Socio Economic Profile of Rural Women and the Role of Animal Husbandry Intervention in a Suicide Affected District of Kerala

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ABSTRACT There have been reports of farmer suicides in the Wayanad district in the south Indian state of Kerala and an investigation was undertaken to assess the socio economic profile of rural women and explore the possible role of animal husbandry in this district. The three taluks in Wayanad district were purposively selected from which a total of 103 women from self help groups functioning under the government sponsored poverty eradication programme were selected at random. Data was collected using a pre tested interview schedule in October 2006. Nearly one third of respondents indicated that their primary occupation was agriculture with some animal husbandry component. Availability of latrine, type of roof and walls of home, as well as domestic source of water were the three variables which used in this study to determine the quality of life of the sample population. Nearly 15 per cent of women did not have separate latrine facilities on their homestead and nearly seven per cent lived in make shift houses. More than half of the respondents were in the age group 25 – 35 years and their average yearly income was reported by them to be Rs 3768. Over three fourths (75.7%) of these households kept livestock along with crops. The paper emphasizes the importance of exploring alternate employment and income generating activities such as animal husbandry in order to improve the socio economic conditions of these women since the family background variables have a vital role in the development of personality traits in children which could affect quality of human capital in the future generation of the district.

INTRODUCTION

Set on the Western Ghats and the Deccan Plateau, Wayanad district of Kerala state once boasted of a booming economy. However, during the last decade or so, there has been a slump in the prices of most of the agricultural commodities. The agrarian crisis has resulted in over 300 farmer suicides in the district (The Hindu, Nov 2006). The reverberations of this crisis have been felt at all levels in Wayanad society. Thousands of people have been reported to be crossing over to neighboring states in search of wage labor and thousands of children are dropping out from school because their parents can't afford to pay for their education. (The Hindu, Dec, 2004 and Jan 2005). Women in society often bear the brunt of changes that occur in their society. It is in this context that an investigation into their socio-economic situation as well as the possible animal husbandry interventions that are feasible in the area of study assumes significance.

MATERIAL AND METHODS

For the purpose of the present study, the three taluks in Wayanad district were purposively selected Viz Sultan Bathery, Vythiri and

Mananthavady. A total of 103 women from self help groups functioning under Kudumbasree, the State Poverty Eradication Programme were selected at random from these three taluks. Data was collected using a pre tested interview schedule in October 2006.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

a. Socio-economic Profile of Respondents

Analysis of data revealed that nearly one third (32 per cent) of respondents indicated that their primary occupation was agriculture with some animal husbandry component while just over thirty eight per cent indicated that animal husbandry along with agriculture as a minor component was their primary occupation. Twenty five per cent of respondents were wage laborers and while five per cent were primarily wage laborers who have some livestock species at home. Ajithkumar and Sreekumar (1996) reported that 48 per cent of dairy farmers in a village adjoining a veterinary college in Thrissur district, Kerala, indicated that agriculture and allied activities was their primary occupation while 38 per cent were agricultural and other laborers and the remaining 14 per cent were employed. Home condition has

been reported as an important variable influencing the learning outcome of children. (George and Domi 2002). The authors further opined that the living conditions, facilities and basic infrastructure play an important role in the education, health and attitude of children. Availability of latrine, type of roof and walls of home, as well as domestic source of water were the three variables which used in this study to determine the quality of life of the sample population. Analysis of data revealed that all the respondents had a home. Nearly seven percent of women lived in make-shift sheds which served as their home. This figure is slightly higher than that reported by George and Domi (2002) in their study of fisher folk in Trivandrum district of the state where 5.45 percent lived in huts. The living conditions of these seven percent of families is dismal keeping in mind the severe weather conditions in Wayanad in winter as well as in monsoon.

Table 1 illustrates the distribution of households based on the type of roofing material used. The findings of this study are similar to that observed by George and Domi who reported that 64 per cent of fisher folk in Trivandrum district of Kerala state, India, lived in tiled houses while 15.68 per cent lived in thatched houses.

Table 1: Distribution of households based on roofing material used (n = 103)

S. No.	Roofing material used	f	%
1	Tile	58	56.3
2	Asbestos/Tin sheets	27	26.2
3	Thatch	13	12.6
4	Concrete	5	4.8

Two thirds (66.9 per cent) of respondents used mud bricks for walls while 26 per cent had baked brick souses which were plastered with cement and seven percent of women used plastic sheets tied up as walls (Table 2). Nearly 15 per cent of women did not have separate latrine facilities on their homestead. This is much lower than that observed by George and Domi (2002) who observed that nearly 46 percent of fisher folk did not have separate latrine facilities. This difference could be due to the larger size of holdings in the present area of study (58.17 cents on an average).

More than 60 per cent of women had to bring water for domestic use from places far away from their homes. Seventy seven percent of women relied on private and public wells/pipes for

Table 2: Distribution of households based on material used for walls of homes (n = 103)

S. No.	Roofing material used	f	%
1	Mud bricks	69	66.9
2	Baked bricks with cement plastering	29	26.0
3	Plastic sheets	7	7.0

domestic water where as less than one fourth (23 percent) relied on ponds and rivers. However, Narayana (2005) reported that 96.4 per cent of farmers in Kotathara panchayat of Wayanad district relied on public or private wells while 3.6 per cent relied on ponds and rivers. The fact that sixty per cent of women have to fetch water from places far away from their homes is an indication of the physical drudgery these women have to face since, as Rajalakshmi (2000) opined besides collection of fuel, collecting water for domestic use was the most important household activity reported by women as contributing to fatigue.

The average age of the respondents was 31.86 years (se 0.793). More than half (51.4per cent) of the respondents were in the age group 25 – 35 years, while 17.4 per cent were in the group below 25 years and 30.9 per cent were in the group 36 – 55 years (Table 3). This in contrast to the findings made by Ajithkumar and Sreekumar (1996) who reported that most of the dairy farmers studied in a village in Thrissur district were in the age group 36 – 55 years. This finding points to the fact that there is a tendency for younger women to engage in animal husbandry and allied activities. This could be because they have recognized animal husbandry as a suitable means of overcoming their present financial crisis. Animal husbandry has been documented time and again as a suitable venture for women as it provides both income as well as employment on the homestead.

Table 3: Distribution of respondents based on age (n = 103)

S. No.	Category	f	%
1	Below 25 years	18	17.4
2	25-35 years	53	51.4
3	36-55 years	32	30.9

Table 4 illustrates the distribution of respondents based on their annual income. The average annual income of the families studied as reported by these women was Rs 3768 (Se 451) which is much lower than that reported in past studies. Ajithkumar and Sreekumar (1996) reported that

Table 4: Distribution of respondents based on annual family income (n = 103)

S. No.	Annual family income	f	%
1	Below Rs 2000	15	15.00
2	Rs 2000-3500	61	59.20
3	Rs 3500-8000	22	21.35
4	Above Rs 10 000	5	4.85

the average annual income of forty eight per cent of farmers in Thrissur district was above Rs 5000. Narayana (2005) observed that the below poverty line census of the rural development department of the Government of Kerala which has estimated the proportion of poor living in each district indicated that this proportion was considerably higher in Wayanad district (50%) compared to the state average of 37 per cent. Narayana (2005) also reported that the annual per capita income of 43 per cent of households in Kotathara pan-chayat of Wayanad district was Rs 6743. George and Domi (2002) reported that the annual income of 43.55 per cent of fisher folk in Wayand district was below Rs 5000. Parents' position in the hierarchy of relations is an important aspect of socio economic background because it helps to develop personality traits in children that correspond to distinct class cultures and these personality traits play a major role in determining a child's success in gaining higher incomes in future (Bowels 1972). Thomas (1998) also observed that though education had an important role in facilitating upward mobility and achieving equality in society, it was hindered by the operation of family background variables. Keeping in mind these observations it is of at most necessity to explore suitable income generating activities among women of Wayanad district.

b. Animal Husbandry Rearing Patterns

Analysis of data revealed that all the households were involved in some agricultural activity. Over three fourths (75.7%) of these households kept livestock along with crops. Data in Table 5 indicates that cows were the most common species kept: 61.5 per cent of households having animals kept cows. The next common

Table 5: Distribution of households with animals based on species of livestock kept (n = 80)

S. No.	Species reared	F	%
1	Cows	49	61.5
2	Poultry	41	51.2
3	Goat	31	38.7
4	Rabbit	4	3.8

livestock species kept was poultry. Poultry was kept in 51.2 per cent of households rearing animals. Goats were reared in nearly forty (38.7%) of houses keeping animals. The least encountered livestock species was rabbit. Rabbits were reared only in four households having animals (3.8%)

Data in Table 6 indicates that of the houses with cows, two-thirds were one cow units and less than one third were two cow units. In the case of houses with goats, 45 per cent of such houses were single goat units while just about one fourth were two goat units and nearly thirty percent were three goat units. Analysis of data also revealed that a single species of animal was reared in 52.6 per cent of houses with animals while in the remaining 44 per cent of houses with animals various combinations of cattle, goat and poultry and rabbits were kept (Table 7).

Table 6: Distribution of households with cows based on number of cows kept (n = 49)

S. No.	Category	F	%
1	One Cow units	32	65.3
2	Two cow units	14	28.5
3	More than two cows	3	6.1

Table 7: Distribution of households rearing various combinations of livestock (n = 35)

S. No.	Combinations reared	F	%
1	Cow-goat	14	40
2	Cow poultry goat	10	28.5
3	Poultry Goat	8	22.8
4	Cow poultry	3	3.7
5	Cow-goat-rabbit	3	3.7
6	goat-rabbit	1	1.25

Nearly 72 per cent of the respondents were of the opinion that agriculture was not remunerative due to the crash in the prices of various commodities where as 12.6 per cent felt that they could just make ends meet and the rest were divided in their opinion regarding this issue. All the women rearing animals indicated that the livestock enterprises has helped them tide over the difficulties they had experienced due to the slump in the prices of agricultural commodities.

c. Constraints Faced by Women in Their Livelihood Systems

For over four fifths (83.4%) of women, life had become difficult to sustain. More than half (56.3%) of these women felt that lack of a steady

source of income and employment were the most important factors contributing to their disillusionment. Over one fifth (21%) felt that crop loss and indebtedness was the most disappointing factor in their lives. Keeping in mind the relatively young age of the sample (Average age 31.6 years) the potential implication of disillusionment among women could have catastrophic consequences on the mental as well as physical well being of their families especially their children.

Table 8: Distribution of women based on their preference for income generating animal husbandry activities (n = 103)

S. No.	Category	f	%
1	Goat rearing as a single species	53	51.4
2	Cow as a single species	21	20.3
3	Cow-goat units	23	22.3
4	Cow-goat-rabbit units	6	5.8

d. Preference for Income Generating Activities

All the women studied were interested in taking up animal husbandry on larger scale in a more systematic manner. More women (51.4%) were interested in taking up goat rearing as single species enterprise because they perceived goat rearing as a relatively low cost – high returns enterprise and marketing goats was not an issue. Just below one fifth (20.3 %) of the women expressed an interest in rearing cows as a single species enterprise because they perceived cows as providers of milk both for sale as well as home consumption and manure for agriculture. Slightly more than one in five women (22.3%) expressed their interest in rearing a combination of goats and cows. These findings point to a positive attitude on the part of women towards animal husbandry

enterprises as an income and employment generating venture in a society that has been devastated by the agricultural crisis. It is important to keep in mind the fact that though these women had been engaged in animal husbandry none of them had attended a training programme on scientific practices. However they were willing to attend trainings if they had the opportunity to do so. Knowledge about recommended practices has been cited as an important factor affecting the viability of animal husbandry enterprises by many authors in the past. (George et al. 2000) In order to revive a society that has lost its subsistence it is imperative that a comprehensive package to promote animal husbandry enterprises with a training component is made.

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