think of either <sup>to</sup> ~~not~~ employing or employing less number of girls from Kerala.

As a result, the employment situation already existing in Kerala may become even worse. Many young girls will be unemployed, hence, their economic situation too will deteriorate. *Thirdly, formulating another law or modifying the present Act does not necessarily mean that it will be enacted and operational.*

In such a situation the only alternative feasible is to have a support structure within the frame work of the Act to safeguard the interests and rights of the young Kerala girls. Such a support system will have to be institutionalized at two levels: one in Kerala and the other in various States where the Kerala girls are being employed.

IN KERALA

- 6.2.1 An immediate measure an Employment Exchange Board should be set up in Kerala with head office at Cochin. Besides other officials appointed the board should be managed by a tripartite committee which should comprise of the representatives of the women workers, contractors and government officials in the ratio of 5:3:2. Thus the veto power of the workers will be inherent in the composition.
- 6.2.2 The contractors or owners of the processing units must recruit Kerala girls only through the Employment Exchange.
- 6.2.3 Employment Exchange should register the names of the Kerala girls seeking employment outside Kerala. For this purpose the officers in-charge will have to either visit the various coastal districts or establish a branch office at Ernakulam, Kottayam, Alleppey, Quilon and Calicut. This will be necessary as many girls from interior villages of Ernakulam and Alleppey districts migrate to other States. Moreover, there should be publicity about the existing facilities available at the employment exchange. Besides, there should be a proforma indicating name, age, area of residence of the girls who have registered.
- 6.2.4 The employment exchange should maintain a record of number of girls leaving Kerala each year to different states.

This is an absolute necessity as before and after conducting the present survey the very first question arose that how many young Kerala girls migrate from Kerala to other states. Unfortunately, there was no information available from any source. According to survey in Karnataka alone, about 700 Kerala girls work for 9 months in 8 fish processing units. However, there are 3 coastal states where the girls migrate and each of the state has 10 to 20 processing units, many more than Karnataka. Considering that a large number of girls aged 13 to 15 years migrate, it is extremely important to have a record.

- 6.2.5 The Employment Exchange will be responsible to provide guidance to the contractors, keep record of the number of contractors existing and their addresses. Besides, explain to them the rules and conditions of Inter-State Migrant Workmen Act.
- 6.2.6 The Employment Exchange will need to have a ~~REGULAR MONITORING~~ constant monitoring system to ensure that the girls have not been harassed by the contractors and have been provided with all benefits like Minimum wages, displacement wages, bonus, overtime, medical expenses etc. during the employment period. This could be accomplished in two ways: one by appointing one or more women welfare officers to visit the girls and their families in respective villages to interview them. The other could be that when the girls come to the exchange office next season to register their names, they could be interviewed by the women welfare officers. Besides, the women welfare officers should be from a coastal district of Kerala and before starting the

job must be trained and apprised of the conditions and situations of the women workers employed in fish processing industry.

- 6.2.7 Based on the reports received by the welfare officers and the girls, those contractors who are found to be violating the rules of Inter-State Migrant Workers Act should be penalised and their licences cancelled. In other words, link licensing to wage implementation and welfare inputs. The contractors should be made aware of these conditions while issuing a licence.
- 6.2.8 The Kerala Women and their families should be made aware of the situation in various States before they leave. Besides, they must know about the labour laws and their rights.
- 6.2.9 The employment exchange should make an attempt to mobilise Kerala women workers to take up the job of contractors themselves. In fact, in one of the largest units in Maharashtra and Tamil Nadu a senior girl with 6 years experience took a batch of girls with her to the companies.

The recommendations suggested above should be implemented in Kerala as an immediate measure to discourage the system of captive labour and illegal malpractices which is prevalent at present.

IN STATES WHERE THE KERALA GIRLS ARE EMPLOYED:

The Labour Department of various States where the girls are employed will also have to take strict measures and initiative to ensure that the women workers from Kerala are not exploited. At present the Labour Department have appointed inspectors within certain local limits to ensure that the provisions of the legislation are being complied with. However, it is disappointing to note that inspite of the administrative arrangement effective protection of the migrant women workers against exploitation has not been secured. As stated earlier, one of the major reasons besides others was the language barrier. Thus, additional forms of structure and monitoring are suggested below to safeguard the interest of migrant women workers.

6.2.10 There is an urgent need to immediately appoint a women social worker by the Labour Department, who will inspect the implementation of Inter-State Migrant Workers Act. The number of Social workers appointed will depend on the location of the processing units in a particular State. For example, Gujarat will need only one social worker as all the units are situated within 5 kms. distance, whereas, Karnataka and Tamil Nadu will need 2 women social workers, one for north and the other for south. An important criteria for selecting a woman social worker would be that she should be able to speak and write Malayalam and preferably from Kerala. Besides, the women social worker should be apprised the total system and conditions of the women workers in fish processing units. Having a woman in this position rather than men will have certain definite advantage. The women workers will feel free to talk to her in their own language.

- 6.2.11 The State Labour Department must ensure that the contractors have licence. Those contractors who are found to violate the Migrant-Workers Act should be penalised and further licence should be cancelled.
- 6.2.12 As an immediate measure the State Governments must fix Minimum Wages for the peelers and graders. In Karnataka, Maharashtra and Tamil Nadu it is not yet included in the schedule.
- 6.2.13 The payment of wages on the basis of piece-rate should be abolished. The Kerala girls working in all States must be given a subsistence fixed wage. Accordingly the Minimum Wages fixed for the peelers and graders should be implemented strictly.
- 6.2.14 A constant vigilance should be kept on working hours. It should not be more than 8 hours a day. If at all the women workers have to work beyond 8 hours overtime should be paid.
- The processing units must be forced to make arrangements for storing fish in the freezer, if it arrives after 5 PM, so that working overnight by the peelers can be avoided.
- 6.2.15 The owners or the management of the processing units seem to wash their hands off from all responsibility towards the women worker and totally depend on the contractors. As a result, the contractor takes advantage of the complete control over the employment pattern. In case of irregularities in terms of working hours, wages and other benefits the management must be informed by the Labour Department followed with strict action, so that the management might remain alert and feel responsible.

- 6.2.16 The management of the processing units must be forced by the State-level authorities to provide uniforms to the peelers as well as gauders. Protective gears for hands and feet must be provided for the girls to avoid skin diseases.
- 6.2.17 Further, since accommodation was one of the critical problems which also created dependence, it is suggested that a women hostel be constructed close to the processing units. For this matter, the State authorities should take the help of the Ministry of Social Welfare.
- 6.2.18 Lastly, a Standing Committee should be constituted consisting of representatives of Labour Departments of various coastal States and Kerala, a woman representative from the social welfare Ministry and few representatives from various women activist groups or voluntary organisation. The Committee would meet once in a year to critically review and discuss the problems and progress made in this direction.