

6. THE TRADITIONAL BASIS OF POWER: THE LAND

A central theme in the topic of status and power is landownership, as village dominance resulted from the possession of land. Land and cultivation have played a central role in the social reform process as well.

GENERAL DEVELOPMENT IN KERALA

As told in Chapter 2, the Nampūtiris started acquiring lands for their temples as early as during the Second Cēra Empire (800-1102 AD), and later they also transferred these into their private property. With the help of Nāyars the chieftains also took lands from the cultivators. (Paulini 1979: 124.) As land-owners the Nampūtiris acted like maximal transactors.

The owners (*janmi*) could confer rights of land to tenants (*kāṇamdār*, *kāṇak-kāran*), mainly Nāyars or Nampiyārs, as *kāṇam* tenure, which was a kind of lease and mortgage at the same time. The actual cultivators often became inferior tenants (*verumpāṭṭamdār*). Even these sometimes employed Untouchables to do the hard work. The *janmis* could also lease the lands directly to the *verumpāṭṭamdārs*, or the *kāṇamdārs* could cultivate the fields themselves. The *kāṇam* and *verumpāṭṭam* could have a multiplicity of sub-tenures. (Paulini 1979: 124; Lemerancier 1984: 136; P. Radhakrishnan 1989: 29; MS.)

In respect of agrarian relations and the commercialization of agriculture, Travancore and Cochin pushed far ahead of Malabar. There was also a difference between the two first mentioned. The development of capitalism in agriculture was greater in Travancore than in Cochin. (Ramachandran 1995: 5-6.)

Martanda Varma, the ruler of Travancore, after subjugating chieftains in 1730, confiscated their landed property, but left the lands belonging to the Brahmins and to the temples untouched. By annexing the lands of the chiefs the king transferred the *janmam* rights from individual chiefs to the state, reducing them to *kāṇamdārs*. Also temple lands were confiscated by the governments in Travancore and Cochin on a large scale during the British rule from the beginning of the 19th century. Sir James Munro, the British resident for both states from 1810 to 1819, confiscated landed properties of 378 important temples in Travancore and 179 temples in Cochin in 1812. By 1850 the share of government lands in Travancore increased to

80%. The remaining 20% were owned by Nampūtiris, chieftains and temples. In Cochin the share of government lands had increased to nearly 40%. Since control of unassigned waste land was not in the hands of the landlords there, the area under field crop expanded. (Fuller 1976: 17-18; Paulini 1979: 135-136; Lemerminier 1984: 197; Ramachandran 1995: 74-75, 77, 95.)

The situation in Travancore and Cochin was characterized by a relatively progressive land policy. In 1863 the Maharaja of Cochin passed his edict aimed at preventing eviction of a *kāṇamdār* before the completion of a term of lease of 12 years. In Travancore in 1865 and 1867 Pāṭṭam Proclamations were enacted through which full ownership-rights were given to tenants on government lands and permanent occupation rights to tenants on *janmam* lands. The Janmi-kūṭiyān Act further strengthened the permanent occupancy right of *kāṇam* tenants in 1896. In Cochin the position of the tenants cultivating government lands, and later (1909), those cultivating temple lands, was slowly improving. The land settlement of 1905-09 gave the tenants who cultivated the state-owned lands and the temple lands ownership rights. The *kāṇam* tenants were conferred fixity of tenure and paid compensation for tenant improvements from 1914, while the *verumpāṭṭamdārs* remained excluded from the benefits of any agrarian legislation. Their leases could be terminated, and because of the insecurity of their position they could be made to pay very high rents. In Cochin in the 1940s cultivators were paying at least 50%, and sometimes even above 75% of the gross returns. (Paulini 1979: 134-140; Franke & Chasin 1989: 55-56; Ramachandran 1995: 77.)

In Malabar the situation was radically different. When Haidar Ali of Mysore conquered Malabar, the most important landowners fled to Travancore. After the defeat of the conqueror's son Tipu Sultan in 1792, all principal Rājas agreed to pay tribute to the British East India Company. The cultivators, Muslims and low-caste people, lost their lands due to the re-establishment of the old Hindu landowners. The Company began to recognise the *janmis* as the sole owners of all landed properties in Malabar, and land ownership concentrated in the hands of the most powerful. The tenant-landlord relations caused Muslim rebellions from 1792 onwards. A very serious uprising took place in 1921. These Moplah (the name used of Muslims in Kerala) rebellions can be considered a prelude to the organized tenant movement in Malabar. Another current in the movement for agrarian change was the organized effort of the intermediaries, Nāyars and related castes, to acquire occupancy rights on land over which they had *kāṇam* rights. Their essential demands were made law in the Malabar Tenancy Act of 1930.

Before the independence of India Malabar could still be characterized as an absentee-landlord region, while Travancore had developed into a tract of peasant proprietors and Cochin into a region of peasant proprietors-cum-absentee-landlords. (Paulini 1979: 126-131, 201; Ramachandran 1995: 71, 80-82.) After the merger of

Travancore and Cochin in 1949, acts were passed to give uniformity to the provisions in this area. The Kerala Land Tax Act passed after the formation of the State of Kerala in 1956, extended the basic land tax system of assessment to Malabar as well. (Paulini 1979: 204, 218, 237.)

The partition of the households had already effectively started to split the lands left to the *manas*. After the passing of the Kerala Land Reform Bill in 1963, those who were defined as tenants were made eligible to purchase landlord rights in leased lands up to a limit. Through the Kerala Land Reform Amendment Act of 1969, most temples lost their income through land, as tenants on lands held by religious institutions got the same privileges as other tenants. (Paulini 1979: 246, 267, 292.) This applies not only to rice fields, but also house compounds, which were owned by the landlords but rented by the tenants against garden products. In the Kerala reforms, around 1.5 million families got some land at a nominal price to be gradually paid to the government. (Franke & Chasin 1989: 57-58.) According to Ramachandran (1995: 89), the implementation of land reform with regard to tenancy and homestead land was relatively successful, but the implementation of reforms relating to the identification of land above the ceiling and its redistribution was not.

The Kerala Agricultural Workers Act of 1974 started to remedy the grievances of those who were working on other people's fields. The Act among other things legislated more security of employment, retirement benefits, maximum working hours at eight for adults and six for adolescents, and the landowners to pay wages prescribed by the government. (Paulini 1979: 313-314.) The implementation of this Act, however, has been extremely difficult. Furthermore, landowners with less than one hectare were excluded from the Act. Still, the unions have won large increases in wages for rural workers. (Franke 1993: 157-158, 177; Ramachandran 1995: 91.)

The agrarian reform policy does not, of course, solve all the problems in Kerala, and in lean times the system of ration shops has become an extension of the land reform for the poor, the landless, and the low caste groups (see Chapter 11). What is ultimately needed is a better chance for everybody to get enough work. (Franke 1993: 177, 220-221.) However, this policy has been considered a possible model for other Indian states (Paulini 1979: 15). On the other hand, the 'progressive' land reform policy is viewed differently by many Nampūtiris. What was a hope for the tenants and cultivators was a menace to them.

FAMILY LAND

Earlier when the *jajmāni* system was functioning in Kerala, landowners got all their income through their land in services and products. Those who tilled the lands got their daily rice as a reward for their work. Other castes also received paddy as wages or as some rights (IR, I, p. 58).

What I want to question is, after the collapse of the *jajmāni* system, whether agriculture is still a profitable source of livelihood, and what part do land ownership and agriculture play today in the economy of the family? Who is doing the actual agricultural work nowadays, and are the wages for the work in grain or in money? Are the methods of cultivation effective enough to contribute in a favourable way to the quality and quantity of the paddy crop? To answer these questions this chapter tells about land ownership and land reform from the point of view of two individual families (IR's and NNA's), and also how the fields of our host family are nowadays cultivated. The following information comes from IR's and NNA's memoirs as well as various interviews.

Ownership of cultivated land

When the news got around in Panjal that the state was confiscating temple lands in 1812 (government officials were three miles away in Venganellur, and confiscated the temple there), a group of Nampūtiris gathered in the Lakṣmī-Nārāyaṇa temple to pray that their temple would be saved from the same fate. If their prayer was heard, they promised to have a period of 51 days of worship in the temple each year. As the officials did not come to Panjal, it was thought that the prayer had helped. A 51-day temple worship (*tēvarassēva*) was started and continued yearly until the government eventually took over the temple. (MS.)

The ancestral family property of Muṭṭattukkāṭṭu Māmaṇṇu Mana was field for 700 *paras*, 300 in Chelakode, 400 in Panjal and Killimangalam. (Ten *paras* of land correspond to one acre, i.e. in one acre of field 10 *paras* of paddy are needed as seed when sowing the fields. One *para* is approximately 10 kg. An *iṭṭāniali* holds 4 *nālis*, a *para* 10 *iṭṭānalis*.) These lands were cultivated in *kāṇam* tenure.

Reforms like the 1865 and 1867 Pāṭṭam Proclamations, carried through or planned in Travancore, must have been on the minds of Cochin people as well, as the field in Chelakode was changed to *verumpāṭṭam* in 1877. This change also increased the rent to 3000 *paras*. To clear some debts the Chelakode fields were mortgaged to Naṭuvil Maṭṭam, a Hindu monastery, around 1885. But as the family was warned that it might become more difficult to get back such land, the land was redeemed and, at the same time, the rent of it raised to 3600 *paras*.

The 400 *paras* of *kāṇam* fields in Panjal and Killimangalam brought the family 1500 *paras* of paddy. In 1894 they were changed into *verumpāṭṭam* lands and the rent raised to 4000 *paras* of paddy. In 1904 the family began to buy new land, and by 1920 the income was 12,000 *paras* (86,400 kg) of paddy. In the 1920s the family took a loan for buying government forest lands in Travancore.

Sometimes the family lived in plenty, sometimes in straitened circumstances, depending on the capability of those in charge and on mere chance. Bypassing the

consequences of the Cochin Tenancy Bill of 1914 and Additional Cochin Tenancy Acts by turning *kāṇam* leases into *verumpāṭṭam* leases was one of the successful moves. In IR's father's time the household used 1000 *paras* of rice in a year. The 4000 *paras* of paddy would cover both all the household and the temple needs. The paddy from Chelakode could be sold to wholesale merchants. In the 1930s land was sold to enable the family to pay its debts. By the time of the partition in 1941, all the debts were cleared, and the family property was 3600 *paras*, i.e. so much cultivated field that the *pāṭṭam* from it was that amount of paddy.

The agrarian legislation only began to have its drastic effects after the Land Reform Amendment Bill of 1969 was passed and went into effect in 1971. That year all the landlord rice land belonged to the Nampūtiris and 94% of the total rice land was owned by them and the temples, only 6% was owned by members of other castes. In 1987, only 18% of rice land was owned by the Nampūtiris. (Franke 1993: 121-149.)

In 1116 M.E.²⁷ (1941) and 1127 or 1128 M.E. (1952-53), Muṭṭattukkāṭṭu Māmaṇṇu Mana was partitioned. In the first partition there were four parties: IR's cousin brother Nārāyaṇan's (11 members), IR's (7 members), and his younger brothers Puruṣōttaman's (4 members) and Subrahmaṇyan's (2 members). Each member got a portion of fields which gave as *pāṭṭam* 150 *paras* of paddy. All the fields were given on lease. In the second partition, which concerned only the first group that had stayed in the Taravāṭṭu there were two parties: Nārāyaṇan's sons Rāman's and Vāsudēvan's families together with their father (8 members), and Nārāyaṇan's son Nīlakaṇṭhan's (5 members including elder brother Nārāyaṇan and Rāman's daughter, who had quarrelled with her father and wanted to follow Nīlakaṇṭhan's wife). Each member in these two groups got a portion of fields giving rent of 120 *paras* of paddy. Putiya-pura was built for the second group in 1953. (Uṇṇi.)

Many *janmis*, Nampūtiris and others, knew that change of legislation was on the way. That is why they came to terms with their tenants over an arrangement by which they got about half of the land back and gave the other half into their tenants' full possession. Ravipuram became aware of the situation very late, and that is why it did not succeed quite so well. Ravipuram had land in Chelakode and Panjal. The main tenants of the household in Panjal were Kāḷattū Vēlukkuttī Nāyar and Kāḷattū

²⁷ Kerala has its own calendar, although the Western calendar is also used for government records. The Malabar Era (M.E.) or Kollam Era is counted from the date of the foundation of the city of Quilon (in Malayalam, Kollam) or its Śiva temple, 824/825 AD. (Gundert 1872: 309.) In the northern parts of the Kerala state the new year begins with the zodiacal sign of Virgo (*kanyādi*), in the southern parts with that of Leo (*siṃhādi*) (Renou & Filliozat 1953: 737-738). As the beginning of the new year is counted differently in the Christian calendar as well, I will simplify the matter and always add 825 to the given Malabar date. If there is an error, it is a few months at most.

Mādhavan Nāyar. They had about 3.5 acres of paddy field and about 4 acres of other land (*paraṁpū*), not very near Ravipuram, in their possession. Ravipuram received only about 1.4 acres of land from those two tenants, and gave full ownership of the rest of the land to them. Even so much of the land could be saved only because the tenants had personal respect for IR.

Near Ravipuram there was 1.03 acres of field in another tenant's possession. Later after the law was passed, the tenant was willing to sell that land to IR at a comparatively low price. Ravipuram sold the land which was got back from the two other tenants at the rate of about INR 110 per cent (cent = one 100th part of an acre, 10 cents making 1 *para* of land), and bought the nearby land at the rate of INR 95 per cent. There were some other lands in Panjal and Chelakode in the possession of tenants. IR lost these lands and got INR 12,000 as an installment, out of which a little more than INR 4000 had been received by 1990 from the land tribunal office as compensation. (MS.) According to Franke and Chasin (1989: 58), the compensation for the lost rice fields was determined to be sixteen times the fair rent as determined by a government committee.

The 1.03 acres of field which was bought from the tenant and another 0.63 acres of field that the family has cultivated since around 1945 now form the only paddy fields that Ravipuram has left for growing its yearly rice. All the paddy fields belonging to Ravipuram nowadays can be seen from the outer porch. The average rice land-holding in 1987 for Nampūtiris in Panjal was 0.71 acres, while that for the Nāyars was 0.34 acres (Franke 1993: 203).

The fields of Lakṣmī-Nārāyaṇa temple belonging to seven *manas*, were earlier given on lease. The income of the temple was 9000 *paras* of paddy as *pāṭṭam* each year. Since the Land Reform Amendment Bill was passed in 1969, the Government of Kerala pays INR 12,000 annuity for the upkeep of the three temples, and the cultivators now own the fields. (MS)

Nīlakaṇṭhan of Putiya-pura has 0.26 acres of paddy field for the use of himself, his wife and his son Uṇṇi's family. It is worth noting that both Ravipuram and Putiya-pura with such small rice land acreages are excluded from the Kerala Agricultural Workers Act (the limit being 2.47 acres), as are nearly all landowners in Panjal. (Cf. Franke 1993: 157-158.)

In Nellikkāṭṭu Māmaṇṇu Mana the development was from financial difficulties to satisfactory results in the 1930s. To cope with the demands of a growing family, NNA's father had borrowed money for purchasing more landed property in Panjal and in Killimangalam, both wet lands for paddy cultivation and dry lands for other crops. Unfortunately the prices of paddy in the market had fallen unusually low, and thus it was difficult to get sufficient compensation for the surplus paddy. During this difficult time NNA's paternal uncle and grandfather died. The funeral ceremonies and daily *śrāddhas* lasting for a complete year for these two important

individuals, as well as the arrangement of the marriages of NNA's two younger sisters with dowry, further deepened the financial crisis. (NNA, pp. 110-112.)

The family resorted to an additional Durgā worship, and some light was seen at the end of the tunnel. NNA's younger brother had married a princess in the family of the Maharaja of Cochin, and the grandmother of that princess was the seniormost lady in the family, with landed property and trust funds under her control and administration. This lady was able to grant a low interest loan of INR 25,000 to NNA's family, so that it could pay off all the urgent higher interest loans taken from different people. The Second World War came to their rescue as well by leading to an increase in the price of agricultural products. So within a few years all the loans were repaid. (NNA, pp. 128-130.)

The partition of Nellikkāṭṭu Māmaṅṅu Mana took place in 1949. NNA talks bitterly of the later drastic changes when paddy fields which were under the control of tenants were taken away in the agricultural reforms at a very nominal price to be paid over sixteen years. Even that nominal value, says NNA, was not paid as promised. 'Landlords were simply fooled and their lands taken away', is NNA's crystallization of what happened. (NNA, pp. 130-132, 170.)

Cultivating the paddy

Let us now turn our attention to the practical and ritual activities connected with paddy cultivation.

Tilling the soil

The valley passing through Panjal village, turned into a rice field, gets its water during the autumn and winter from a natural brook. The brook starts as a spring on a western hillock, but gets ampler from many ditches which join it on both sides of the field. There is another spring nearby on a field which belongs to a Nāyar. When there is a scarcity of water, this Nāyar may block the channel, and only open it against compensation. He charges for the water according to the acreage or time. The fields that are at the western end of the valley, a little aside from the brook, only give one crop per year.

The fields on the eastern side of the village near the confluence of several brooks and those close to the pond by the Ayyappan Kāvū can give a third crop called *punya*. The fields must be watered from the above-mentioned sources, which means a lot of work. According to Mencher (1966a: 137-138), the yield hardly repays the cost of the labour involved in this kind of cultivation. The seed usually used for the third crop is *tekkān cīra* and it is sown in the middle of February. The crop will be harvested around the second week of May. If the seedlings are replanted it will take them 100 days instead of 90 days to mature.



Fig. 15. Men with their teams of animals preparing the soil for planting in October 1983. Mango leaves and plants used as fertilizers are being mixed with the soil. Photo MP.



Fig. 16. Tractor ploughing large fields in Panjal in February 1990. Photo MP.

Ravipuram's fields and others situated in the same position in the valley give two crops a year, the *virippū kanni* crop and the *muṇṭakan makaram* crop. Owing to the unpredictability of the monsoon, the production of basic cereals, particularly rice and wheat, in sufficient quantity has in most parts of India necessitated the construction of irrigation facilities. In Kerala cultivation is mostly based on the utilization of rainwater alone. (Mencher 1966a: 137 and note 4.) People of many castes help in agricultural work nowadays, but Nampūtiris, goldsmiths, blacksmiths and carpenters are hardly ever among them. The women that I saw most frequently helping in Panjal were Śūdra Nāyars. The workers are hired by a male Nāyar mediator. As noted above, the mediator for Ravipuram is a Vaṅṅēkkāṭṭi Nāyar, but other Nāyars may be working for other *manas*.

After the January harvesting, the fields in front of Ravipuram are dry and the cattle and goats walk there nibbling the stubble. At other times the men of the family watch very carefully from the verandah to see that animals do not eat their crop, but now the household only loses some of the stubble which could otherwise fertilize the soil, getting a little animals' droppings instead. Land is ploughed soon after, for otherwise it would become parched and stiff, and water would evaporate through the holes in the strong sunshine. Large fields are ploughed by a tractor and small ones by a team of bullocks or buffaloes. Sometimes one bullock and one buffalo make up the team. When the fields are ploughed with a pair of animals, some clods may remain. These are broken by Nāyar women with a heavy stick. The labourers own both the animals and the agricultural tools.

The lateritic loam mixed with river sand and clay brought down from the mountains is said to be well suited for paddy cultivation, but poor in organic matter (Mayer 1952: 10). There is a scarcity of dung nowadays as tractors have started replacing animals in agricultural work, and fewer houses keep cattle. Some paddy straw and leaves which are swept together in the compound may be burnt in the field, and some dung is also sometimes bought when fields are prepared in February. In the autumn, mango leaves and plants growing near the fence are used as fertilizers. Some additional fertilizing is done in July and late autumn with Factamphos, a commercial product, the main contents of which are urea and superphosphate (3-4 kg per *para* of land). This is spread by the male labourers, broadcasting by hand from a basket, while walking all over the fields carefully so that no damage is done to the crop.

In April, after again ploughing and fertilizing the fields, before the time of the first pre-monsoon showers, some of the dry fields are sown with rice that is meant to mature without replanting. The early sowing is necessary because the shoots should not be flooded too early. The seed is taken from the remaining crop of the previous year and sown broadcast by hand. The paddy grows quickly when the

south-west monsoon rains come, and can probably be harvested in August. Some weeding by hand is done a few times by female labourers.

During the pre-monsoon showers the second sowing takes place, this time for getting seedlings for the *virippū kanni* crop. The seedlings are planted after 20-25 days in June during the heavy monsoon rains. The land is prepared for this by ploughing, mashing and fertilizing. The soil is first broken with a plough (*kari*). There are two kinds of wooden boards used as agricultural tools, a small one, about 70 cm long (*muṭṭi*) and a big one (*maram*), about 140 cm long. The *muṭṭi* is used for mashing and mixing the mud and leaves, and the *maram* for levelling. When using a *muṭṭi* the labourer stands on the board. If the *maram* is used to spread heavy masses of soil from the corners (brought there by heavy rains) to the centre of the field, it will help the work if the man stands on the board, but when levelling the field the man will walk behind it.

The *maram* is used only for the *muṇṭakan makaram* crop. After the transplanting of the seedlings there will be a scarcity of water. If the fields are not levelled well with the help of a *maram*, there will be higher spots which the water cannot reach. For the *virippū kanni* crop this is usually not necessary as the monsoon rains bring plenty of water in most years. In 1986 the monsoon only started in July, in 1987 it almost failed. Then even a small leveller was difficult to use. On the other hand, the rainfall is sometimes so heavy that the fields are flooded up to the road. In June 1985 for instance it stayed so for two days. The soil may be both ploughed and levelled by a tractor for the *muṇṭakan makaram* crop, but on smaller plots it is necessary to do the levelling again with a team of animals afterwards. On the one hand, due to the speed of the tractor there will be higher mud levels in the corners, and on the other the tractor cannot make sharp turns and reach the corners.

For replanting the women pick the seedlings and bind them into bundles of about 50 pieces. They throw the bundles over the whole field, then open the bundles and plant bunches of approximately 10 seedlings 6-7 inches apart. The women measure the distance by spans and try to plant the seedlings at even distances from each other. Although the planting of seedlings in lines with the help of a string is recommended (cf. Iyer 1968-70, I: figures between pp. 80 and 81), this method, called the Japanese method, was used only when a new seed was experimented with. The women wore huge palm-leaf rain covers which made them look like slowly moving tortoises when they were bent down to do the planting. Men wore palm-leaf rain hats. In 1985 the palm-leaf covers were commonly in use, in 1990 plastic hoods had mostly replaced them.

When one area was completed with planting the Nāyar women put a branch of the vomit nut tree (*kāññiram*; *Strychnos Nux-vomica*) in the centre of the field. The young Nampūtiris said that this was done to prevent people from walking in the

field and spoiling the work when the water still hid the seedlings. M, however, said that it was done to ward off evil spirits and to protect the paddy. On seeing the new seedlings some people would say: 'Now, what paddy!' This is supposed to cause the paddy not to grow well, and the vomit nut tree is there to prevent the harm. The vomit nut tree also plays a role in the rituals of witchdoctors. After removing evil things from human bodies they nail puppets on the *kāññiramaṃ* tree. (MS.)

While the paddy is growing, insect catching is done by the women by means of shallow baskets very early in the morning. Another method is to place perches between two poles in the middle of the fields in order to encourage birds to sit there and catch the insects. If the family had had more money to use on their cultivation, they would have used insecticides like DDT. In the 1990s DDT was banned, but was available on the black market.

After the sown rice crop has been harvested, in late July or early August, new seeds are sown in its place for seedlings to be planted, after 25-30 days, in September-October for the *muṇṭakan makaram* crop. Usually seedlings are grown in what are called *palliyāl* plots of land where water is available only for one or two months during the heavy monsoon rains and which are used only for this specific purpose. At this time also harvesting of the replanted crop takes place. In 1987, when the monsoon came late, a great part of the harvest was destroyed. Many houses had to remove the *virippū kanni* plants and sow the seeds for *muṇṭakan makaram* crop instead. For this they had to use ten times more seed than usual. When the field is prepared for the new paddy the Nāyar mediator strengthens the walls with mud by means of a hoe. The plastering of the walls is not necessary for the *virippū kanni* crop because there is usually enough water even if the walls are not tight.

Before sowing, the seeds used to be treated in a rectangular box made of wooden planks. At the bottom was placed a layer of arrow-root leaves. On this layer the seeds were placed after being dipped in a thick solution of dung. On top of this was placed a layer of Indian gooseberry leaves. Water was poured over this bed three times a day, seven times altogether, one *para* of water for the corresponding amount of seeds. On the third day the seeds had all germinated and were taken to the *palliyāl* field to be sown. Nowadays people seldom follow this procedure, but use bamboo baskets (*vaṭṭi*) or gunny sacks without any arrowroot or Indian gooseberry leaves. Those with ponds dip the gunny sacks in the water and keep them on the steps leading to the pond. The seeds are watered there for three days thrice a day with a hand shower. The reason why germinated seed is used at this time of the year is that the abundance of water will cause paddy not treated in this way to sink too deep in the slush. At the time of the uprooting the deep-lying roots would be damaged. (Uṇṇi.)



Fig. 17. A Nāyar labourer using a hoe to strengthen the paddy-field walls with mud in October 1983. Photo MP.



Fig. 18. Nāyar women replanting seedlings in October 1983. Photo MP.

After the monsoon the water is taken from the brook. Sometimes the fields are situated higher than the water level in the brook at that place, but lower than the neighbouring fields, which have been filled earlier where the brook runs higher. In this case water is conducted through holes made in the walls separating the fields. If the wall is between the fields of two different owners, holes are sometimes secretly made at night. When it is discovered in the morning, there may be a quarrel.

It is important for there to be enough water immediately after the planting as the water keeps the weeds away quite effectively. When the growing paddy gets higher and stronger, the weeds cannot take over the field so easily. Some weeding from time to time is necessary, however. The water level was regulated by controlling the hole in the wall, through which the water ran, by the Nāyar mediator in the beginning. Later this was done by Rv or Rm, and, occasionally even MS, who started to be in charge of the whole cultivation when IR grew old. One could see, however, that MS felt uneasy when doing this work, which is not considered suitable for a Nampūtiri.

Before proceeding to describe the harvesting I will give some information about the different kinds of seeds.

Name of seed	Time of maturing
<i>Virippū</i> crop	
(very rare nowadays:)	
<i>neṭuṅkaḷama</i>	148 days
<i>tavaḷakkaṅṅan</i>	130 days
<i>āryan</i>	162 days
<i>veḷuttirikaḷama</i>	148 days
<i>rājakaḷama</i>)	148 days
(used also nowadays:)	
<i>paraṃpu-cīra</i>	120 days
<i>veḷuttavaṭṭan</i>	125 days
<i>veṭṭuvāri</i>	130 days
<i>Muṇṭakan</i> crop	
(very rare nowadays:)	
<i>veḷḷakkōli</i>	180 days
<i>kāraṇi</i>	165 days
<i>veḷḷappāṇṭi</i>	90 days
(used also nowadays:)	
<i>cirrāni</i>	less than 150 days
<i>veḷḷari</i>	150 days
All crops:	
<i>tekkan cīra</i>	90 days
(new seeds:)	
IR - 8	90 days
<i>trivēṇi</i>	
<i>paviḷam</i>	
c.o. 25	

Tekkan cīra is usually used for the third crop (*punya*). If seed which is suitable only for the *muṇṭakan* crop is used for the *virippū* crop, the clusters will not come out at all. In Ravipuram they used the traditional seed, *veḷuttavaṭṭan* for *virippū* and *cirrāni* for *muṇṭakan*.

In 1960 the government appointed an advisor for a new method of cultivating the fields. An office of the village extension officer was started south of Panjal near the road to Chelakkara. This was controlled by the block office situated in Pazhayanur. The government stocked some c.o. 25 seed and subsidized the buying of fertilisers. Some people got 25 *paras* of paddy for one *para* of seed. The new seed, however, needed plenty of water and frequent care. The grain was also difficult to separate by manual threshing. Keeping the sheaves in store for a couple of days helped the situation a little, but it was noticed that this type of paddy was meant to be threshed by machine. For these reasons, after two crops, all the farmers went back to the old seeds and methods. Later, the village extension office started giving loans for buying pump sets and digging wells. This installment scheme was also subsidized to some degree. (MS.)

During recent years, Ravipuram's annual yield was about 300 *paras* from the two crops. The yield of the *virippū kanni* crop was about 130 *paras*, and *muṇṭakan makaram* crop about 170 *paras*. In 1975 one *para* of paddy cost INR 22. It cost the same in 1987. In 1990 the price was INR 25. The yield of the fields of Putiyapura has been about 75-80 *paras* of paddy per year (MS.).

In 1975 a Nampūtiri had to pay INR 4 per day to a male labourer and INR 1.25 per day to a female labourer. In 1987 the amounts were INR 20 and 10 respectively, in 1990 INR 30 and 15, and in 1994 INR 50 and 30. Ploughing with bullocks cost in 1990 about INR 50 per day, ploughing with a tractor about INR 80 per hour, in 1994 INR 150 per hour. All the agitation and the Kerala Agricultural Workers' Act of 1974 have increased the agricultural labourer's wages, although the acreage of the landowners' fields is smaller than what is needed for the full implementation of the Act. In comparison, MS, at times the only earning member of his nuclear family, got INR 800 per month for his job as a part time drawing teacher in the local school in 1983. (MS; Franke 1993: 58, 157-158.)

From harvesting to storing

In January the *muṇṭakan makaram* crop is harvested. The paddy is cut with a sickle (*arivāḷ*) most commonly by some Nāyar women. In other places I also saw men doing this work. Paddy is bound into sheaves and carried on the head in heavy burdens kept together with a rope. The loads are dropped near the main building on the ground which has been cleaned and smeared with cowdung. The sheaves are piled into a huge heap.

The harvesters used to be given one tenth of the produce as their share. The labourers considered the harvest to be so poor that they insisted on getting wages instead. The harvesting wages were 7-8 *iṭāṇṇalis* of paddy per day in the 1980s, a full *para* in 1994. The harvesting women can be sometimes given coffee or tea to drink, but, as was said before, only the regular house maid gets remnants of rice and curry to be taken home. It has become difficult to get field labourers at the proper time, and anybody who is willing to take the job is hired. (MS.) In 1985 harvesting was obviously started too late, as lots of grains shook free when the sheaves were carried from the fields. The reason for that delay was the celebration of IR's and DA's 60th wedding anniversary on the 26th of January.

The first threshing is done by hitting one sheaf at a time against a wooden bench or stool. The grains are then swept together and winnowed. During the dry season in January and February the second threshing can be done with long flexible rods of vomit nut tree. Usually, several Nāyar women rhythmically beat the sheaves which are in front of them. During the northeast monsoon in October and November the second threshing takes place in a different way. The paddy, cut in Septem-



Fig. 19. M. and two other Nāyar women doing the second threshing with rods of vomit nut tree in February 1990. The paddy is laid on a large bird-shaped brick pavement which is the lowest layer of a fire altar for an *atirātra* ritual performed near the Taravāṭū by IR's great-grandfather in 1844. Photo MP.

ber, is bound in sheaves, and these, after the first threshing, are piled into conical shocks with a vertical top sheaf. The shocks get wet during the casual heavy rains, and the women try to dry the sheaves by spreading them on the ground before they start tearing the sometimes already half rotten paddy with bare hands into chopped straw and separated grain. After sweeping all this together, they may dry it a little while on the ground. The grains from the first threshing are of better quality.

The women separate the grain from the rests of straw by tipping the load from a winnowing basket, or a basket with a slightly higher back, from above their heads, letting the wind do the rest. Winnowing by tossing the paddy into the air repeatedly from the winnowing basket is also done. The grains are dried on bamboo mats. The wages for threshing are paid in grain, too. The labourers insist on getting even the grain of the second threshing, though it is inferior in quality, and do not let the Nampūtiris sell the straw with the grains in. (MS.)

Part of the paddy was parboiled by M in a big cauldron in the outer room. In the 1990s it was done in the old kitchen. When the husk opens a little, the parboiling is stopped. Most of the paddy which is meant for rituals is left raw. Only raw

rice (*pacc' ari* or *uṅakkal ari*) is allowed in Vedic rituals, but in ladies' rituals also parboiled rice is used. To my question why paddy is parboiled I got the following answers. It makes husking easier and parboiled rice can be kept longer. It tastes better, and is good for digestion. For those who are not well it is the only choice and it is better for certain dishes like *iḍḍali* and *dōśa*. Parboiling does not make the boiling quicker, on the contrary. (U; R; IR's daughter-in-law Ammini; MS.). That parboiling is thought to kill small creatures was given as a reason to Moore (1990: 175). That the vitamins of the outer layers are better preserved in the grain when paddy is treated like this was never given as the reason, although I had been instructed so at home.

After parboiling, the paddy is dried again on bamboo mats in the sun or on the floor indoors. When completely dry the paddy is collected in the grain bin (*pattāyam*). When need comes M carries a sackful of paddy (c. 40 kg) on her head to the Panjal electric mill to be husked. Earlier the husking was done by Nāyar women in a mortar (*kūntāni*) made of mango wood, having a hole in the middle. Nowadays a stone *kūntāni* without a hole is more often seen. For the work a wooden pestle (*ulakka*) with iron-strengthened ends was used, one of the ends having a widening shape. The capacity of a *kūntāni* is 5-6 litres.

After removing the husks the rice is put into a vessel (*ural*) for removing the bran. The removable type is usually made of wood and has the shape of a sand glass. There is another type which is cup-shaped and made of granite, embedded in the floor. For removing the husk the wide end of the pestle is used, for removing the bran the other end is used. The houses may still have such mortars and pestles.

The ground husk which is the by-product of the process of pounding is used in cooking or it is mixed with cow food. The bran is also used for making tooth powder. Nowadays the stone mortars are sometimes used for making rice flour, but for a bigger amount two flat round grinding stones were earlier also used. Most of the rice, however, is used as grains and the wet grinding is separately done for each meal at home in the cup-shaped grinding stone with the help of a stone which resembles the *liṅga*. The rice that is brought back from the mill is, after being winnowed, stored in big jars in the store room (*kalavara*).

Earlier, the making of rice from paddy by pounding was done by any Nāyar woman who came for the work. The woman had to give the family 4 *iṭannālis* of rice for one *para* of paddy, after removing the husk. In addition she could keep the powder. Even nowadays she can keep the powder, but is otherwise paid in cash for taking the paddy to the mill. (IR, I, p. 58; MS.)

Nira, the harvest festival

The Kerala harvest ritual was described by the family members and M as follows:

When the first paddy is cut in September after the south-west monsoon rains, the Nampūtiris celebrate *nira* ('filling') or the harvest festival. Only the Nampūtiris celebrate this festival at home, but the Nāyar and Ambalavāsi castes join a temple *nira*. The ceremony does not take place when the January-February harvesting is started.

Round figures are stamped on the doors with the help of a cup, using paste made of rice powder from the previous harvest, mixed with water. On the floor of the entrance room (*akatte pūmukhaṃ*) or the kitchen store room (*kalavara*) is drawn a figure with the same paste, and a *pūja* is performed on the spot. Usually the *pūja* will be performed by the eldest Nampūtiri in the household, but sometimes by a lady. In September 1984 for example it was performed by DA. The difference is that only men can use the *pūja* bell and utter mantras.

A tortoise-shaped seat will be placed on the figure and another for the person performing the *pūja*, both seats decorated with rice paste. On top of the seat which is put on the figure will be placed mango leaves, a bunch of ten herbs (*daśa-puṣpaṃ*), jackfruit, Indian gooseberry, bamboo, and pipal leaves, some creepers (*kal-k-koṭi*, *amarcca-k-koṭi*), and four different kinds of milk-plants (*valli-p-pāla*, *koṭa-p-pāla*, *daiva-p-pāla* and *pāla*). The ingredients are usually collected by the Nāyar maid.

The ritual tray with eight auspicious items (*aṣṭamaṅgalyaṃ*) and all the three different rice measures will be visible during the celebration, but the latter are not filled. For the *pūja* the spouted water vessel (*kiṇṭi*) and the other common ritual vessels are used. Ghee is used as fuel for the ritual lamp, and pieces of an old cloth as wicks (*tiri*). The cloth must be freshly washed by the washerman of the house.

After the *pūja* the participants go to the gate of the *mana* carrying the lamp and the *aṣṭamaṅgalyaṃ*, as well as a ritual bell if the ceremony is performed by a man. The Nāyar servants will tie a small sheaf of newly cut ears of paddy (*katir*), and it will be carried in to the accompaniment of the bell if it is used. The women repeat: 'Lakṣmī-Nārāyaṇa'. The children shout: *nira nira, poli poli, vallaṃ nira, cellaṃ nira, illaṃ nira, pattāyaṃ nira*. With these words the celebrators refer to the fullness of the heap of paddy, the grain basket, the house and the grain bin.

The sheaf is placed on a banana leaf, and a new *pūja* is performed. A sweet roll (*aṭa*) is placed on a piece of banana leaf for each of the gods Gaṇapati, Viṣṇu, Śiva and Śrī Bhagavati. They are eaten as *naivedyaṃ* afterwards. Small bunches from the sheaf together with the other plants on the wooden seat are carried to the kitchen, the store room, the granary and the kitchen entrance room. The oil lamp is carried along. In each of the places one bunch is fixed on a high place and left there until the following year's *nira* is celebrated. Before consuming food prepared from

the new crop, the householder and his wife should offer cooked raw rice (*pacce' ari* or *unakkal ari*), from the newly harvested paddy grains, into the holy household fire (NNA, pp. 94).

The *nira* ritual is described by Hermann Gundert (1872: 559):

nira (5) 1. Fullness... 4. different ceremonies for bringing wealth and blessing (beginning by taking home a handful of ears of corn as the first fruits with the cry for instance of *nira nira poli poli* or *nira nira nirō – nirā illan nira* (114), *vallan nira*, *vallavaṭṭi nira* (*pattāya nira*), *ara nira*, *koṭṭa nira* etc.). Chiefly *illam nira* the annual cleansing of the house-door with offerings of rice and sticking over it new ears of corn (and 6, or 10, or 16 etc. different kinds of leaves) with cowdung (the same thing is done to implements and even to trees).

As far as I know, there are no coconut harvesting ceremonies, although this product is important in the economy, and used in rituals in Kerala. Paddy, however, is the most important in both respects in Panjal. The coconut bears fruit all the year round, but paddy has one crop common to all parts of the village, and this gives the latter additional ritualized importance in the yearly cycle.

LUCK, LOSS, PROBLEMS AND NEW CHANCES

In Panjal, partly because they were lucky and partly because they had authority or could manipulate the course of events, the Nampūtiris were able to keep their lands for themselves until recently. It was only after 1971 that some large scale shift of ownership took place from them to other castes. But the partitions of the households had, as stated above, by then split the property into smaller units.

IR's memoirs, my informants and my own observations do not give the impression that Kerala's peasant organizations and farm workers unions would have been strong in Panjal in the decades following independence. Still, the wages of agricultural labourers, paid in cash or in an agreed amount of paddy, are a heavy burden to the Nampūtiris. The profit from paddy has not grown, while the cost of growing it has become high. Those who own the animals and tools and do the work themselves can profit from agriculture, not those who have to use hired labour.

Ravipuram's fields gave just enough rice for household use in recent years, leaving nothing to be sold. But getting all the rice that a family needs from its own fields should not be underestimated as a basic security in life. It used to be the duty of MS, even when IR was alive, to give what was needed for cultivation from his income. Only if he could not afford to do this did he get help from his father, who used to pay other household costs. MS did not make a serious effort to improve the cultivating methods and increase the paddy crop. On the whole he thought that 'cultivation was a headache'.

As one *para* is approximately 10 kg, the yield of the *virippū kanni* was about 1300 kg and that of the *muṇṭakan makaram* crop about 1700 kg, 650 kg and 850 kg per acre respectively, in the 1980s. According to Mayer (1952: 55), the average yield in Malabar was 1400 pounds per acre in 1950, that is 635.6 kg. The yield of Ravipuram paddy fields, then, was more than the average yield in Malabar in 1950, but less than in Cauvery Delta, Tanjore area (1750 pounds per acre = approximately 795 kg), although the *muṇṭakan makaram* crop is more than that. Compared to Japan (3444 pounds per acre) and Italy (4566 pounds per acre) the yield was very small. The fact that more than 50% of the cereals consumed by Keralites comes from outside the state (Ramachandran 1995: 33) must to a great extent be due to this low yield.

There was no decision about partition of the paddy fields by 1998, but the plan was to sell at least part of them. As IR's son Ravi, who returned to Panjal after retiring from his job in 1993, was not interested in cultivation, MS continued to cultivate paddy, but only one crop per year. In 1997 MS let one of his former students rent the fields, and the latter cultivated two crops, one of a small kind of yam (*kūrkkā*), which Unṇi calls Chinese potato, and another of paddy. MS's family had to buy rice from the shop then. In 1998 MS himself again cultivated paddy.

The following seem to be the reasons for agriculture not being as profitable as it could be. The Nampūtiris still do not want to do the agricultural work themselves, and they have to hire labourers, animals, and tools, which is expensive for them. As they have no animals of their own, and as manure is expensive to buy, the fields do not get enough nourishment. The villagers are also suspicious of new kinds of seed and methods, which could give a bigger crop. As to the quality of the paddy after the first threshing, I have heard no complaints. The result after the second threshing is obviously poorer. That the Nampūtiris cannot afford insecticides and artificial manure may be considered a negative factor by them, but must be counted as an asset from the ecological and health point of view.

Some Nampūtiris have turned to other kinds of cultivation to compensate for the loss of income from paddy fields. According to Mencher, fewer cash crops were raised in Central Kerala than in north Kerala or Travancore, but certain cash crops were introduced in the mid-fifties, such as rubber, pineapple, areca nut etc. (Mencher 1977: 319-320). To better its financial situation in the 1940s, NNA's family started growing cashew, mango, jackfruit and other trees in the dry land. Some dry lands were made cultivable by introducing irrigation arrangements. (NNA, pp. 130-132.) Some other Nampūtiris have no paddy fields at all. Vaikkāk-kara Citran Nampūtiri (DA's brother), who used to function as the temple priest in the Ayyappan Kāvū, grew vegetables and trees in his compound in the 1980s.



Fig. 20. Rubber sheets drying in the compound of Kaippañcēri Mana in 1983. Photo MP.

Kaippañcēri Mana had a large rubber plantation in the 1980s. Uṇṇi started a rubber plantation of 1.4 acres in 1985 on one of the plots of tree-growing land which belong to the Putiya-pura joint property. There are also some old-type as well as new-type coconut trees there. In 1991 all other trees were cut down in Vaikkāk-kara Citran Nampūtiri's compound and rubber trees were planted instead. In 1995 Nellikkāṭṭu Māmaṇṇu Mana had 12 acres, Koraṭṭikkara Mana some 10 acres, and Rosevalley (the new name of the plot of land which belonged to Kaippañcēri Mana in the 1980s) some 18 acres under rubber cultivation. Nellikkāṭṭu Māmaṇṇu Mana further extended the plantation to the courtyard itself, cutting down other trees.

Rubber yield is around 120 kg per month per acre in the best season. The rubber cultivation and manufacturing is done by hired labourers. The latex, which flows out after an incision is made in the bark of the rubber tree (*Hevea Brasiliensis*), is collected and mixed with formic acid and left to coagulate in metal molds overnight. The solidified spongy caoutchouc from each mold is passed between rollers so that it becomes a flat sheet of about 0.5 kg. Two such sheets weigh about 1 kg, and in 1995 fetched INR 52, INR 57 if smoked for preservation. The lesser material, which remains at the bottom of the collecting cup, fetches INR 35 per kg. As the world market price for caoutchouc was high in 1995, rubber cultivation could be considered very profitable and could result in great income differences between families that had a chance to cultivate it and those that had not.