PRABHA RANI, POONAM KAUL

For Two Meals A Day

—A Report On Tamil Domestic Maids

LAJPAT Nagar, where the **Manushi** office is situated, has a predominance of Tamil domestic servants. We conducted a survey of 25 Tamil women. Of these, four were un-married girls between the ages of 14 and 16, and seven were widows. We also interviewed four men of their own community and seven employers.

Our attempt has been to understand the pressures which push them out of their villages in the south to a distant city in the north, the nature of the work they undertake, the reasons for taking up one kind of work and not another—if there is a choice—and the conditions of their life in the city.

Migration

The picture that emerges from the women's accounts of migration is one of human beings shifting for survival. What they hoped to find in this distant city was not a life of luxury but a life that would ensure two meals a day, and a life without debts.

A majority of those interviewed come from North Arcot district with a few from Madurai and Tirunelveli districts. They were agricultural labourers. Low wages coupled with recurrent drought and accumulating debts drove them out of their villages.

The wage they received in the village ranged from Re 1 to Rs 4 for a woman for five hours of work and from Rs 2 to Rs 8 for a man for 10 hours of work. These wages were often paid in kind, which meant a kilogram or two of paddy.

Parvati says : "If we went to harvest we received Rs 2 or Rs 2.50 per day. If we returned at 1 p.m. we received Rs 1.50. A kilogram of rice cost 'Rs 1.50, and 50 paise were spent to buy spices for the gravy." Their life was lived from day to day. "It was enough if each day passed,"

says Pattu. "If two from a family worked, the wages would cover a day's meal for the family."

Having a little land was no protection against starvation and indebtedness as the landholdings were small and the produce was not enough to last a whole year. Even families owning a little land had to work as labourers to supplement their income. When the monsoons failed there was very little work to go around. So there was only a marginal difference in the condition of a landless and a landed family.

As if this were not hard enough, work was not available on all days of the year. Nearly six months in a year they had to survive on what they had saved during the other six or by selling jewellery, if they still had any. Jayalakshmi says : "If we got three padis of paddy we would put aside one padi and that would stand us in good stead during times of scarcity." "We just sat around during those days of idleness. Use up what is left, sell jewellery and eat and when work is available, go again", says Yashoda.

These months of compulsory idleness were also months that brought in indebtedness. As Valar-madi says : "Don't we eat by borrowing money ? When we harvest, we repay that." The debts were incurred in the hope of a good harvest. But when the harvest failed due to lack of rain or when it failed for consecutive years, indebtedness became acute and there was a compulsion to move to a place where they would survive.

Preparation for migration brought further indebtedness in its wake. All the women interviewed had sold or mortgaged their land or hut to pay for the train fare to Delhi. Pattu, who had a little land, had mortgaged it to survive when her husband died and she fell ill. When she decided to come to Delhi with her two sons, she mortgaged her hut for Rs 300. Yashoda's family had no land and no hut to mortgage, so they borrowed Ks 600 from a person who trusted them, and after working in Delhi for some time, they repaid this amount. Valarmadi's mother mortgaged her land for Rs 700 to send Valarmadi and her husband to Delhi.

To Work Every Day

Most of the women interviewed had come to Delhi because they already had relatives who had lived in Delhi for a couple of years and had repaid the debts incurred in the village. Panjavarnam and her husband had worked on the land of a brahman for many years. They heard from people who had migrat-ed to Delhi that, "There one gets work every day, men get government jobs, women work in four or five houses and earn Rs 300 or 400. After spending on food, one can save Rs 200 every month and in four or five years save Rs 10,000 to buy a piece of land in the village."

Panjavarnam was exceptional in the sense that she migrated without having anyone to turn to in Delhi. She roughed it for a couple of years and then, with a better knowledge of Hindi, arranged work for herself.

Her nephew's wife Valarmadi says : "Since she was here we thought she would help us find houses to work in. We saw how, after 10 years in Delhi, she had bought some jewellery and a three quarter kani* of land. We were facing many difficulties. We decided we could survive in Delhi and also repay all our debts."

Delhi, though far from their villages, offers a better chance of survival than does Madras. The wages for domestic work in Madras are much lower. As Usha, a Tamil woman in Delhi who employs a Tamil maidservant, revealed, a maid in Madras receives just Rs 30 or Rs 40 for mopping, sweeping, and washing dishes and clothes, whereas a maidservant in Delhi receives anywhere between Rs 90 and Rs 100 for the same tasks.

Housing

The Tamil migrant slum which we visited for some of our interviews is located bang next to a rail track. This is how the slum came into existence. The first man who came had a job in the railways. He was given a tent to pitch close to the site of work. Within no time, other Tamil families started trickling in and settled in the area adjacent to the tracks.

The houses lie within a 50 feet radius of the tracks. Lying cheek by jowl, these are six feet high structures of brick cemented with soft mud. The walls and floors are given a coat of cowdung which has to be applied afresh every three days.

Less than six feet separate the floor from the ceiling in the centre of the hut. Since the ceiling is sloping and barely three feet at the sides, all movement within the hut is confined to a bent, crouched

*One *kani* is two and a half acres of land

The migrant colony

position. The entrance, a wooden door, is not higher than three feet in most houses.

Nearly all the huts have a roof of lightweight hollow reed which appears highly vulnerable to flame. Unless covered with a plastic sheet, which many have put up, the roof leaks during the rains. The total surface area of the hut is six by six feet. This space serves as a kitchen, sleeping and living area for an average of four people.

The only source of ventilation is a five inch opening above the door. Most huts contain a single cot on which all possessions are piled up during the monsoon. Makeshift shelves are created in one part of the wall where plastic and glass containers holding spices, pulses and cooking oil are kept. A stove, a kerosene bottle, a *chulha* and some utensils can be seen in many huts.

There is no electricity in the huts. Drinking water has to be fetched from a common pipe half a kilometre away. The task of fetching water is the responsibility of women who collect a couple of buckets every evening to meet the family's cooking and drinking requirements. The first few families who settled at the site jointly invested in the installation of a pump for their own needs. As the slum population swelled, this became a source of income for these families. Each of the other families pays Rs 10 a month for the use of the pump.

Brisk activity is evident in the afternoons when the women get down to doing their housework. Some can be seen cleaning rice or pulses for the evening meal while others sweep the interior of the hut or comb their hair. Thick smoke from the earthen stoves greeted us on our visits to the slum. These take a good half hour to light and the coal and wood used give on" thick, cough provoking smoke. Adding to the din of crying children, older boy or girl children fetching water and women beating clothes were transistors blaring film music.

Men bathe at the pump in broad daylight whereas women perform the same activity under cover ot darkness. Only a few people have enclosures built next to their huts to serve as private baths.

Interior of a hut

The slum-dwellers generally bathe once in two days.

The open tracts of grassland nearby are used as a latrine. Women have to ease themselves either at night or in the wee hours of the morning.

Nearly all the immigrants who have been in Delhi for seven to 10 years have had to move house three times because their hutments were razed to the ground. We feel that the government cannot be absolved of its responsibility for creating the slums in the first place as it is the unskilled government employees who have paved the way for the emer-gence of a slum by pitching the tents provided to them by the railways— the largest visible employer of Tamil migrant labour here.

During the Emergency, these

migrants were evicted from the near-by Defence Colony flyover and were given accomodation on the outskirts of Delhi. However, commuting to their workplace consumed too much time and money so they were forced to return to the city. This led to the growth of the present slum near the Jal Vihar bus terminal.

The possibility of their hutments being mowed down again by the municipal authorities, is a perma-nent source of anxiety to the slum dwellers. Even after several evic-tions, they have no resources to offer resistance against a future one.

Working Conditions

Of the 25 Tamil migrant women interviewed, 22 work as domestic servants. Their average income per month is Rs 220 although individual earnings range from Rs 100 to Rs 300. The women measure their work in terms of their income. Devaki, for instance, said she works for Rs 200. Only a detailed breakup of the number of households and the tasks in each, gave us an idea of the work involved in earning this amount.

Jaya has six houses in hand. In two houses, she washes utensils and in two others, washes utensils and cleans the house. This fetches her only Rs 265 since she is paid only Rs 25 or 30 in a house where she washes utensils but is paid Rs 60 in a house where she does both the tasks of cleaning the house and the utensils.

On the other hand, Pattu, who works in only two houses, washing utensils and cleaning the house in both, gets Rs 190. One of her houses is a bungalow, where there are two huge rooms and a portico. She is paid Rs. 120 here and Rs 70 for the other house.

The number of utensils and clothes a woman washes is directly related to the number of members in a family but may not be related to the money she gets. For instance, Lakshmi gets Rs 50 to 60 in four houses where the membership ranges from three to five.

The nature of their work pre-vents them from undertaking more houses to enhance their earnings. Since the first round of utensils has to be done between 7 and 11 a. m., the women try to fit in as many houses as possible during this period. However, they cannot do more than six houses. Those who work in more, do so with the help of a younger sister or brother. Valarmadi, who already cleans floors and utensils in eight houses, says she would be able to do three more since her brother helps her with the work. But even that would fetch the two of them only Rs 400.

From 11 a.m. to 2 p.m. the women are free to either hang around or sleep and have their lunch in a nearby park. At 2 p.m. they begin the second round of work and finish by 4 p.m. Thus, they have a paid workday of six hours.

But work for the women does not end at 4 p.m. The women are entirely responsible for the work that needs to be done back home. Lakshmi, 14, returns home at 5 p. m. after finishing the work of her five employers and gets down to the same routine in her own house which she shares with her parents and two younger siblings. She cleans the dishes, fetches water and cleans the dwellingplace. Though her mother would like her to wash clothes every day, she says she does it every second or third day.

The men do not help in house-work at all. Even Ramachandran, who is unemployed, does not help Valarmadi in the housework. “What heln can 1 extend to her ?” he asks.

And Valarmadi says : “He does not do anything; he only hangs around.”

Women’s Work And Men’s Work

Over the years, a pattern has evolved determining the work available to women and that avai-lable to men in the city. By and large, women work as domestic maids whereas men have a wider range of occupations to choose from. The most sought after jobs are those in government departments like the public works department, railways or the municipal corporal tion. Men can also join cemen-factories, work as gardeners, vend vegetables or do petty business selling ganja and liquor.

A majority of the husbands of the women interviewed had joined the railways or the corporation and many of them held permanent jobs. A permanent, unskilled worker receives not less than Rs 700 per month and enjoys all the benefits of leave, provident fund, and loans, and an assured income until he retires at 58. Other jobs only serve as stopgap occupations for the men while they try to secure a govern-ment job. When a man gets a government job, he may be made permanent in a couple of years or may remain temporary for nine years.

Men already in government employment help newcomers by inform-ing them of vacancies or introducing them to their senior officers. Receiv-ing of bribes for this favour is com-mon but since the likely returns are high, the new immigrant is not reluc-tant to pay. Ramachandran said he would be expected to pay Rs 50 or Rs 100 to a Tamil worker to help him find a job. Kalvirayan who had a permanent job with the railways had willingly paid Rs 10 to a friend who had informed him of a vacancy. Shankarna, however, who is educated up to the eighth stand-dard, registered himself with the employment exchange where he was given a card. When he was informed that the PWD was recrui-ting men, he went there and got a job on the basis of his card.

All these occupational outlets are closed to women. Those women who are already in Delhi work as domestic servants and are not in a position to introduce other women to any other profession. If they have invited a family to Delhi the women readily help new women migrants to mid a household to work in, but by doing so they also unconsciously pull them into a situation where they are collec-tively the ultimate losers. For 15 years of work as domestic servants is more likely to leave them earn-ng less thaa the younger ones, with the attendant danger of having to cease working altogether due to age and exhaustion. More-over, long years of employment do not even bring in a bulk sum in the form of provident fund or an assured income as pension.

Many of the women interviewed were not happy with their work. Valli, 15, said it was difficult work and she would like to do any other work, though she could

not speci-fy what work she would rather do. Lakshmi, whose husband worked in the railways and is now dead, is working as a domestic maid for her husband's former bosses, who have assured her a job in the railways. However, she does not think they will give her work that involves travelling to distant places by train, such as that of a cleaner on a southbound train which she would like.

Chellamma believes that only educated people are employed by the government. Parvati, when asked if she would have liked to do some other work, declared with a delightful sense of humour that she had wanted to be an artist but could not manage it, and that she was also invited to be a lawyer but since she was not educated it did not work out.

Men dislike domestic work even if they are unemployed. Ramachan-dran has been unemployed for many months now but when asked if he would do domestic work he replied that only women and young boys are preferred to do such work, that he would work for bachelors. He said he may suppress his shame and work for a family but ended by saying he would not do such work for a woman employer even if she came to him to offer it. Depending on his wife's earnings while waiting for a job was preferable to doing domestic work for pay.

Little boys do domestic work only as a stopgap until they move • on to more secure, better paying jobs. Lakshmi is six years older than her brother who now works in two houses. She keeps a watch on him to prevent him from running off to play and has literally to drag him to work. But in 15 years or even less, he is likely to be more secure economically than she will even be, to have seen more of the world, and to be surer of his future.

The Outside World

Women are far less mobile than men. Their life in Delhi revolves around their dwellings and the houses where they work, with a visit to the market once a week. There is little contact with Hindi speaking men and women of their own class in the city. Even when they do have time, they sit around with other Tamil women. This leaves few opportunities or access to, or even knowledge of, any life other than the one already chalked out for them.

The men, on the other hand, move about more freely. The cinema, the marketplace and the whole city is open for men to ex-plore and experience. A 13 year old boy can just walk into a nearby theatre when he has enough money. Such a venture would be unthink-able for a girl of the same age. Devaki's 11 year old son is working in a cold drinks shop in the main market of Lajpat Nagar. His occu-pation brings him in direct contact with a world which is closed to a girl of his age.

Men work in places where men from various backgrounds come to-gether, and thus have a better chance to understand the workings of the city and the world at large. The possibility of their moving on to more lucrative work, provided it is available, is consequently greater.

Men would rather have the women so enclosed in the dwelling place that they have little freedom to interact with the outside world, particularly with men of the same social class since they pose a direct threat to the men's control over the sexuality of the women. The occupation of a domestic maid exposes a woman to a relationship with an employer who is usually a woman. Interaction with male members of the employers' family is minimised since all the work is done during the day when the men are away at work.

Men actively prevent women from coming into contact with the outside world. When the two of us went to their huts to interview women, men crowded around, pre-venting our conversation and hinting that we had a vested interest in interviewing women exclusively. They felt that men could give us more and better information. Men even felt insulted because we were giving more importance to women's lives.

More than that, we sensed an element of hostility arising from a desire to prevent women from questioning their lives in rela-tion to those of men When they found us asking pointed questions regarding male female disparity, they created a general distur-bance in the atmosphere, com-pelling us to confine ourselves to interviewing women while they were working in Lajpat Nagar. When we left the slum, young men even followed us to some distance and passed comments that were clearly sexual innuendoes. This was also a clear message to the two of us that home was where we should be.

Interestingly, we encountered similar hostility from a husband in Defence Colony. We were interviewing his wife in her capacity as an employer. He first refused to let us in but when we persisted, reluctantly admitted us. He then introduced us to his wife quite bluntly as : "Here's trouble for you !" Even before we could explain our purpose to her, the hus-band admonished her : "You know, you don't necessarily have to answer their queries. Think it over well." The wife perhaps caught a hint of his displeasure but chose not to heed it and consented to the interview.

Shy and hesitant at first, she finally allowed us to record the inter-view. By this time, the husband had left the room. She soon felt relaxed and gave replies easily. Midway through the interview, the woman faltered while answering. We turned around only to find that the husband had reentered the room. This time, he said to her : "You don't have to tell them everything, you know." Although we had at no point asked any personal questions, except her name for the record which she had declined to give, the husband gave us the impression that he was the owner of the house and of everything in it, and that even any information about the maidservant employed in his house, formed part of his "property."

By now, the wife was visibly em-barrassed by her husband's behavi-our but in genial tones replied that everything was all right and that we were quite harmless. At one stage of the interview the woman employer said that she occasionally gave her maid milk to drink "on the sly." Knowing that she and her husband were the only persons in the house, we enquired whether her husband would object to her generosity to-wards her servants. At this she hastily

asserted that she had com-plete freedom in the running of the house and her husband never inter-fered in her sphere. On our leaving the house, the husband was most gracious. He assumed the air of a kind patriarch who had allowed us to interview his wife.

Children

On an average, these women have three children. On an aver-age, they lose one child. Of three offspring born, only two survive. When the number of children born is five, the death toll is three. This leaves the number of offspring equal to the planned family slogan touted by the government : "Two or three children."

There was no significant difference in the numbers of surviving daugh-ters and sons. Most children died between six months and two years of birth. A few died of chickenpox. But by and large, parents did not know what had caused the children's deaths. Even in the two cases where the children had died at the ages of eight and 18, the causes were not known.

The children, when young, usual-ly follow their mother to her place of work. However, if a daughter is eight years old and has younger brothers and sisters, she is likely to stay behind to look after them.

Valli did not work for money before her marriage, since she had to take care of her young sisters while her mother and elder sisters were at work. Now that she is married she earns, and her sisters are old enough to work along with her.

When he'p is not available from such sources, women are forced to leave their children near a park in the colony. Toddlers play around a huge pipal tree all the day long. This exposes them to traffic, and, since they eat just about anything that catches their eye, they are vulnerable to disease. The nonavailability of help to look after children in their absence forces some women to opt out of paid work altogether. Anjalai is one such. Her husband has a permanent job so she is in a position to exercise this option. She may begin to work as soon as her children are old enough or if she finds help.

Waiting under a tree

When she is eight, the daughter begins to lend a helping hand to her mother outside their home. She may do the sweeping in a house where the mother works, or help in rinsing the clothes or dishes. By the time a girl is 10 or 11, she begins to work independently in one household and by the time she is 14 or 15, the number of households she works for is easily four. This is equal to the average number of houses any woman above 40 works in.

By and by, the younger male children too are initiated into domestic work. They begin, like girl children, by helping their sisters or mother, and move on to independent charge in a few years. But they do not stick to domestic work for long, for, as they grow older, they have other options.

Education

Poverty is the greatest barrier to sending children to school. There were cases of children having stu-died up to the fifth standard, of those who had given up after the second, and of many who had not been to school at all. However, the opportunities for schooling shrank on migration. Quite a few ad-mitted that they used to send their children, mainly sons, to school back home, but discontinued it after moving to Delhi. Chellamma said her younger son refused to attend school in Delhi because of the use of Hindi while Kulamma's son re-tuined because of the hostility he encountered from north Indian fellow students and from the teacher. He will study when he returns to the village.

Some mothers do not insist on their children going to school as they are apprehensive of the compli-cated process of admission which perhaps

S. No.	NAME	Number Of Children Born	Number Of Children Dead	Number Of Surviving Children
1	Pattu	9	6	3
2	Chellamma	9	6	3
3	Anjalai	3	1	2
4	Nachi	3	1	2
5	Lakshmi	3	—	3
6	Yashodai	—	—	—
7	Parvati	3	—	3
8	Pazhaniamma	2	—	2
9	Jayalakshmi	2	—	2
10	Panjavarnam	4	3	1
11	Thayaramma	5	2	3
12	Valli	—	—	—
13	Devaki	2	—	2
14	Kulamma	4	1	3
15	Yashodai	5	—	5
16	Jaya	5	—	5
17	Valarmadi	2	—	2
18	Lakshmi	5	2	3
19	Lakshmi	4	1	3
20	Veeramma	1	—	1
21	Chinnapulai	7	2	5

requires a birth certificate. Lakshmi, however, is wary of sending her children to school when they are still young. "Back home", she says, "we had to fear enor-mous snakes. In the city, you don't know when you will be surprised by a moving vehicle." However, she is determined to educate them. Once they are old enough, she will send all of them to school together.

They also cite poverty as the chief reason for their lack of interest in the children's education. Lak-shmi, 50, educated her son up to the eighth standard and one daughter up to the third. The son did not study further while the daughter was required at home to maintain the house while the parents went to work. Boys too are recalled from school to babysit for younger siblings.

Veeramrna, 24, and Lakshmi, 12, said their parents sent them to school but they had refused to go. Both regret it now Lakshmi had refused because she did not know Hindi which is the medium of ins-truction in the local municipality-run schools. At a later stage, when she expressed her wish to study, her mother queried : "What are you going to learn now ?", implying that she had crossed the age to be sent to school.

There is no doubt that education will make some difference in their employment opportunities. But if the girls continue to drop out from school at a young age and enter the domestic servant rut, chances are that their life conditions will be no different from their mothers'.

Marriage

Most girls are given away in marriage after the age of 15. A number of them marry cross cousins —the emphasis is on marrying within the family. The decisions in this regard are usually taken by the parents and the elders of the family.

Men, however, enjoy some lati-tude in the choice of mate and often, families gave in to this. Chinnapulai categorically said that she would not allow her daughter to choose her spouse as this is "dirty and vulgar." However, she would allow her sons the marriage of their choice : "A son can marry 100 women and they shall all be welcome."

We came across many migrant parents who sought a match for their daughters back home. One said the expenses of a wedding in Delhi are $_{v}$ at least Rs 2,000 more than in the village. Another said if they had a daughter back home, the family could stay with her on their visits home and obviate some ex-penditure.

The expenses on a daughter's marriage range from Rs 2,000 to Rs 10,000. The lower limit is suffi-cient for a son's wedding. Generally, nose studs, a silk sari and utensils are given to the daughter by the parents. Sometimes, the in-laws too give some small gold ornament.

Traditionally, the bridegroom's family paid a brideprice which has declined to a customary Rs 10.50. Though vestiges of this tradition remain, the trend these days is to ape the middle class practice of demanding dowry. Most families save for a daughter's marriage and even incur huge debts to fulfil the expectations of the bridegroom's family. Parvati's comment brought this out clearly : "You can count the hair on your head but not the demands of the in-laws."

Sometimes, the marriage ex-penses are borne by the families jointly and we came across two or three young couples who were still paying instalments towards repay-ment of loans taken for their wed-ding feast.

Marriage And Social Freedom

One reason why girls are married at a young age is the threat that parents perceive to their sexual purity. "If a daughter talks to a strange man, tongues will wag", said Chinnapulai.

As long as a daughter is un-married, her family assumes res-ponsibility for her chastity. Once she gets married, this charge is automatically taken over by the husband.

Unmarried girls and married women whose husbands are alive never go beyond the slums or the colony where they work. The likelihood of sexual encounters with men is rare). In contrast, Veeramma, 24, who has separated from her hus-band, is an independent woman. Her family has little control over her relationships and her social mobility.

A few women travel long dis-tances to reach their workplace. They usually travel with their relatives or with women from their own communities. Only Laksmi, a widow of 25, who travels to Old Delhi from Lajpat Nagar to work, does so without censure from the community.

Drunkenness And Wife Beating

The women interviewed spoke freely about many aspects of their lives. They readily informed us that their husbands drank habi-tually, putting aside a small amount for their drink. But they were less forthcoming when questioned about the incidence of wife beating. When asked : "Does your husband beat you ?" they uniformly answered in the negative.

But when one of us put the question differently and asked a group of three women : "What do you do when your husbands beat you ?", they said they were unable to do anything about it. Devaki was beaten frequently by her hus-band for years when he was sitting idle at home, entirely dependent on her wages for survival. She tolerat-ed this until his death a year ago.

They never thought of the possibility of neighbours restraining a man when he is beating his wife. Wife beating is treated as a strictly private affair-little more than a man exercising his right over his wife. The women said if anyone intervened he would say thai he was beating his own wife and nobody had the right to intervene. There was apparently no argument against this.

Sons Or Daughters

When we asked them whether they preferred sons or daughters we encountered a range of answers. There was no ambivalence in their answers but no clearcut preference for children of one gender either. A typical emotional response would be : "Sons and daughters come from the same womb." Most stated matter of factly that they "needed" both.

Even some of those who said that no help and care could be expected from

daughters once they get married, pointed to the special sympathy a daughter shows for her mother. Kulamma said : "A daughter sometimes enquires after a mother's well being. A son only questions the circumstances in which he finds himself and blames his mother for it." She also added that she "prefers daughters but not birthwise."

Chinnapulai began by saying she needs both sons and daughters : "A daughter will look after me and give me a bath when I am ill. But a son will only run away and play. At the most, on my death, he will spend Rs 100. Whereas a daughter even after she marries, will come to nurse me... On my death, I am certain my daughter will weep for 16 days but my son will only throw my body away." She concluded by preferring daughters.

Parvati, who has three daughters and no sons, said that she could be proud since she had daughters but that she had to consider her hus-band's sorrow since he had no son and "boys understand a father's sorrow while girls understand a mother's sorrow."

Though women valued the care and affection given by daughters, there was a desire for sons due to

the social advantages of having sons. As Chelamma says : "It is the son who will inherit the burden of debts after me, just as he will have a right to my savings, if I have any."

Panjavarnam, who has only one daughter, said that a son could have performed the last rites and carried on her husband's and her name. The common refrain was that a daughter will go away while a son will stay to earn and support his parents in their old age.

Indebtedness

A stark fact of their existence is the persistence of indebtedness. Of the 22 households surveyed, 14 are indebted, four have no debts or have repaid their debts while no information is available for the remaining four. Some people incurred debts to survive in times of famine consequent upon failed monsoons; others to meet marriage expenses. Some were driven to indebtedness due to the prolonged illness of a member of the family.

Parvati

The main motivating factor behind migration was the hope, apart from a desire for a better life, of earning enough to repay debts. However, migration itself entailed taking a further loan to cover the passage to Delhi and to tide them over the initial months of unemployment or partial employment.

The rate of interest is very high. If land is mortgaged, the produce from its cultivation, which could be millet or groundnut, serves as the interest.

Once in Delhi, they do succeed in repaying the loans taken in the village and retrieve their land and hut. However, while repaying previous loans, they simultaneously incur fresh debts in Delhi necessitated by their regular visits to their village. Many also undertake long journeys to pilgrim centres where expenditure could include sacrificing a goat and a hen.

Nearly 50 percent of the men work in the railways and are entitled to free passes for their families and themselves. But the trend to visit home once every two or three years is common to all. Most women interviewed, saved towards this end. The cost of the passage of their stay for a fortnight to two months, even when they reside with their relatives, is so high that most have to take a loan. Long after their return to Delhi, they continue to pay instal-ments towards repayment of these loans.

Most of the loans in Delhi are taken from north Indian coworkers or from people from their own community. Several families who have been in Delhi for 10 or more years and are drawing a substantial salary from a permanent government job can afford to lend money.

The rate of interest is usually 10

"What Sort of Life is Our Life?"

Pattu

My name is Pattu. I don't know my age. We are from Kallakurchi taluk in North Arcot district.

I was married at 15. I gave birth to nine children. AH but three died. What can I say how they died ? Does anyone get to know of children's illnesses ? They died at the age of one to four. My eldest child was a son. Second was a daughter. Both died. Third is a girl. She is married and lives with my parents. Fourth and fifth children were daughters. Both died before they were one year old. The sixth child was a son who is now with me in Delhi and the seventh lives with his grandparents. My eighth child was a son. He died after the death of his father. My ninth and last child was a son. He died after coming to Delhi. Don't know what happened. He vomitted a couple of times one morning and died on the way to the hospital.

We had a little land. My husband went to the forest to cut wood. I stayed at home with my children. But after he died four years ago I suffered much hard ship. There was no one to work on the land. I had small children. What could I, a lone woman, do ?

I worked as a landless labourer for four years. I had two buffalos and sold their milk. But that did not work either. People had come to Delhi. I came along 10 months ago with my two sons because our neighbour Parvati was here. I joined her here. She lives with her son. We live in the same hut but cook separately. But I don't pay for staying in the hut. To come to Delhi I mortgaged my thatched hut for Rs 300. I have now retrieved it.

For some months after I came I had only two houses to work in. Now, for the last four months I work in four houses. My son helps me too. Together we earn Rs 350. A large part of it goes on food. I have saved Rs 200 in the last several months. I contri-bute Rs 150 to the chit fund every month. I have to repay the petty debt incurred when I had no money to buy food. When I get the chit fund money I will buy new clothes and visit home.

To date I am indebted for Rs 1,000. When my husband died I fell ill. I had to mortgage the land for my medication. Now I must pay back and retrieve the land.

I get up at 5 a.m, work in two houses and eat at 9 a.m. We hang around till 2.30 p.m., when we have to do the second round of utensils. After that we go home. At home 1 wash the utensils, fetch water and then cook. What we cook at night we bring in the morning for our midday meal.

What can I say whether I like daughters or sons ? Is it in our hands ? People might prefer one to the other. But I would say girls have to live by their labour just like the 'boys. We can't survive without working. A girl goes away to another man's house. Once we are married our parents would not care for us as much.

I will go back and bring my son here too. It is all right even if I die in Delhi. What is one going to do back in the village ? We will do the same work there. We have to struggle to live no matter where we go. Delhi is better. If not one house one can always find another. In the village even if you work every day you cannot save Rs 10. It is better to be here. One can't talk of months there. It is enough if each day passes. What wages does one get there ? They give Rs 2. You have to buy rice and spices with it. Can't take out 10 paise to put aside. And then when one has no work for six months one has to survive on the millet saved earlier.

They are threatening to raze down our *jhonpdi.* Don't know when. We may rent a room for Rs 150. If Parvati is willing I am willing to live with her. We don't help each other much, except that if there is any shortage of a commodity we share it. We, of course, share delicacies with each other whenever we make them.

I am not educated. I have only two children left now. What am I going to get by sending them to school ? Maybe it is good if they go to school.

What sort of life is our life ? And then when we go to sleep at night can we be certain of the morrow ?

(translated from Tamil)

percent on Rs 1,000 per month though it can vary from 5 percent to 25 percent a year. Most migrant families find it hard enough to pay the interest on these amounts and often the principal sum remains un-affected despite steady repayment over several months. Surprisingly, the petty sums borrowed casually from fellow hutment dwellers carried an astronomical rate of interest ; as high as 50 percent. One cannot say with certainty how widespread this practice is but we have Pattu's ac-count of having borrowed Rs 10 for her immediate household expenses and returning Rs 15 the following month.

Income And Expenditure

The family size varies from two to seven with one to four earning members. On an average, there are two earning members and four mouths to feed, in each family. The average income of 22 families sur-veyed was Rs 600. Women domes-tic servants earn Rs 220 on an ave-rage. Men, if employed, earn any-thing between Rs 400 and Rs 800. If the man is unemployed or temporarily laid off, the household runs on the woman's salary. Among women, Veeramma earned the highest—Rs 450.

When the children begin to work, they earn as much as an ave-rage adult. Even young children enable their mother to take on more work by assisting her in the housework.

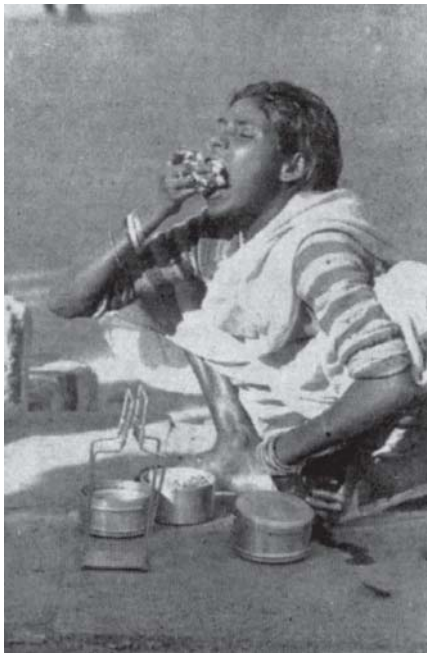
Though the average income of families is Rs 600, a major part of this is spent on food and monthly instalments to the chit fund which is used to repay debts. If a man earns Rs 700, he contributes Rs 300 to-wards the family expenses. Of the rest, he will probably spend nearly half on cigarettes, gambling, liquor, or eating out.

The contribution of the husband towards the family expenditure can-not be taken for granted. He may give Rs 200 one month, Rs 300 the next and virtually nothing the following month. The man usually tries to use up his wife's salary in running the household while he reserves his to contribute towards the chit fund.

Families headed by widows are in a better position to budget, and even manage to save regularly. All men, whether employed or depen-dent on their wife's income, exercise the right to spend on themselves.

But few women ever have any money for personal expenditure.

Depending on the size of the family, 20 to 80 kilos of rice are bought every month. A few have ration cards while others borrow these from their employers to buy rice, sugar and kerosene. This, however, is not always adequate and they have to buy in the open market. A kilo of rationed rice costs Rs 2 to Rs 2.25 and Rs 3 to Rs 3.30 in the open market.



The midday meal

A family spends Rs 5 to Rs 10 daily on buying oil, spices, pulses, soap, kerosene and other sundries. Only a few do daily purchasing. Most buy once a week or every 10 days.

The quality of food consumed by these families is very poor. All of them cook once a day in the evening and bring the leftovers to work, to eat in the afternoon the next day. This food consists of boiled rice and gravy. The gravy could be *sambar* or *rasam*. Vegetables are not generously used since they are expensive. Often, vegetables that are rejected by the main bazaar are sold at the slum colony at cheap rates. If at all any vegetables are used they are half rotted or stale.

What Is A Fair Wage ?

Of the seven women employers interviewed, not one was an employ-ed woman. This is not typical. Maid-servants are generally hired to clean the utensils and sweep and mop the house. The number of rooms is usually four to five including the verandah or balcony. Only house wives with relative ease and affluence or less stamina due to advancing age, engage women to wash clothes. Others wash the clothes themselves.

Most employers hire Tamil domestic labour as it appears to be readily available and not because of any personal preference, although one employer, Nirmal Kanta, said that Tamilians were easier to "handle." When asked to elaborate, she explained that a Tamil maid, with her limited vocabulary and lack of fluency in Hindi, is less likely to answer back or argue for long.

We found great disparity in the wages these employers pay their maidservants. The wage depends less on the family size and work area and more on the relative afflu-ence of a locality and the employer's monthly budget. There was one employer in Defence Colony, a posh locality, who paid her maid Rs 120 for two tasks for a four roomed house and a two member household, while another, whose husband is in private service, paid Rs 55 for a family of four for the same tasks. The latter, when asked how she would react to the maidervant's demand of Rs 80 for two tasks, felt it would disturb her monthly budget and she might have to cut down on their entertainment to be able to absorb the raise.

Yet another factor responsible for the anomaly in wages is the barg-aining power of the maid. A Tamil maidservant who has just joined the community of domestic servants, will accept a lower wage to enter the market. An example of

this was Haijit Kaur's maidservant who had migrated recently and could not speak or understand Hindi. They own a tyre retreading shop and pay the maid Rs 60 for two tasks per-formed twice daily for a family of six and a four roomed house.

The maidservants' idea of a fair wage is Rs 40 for each task. At present, they get Rs 25 to 40 for one, Rs 60 for two and Rs 100 for three tasks. If a maid washes utensils and cleans the premises in one house, she is likely to receive less wages than if she does the first task in one house and the second task in another house. Manufactured goods are cheaper when bought in bulk but to apply this rule to physical labour is atrocious, because the costs in time and energy do not decrease for the maidservant when she does more tasks than one.

Working Conditions

The notion of a fair wage is a subjective one. One Tamil employer, whose husband works in a private concern, pays Rs 55 for cleaning utensils twice daily and cleaning the floors once daily, for a family of four adults and a four roomed house. She tried to prove to us that this was a fair wage because she was not satisfied with the quality of the work. Also, she had raised the wage by Rs 20 three months ago, and maids in Madras charge only Rs 55.

She admitted that to pay the maid more would upset her budget. She said she would increase the wage to Rs 65 only if the quality of work improved and the maid had put in one and a half years.

Kailash Batra who pays Rs 60 for two tasks for a family of two and a four roomed house, said she was merely paying the maid "the prevalent rate." The maid works in her house from 6 a.m. to 7.30 a. m. every day. She felt that Rs 2 a day was a square deal.

Prakash Sethi, who pays her maid, a girl of 13, Rs 100 to perform two tasks for a family of seven, said she thought the wages reasonable but added: "Considering the poverty of these maidservants, these are not sufficient. No wage would be really fair." Her maid had asked for an increase but Prakash refused. She told the maid to do as much work as she can. Prakash and her daughter-in-law do the rest. Prakash's husband and daughter-in-law, both in government jobs, are the two earning members of the family.

Of the seven employers we spoke to, three admitted to getting extra work done by their maids. For this, they usually pay in kind or with a rupee or two in cash. This petty work is not easy to define. A woman employer, when unwell, may ask the maid to wash clothes, grind spices or chop vegetables. Maids often have to cope with unexpected guests.

The maids generally have two hours to spare between their morn-ing and afternoon rounds. The hope of earning an extra rupee or two besides the obligation they feel towards longstanding employers, prompt them to accept extra work. Some maidservants earn about Rs 10 a month for such extra work.

It is customary in many house-holds to give tea and a snack to the maidservant daily, although this is not part of the work contract. But most maids cannot depend on this food, so nearly all of them fetch food from home for their first meal of the day. The dependence on food given by the employer, even if par-tial, renders the maid vulnerable to the vagaries of the employer's moods, and is more often than not related to the availability of left-overs in the employer's kitchen. The employers, without exception, derive satisfaction from occasionally giving food to the maids, and interpret this as an altruistic act.

Only when a maid has worked for at least a year in a household does she ask for a Divali sari. This is one perk that most employers give their Tamil maids, some to respect their sentiments, others because they want to keep the maid satisfied. The objective is to estab-lish a bond apparently outside the purely economic contract, but this bond has in fact a direct bearing on the contract. It is this bond which prevents the maid from opting out of a longstanding job and the employer from dismissing her. But this tie works to the economic disadvantage of the maid because the increments she is given never bring her wage on par with the wage demanded by and given to new ent-rants in the maidservant market.

Most employers would like their maids to feel grateful to them. They subtly use extras to ensure pliancy. When this is not forth-coming, as when a maid refuses to stay overtime to «ope with extra work or unexpected guests, em-ployers are offended. One employer was quick to label them *namak haram* (not true to their salt, un-grateful) and self centred.

Leave

When they take a job, most maidservants agree to take off two days in a month. Most of them said Ihey would like the number of holi-days to be increased to four. The em-ployers say that on an average the maids do take off four days a month. Occasionally, employers threaten to sack servants or deduct wages for the period taken off. In actuality, no one executes this threat. One employer said that four days off would inconvenience the employer and it is after all for their convenience that people hire maids.

Since the upkeep of the house is the responsibility of the housewife, nearly all housewives take on the work of the maidservant on her day off. This means that apart from her daily routine which includes cooking, washing clothes, dusting the house, packing off the children and, husband to work, a housewife has to wash the utensils and sweep and mop the floor.

If there are other women in the family—girl children, daughters-in-law, mother-in-law—there is some likelihood of the work responsibility being shared. One employer said, when she is unwell, she usually gives some other Tamil maid Rs 2 to do the job for that day.

No housewife ever contemplates receiving any help in this work from the male members. Two housewives, living with their husbands, when ask-ed whether they did the entire work of the maidservant on their own, innocently

queried: "But who else is there in the house ?" The husband was never perceived as a potential helpmate by these women.

Prakash Sethi said : "Men are inexperienced in housework so they cannot be asked to help." But she also admits that she herself is to blame for not having inculcated in her sons the habit of sharing the housework—for which her employed daughters-in-law now have to suffer.

The Tamil employer we interviewed said that she did the work on her own the day her maid took leave and she did not "require" help. It seems that women are not willing to own up even to themselves, how much they have to physically exert themselves in order to live up to the image of an efficient housewife.

Most maidservants wanting to take a day off, inform their employers beforehand. This is acceptable to employers. The employers interviewed understood the reasons why maidservants take leave beyond the informally agreed upon two days, or take leave without intimation. This sympathatic reaction was more forthcoming from elderly employers who saw themselves as equally susceptible to sudden illness.

Miss B K Mehta, whose family owns a shoe factory, said that she regularly gave or recommended medicine to her maidservants as this was in her own "self interest." If a maid-servant with a tummy upset or headache is not given timely and preventive medical care, chances are that the ailment will continue and confine the maid to bed for the next few days. "It is in my interest to see that they do not fall ill for long", she explained. The employer from Defence Colony gave milk to her maid when the latter appeared fatigued while another exempted her from mopping the floor or washing the xlothes on some days of the month:

hoisework is the housewife's responsibility, by hiring a maid she is only making another do what she herself would otherwise have to do. Therefore, it is she who has to ensure that the work is done satisfactorily. Many

maidservants view their women employers as hard taskmasters who are constantly complaining about the quality of work and are stingy.

A study of the woman employers showed that most housewives have a tight budget within which they have to spend judiciously. The expenditure on the housework (in the form of wages and the cost of washing powder, broom or detergent) usually takes a back seat to accom-modate essential items like milk, fruit, vegetables for the family. So it is chiefly the housewife who is viewed with hostility by the maid.

Men come into the picture when the matter falls outside the orbit of housework. In one instance, the hus-band of the employer threatened to hit a young maidservant who worked in their house because a gold ring was lost. He heaped filthy abuses on her, threatened to report her to the police and even tried bribing her into disclosing

what she had done with the ring. The woman employer played a passive role in the drama. Since the house and everything in it belongs to the man, he can assume the role of master even when the maidservant has been hired by the housewife and not by the husband.

Employer's Prejudices

A general comment of employers was that Tamil domestic servants are dirty in their appearance. The employers we interviewed said that their maidservants were sufficiently clean but admitted that the girls in their early teens have filthy hands and runny noses. Asked what attempts they had made to ensure their maidservants' personal hygiene, some said they allowed them the use of the bathroom to bathe and wash clothes. Most gave them a separate cake of soap. The young girls were asked to wash their face, hands and feet before beginning to work.

The slum where the women live is half a kilometre from their workplace. Most of them come at 7 a.m. and leave after 4.30 p.m. During the day, when they wish to ease themselves, they usually go to the house of an employer whom they have previously assessed to be leni-ent. A few employers outright refuse the use of their lavatory. One em-ployer said they left it unclean after use. She allowed them to urinate but not to defecate in her lavatory. Another said : "They are also human beings. Being women, we know that they need to use the toilet on some days in the month. I don't forbid her to use it, but ask her to pour pheneol after use."

Quite a few said their maids never used the toilet. They said it was possible the maid used the toilet without letting them know of it. They also said they would not re-fuse such a request. But we got the impression that none of them was willing to grant the use of the toilet as a right to the maid.

Instances of employers having fired maids to replace them by new ones are few, but since the stage for the interaction between the employer and employee is private rather than public, there is scope for harass-ment by the employer in the form of abuses, baseless accusations and frequent dressing down. If many employers get away with such behaviour, it is partly because the maidservant is alone and defenceless and the drama takes place within the four walls of the employer's house.

Some maids did complain of constant heckling by the employers but, by and large, the maidservants and employers somehow mutually understood each other's circumstances. Most maidservants recalled instances of employers' kindness, of stitching clothes for them from cloth given by the maid or giving curd instead of tea if the maid com-plained of an upset tummy. Of the seven employers interviewed, five were very pleased with their maids' work and emphasised that they found them trustworthy.

We wanted to know from the employers whether they knew the conditions which forced these women to migrate from their far off villages to come in search of work. Most admitted that they did make such enquiries. Kailash Sharma, whose husband retired from government service some years ago, said that she had visited her maidservant's slum colony in Trilokpuri when the maid did not report for work for a few days. She found that her maid needed medical care but had not visited the hospital as it would involve some expenditure. She pro-mptly parted with Rs 50 on the spot. She also said that when she confronted the Jife of deprivation these women lead she felt like "filling the gap." She lavished much praise on her maid though at the same time she spoke very critically of Tamil maids in general —of their being belligerent women, prone to using filthy language, dirty, petty thieves and so on. Each time we asked if her maid exhibited any of these qualities, she replied in the negative. The charges were general and her maid was "excellent", and an "exception." "Her care for me exceeds what my mother would lavish upon me", she conceded.

However, the contradiction in what she knew about her Tamil maid from her experience as an em-ployer and the picture of Tamil women which emerged from her strong condemnation of them, was not apparent to her. Her account betrayed a deepseated prejudice not susceptible to logical examination. For instance, she vouched for her maid's cleanliness and took help from her in chopping vegetables. At the same time, she did not permit the maidservant to enter her kitchen though the same maid washes her utensils.

Preference For Delhi

Despite the heavy odds against their living with dignity in Delhi, these women, by and large, wish to continue living here. Returning to the village could well mean "starving to death", as Panjavarnam stated categorically.

Yashoda, who came to Delhi after her marriage two years ago, remembers that in the village they ate only when there was food. When there was none they just went hun-gry. But in Delhi, "There is always food to be had." Chellamma too feels that Delhi at least ensures food and clothing.

But some long for a life in the village where they could live off a piece of land of their own. As Nachi says : "It would be difficult if one had to wash dishes in Delhi for ever. It would be good if we could buy land and run our family in the village." Taya feels that she has to work with her hands for daily wages wherever she goes, and no place offers enough to be able to save for the future.

Women with husbands having permanent jobs with the government do not contemplate leaving Delhi at all. But those women whose hus-bands are still in temporary jobs feel less secure about their future, The same is true of widows. Devaki, who lost her husband a year ago,would have liked to return to the village since she feels that there one can choose not to work for ten days if one is unwell but here one just cannot. In the village one can sur-vive on a rupee but in Delhi one needs not less than Rs 10 for a day's food. But even she does not contemplate leaving Delhi as there is 'no one to support her in the village. It seems

strange that she feels unsupported in her home village where her relatives would be around but more secure in Delhi where she is all by herself. One possible explanation could be that being a widow, her brothers-in-law back home would exercise some control over her movements and activities without a corresponding offer of support.

Valarmadi and Ramchandran have been in Delhi for a year and a half. They had come in the hope of earning enough to repay their debts and making enough money to go home, and are still hope-ful and determined to return in three or four years.

Aspirations And Dreams

Having come to Delhi "to survive", many women have begun to . perceive the drudgery that they have to go through to attain this end. There is a desire for a better deal from life and it is expressed in many ways.

Elamarichi, 15, said she would gladly study if she could, and that this would make her very happy. She said trinkets too make her happy. Lakshmi, 14, who be^an to work at the age of eight, when asked about the number of holidays she would like to have, said that she would like to have a holiday every day but, "If I don't work I won't be paid, and if I am not paid I won't be able to eat. Therefore, I must work."

Valli complained that her pre-sent work was very difficult. She expressed the desire to do some other work if it were possible but she did not specify what she would like to do. Elamarichi believed one could escape hard work if one were educated. "One has to do manual labour to survive if one is not educated."

Yashoda saw the birth of child-ren as the primary source of trouble and jestfully suggested that men and women should be put in two sepa-rate rooms at all times and released only to eat. While dreaming of a life without debts, she visualised a world where all—men, women and children—could live without work-ing, and where money just dropped from the sky to ensure their happi-ness. But she also expressed a desire to be born again—in a family where she would not have to work manu-ally for a living ❐

The Story Of A Humane Policeman

The story of the suspension of assistant subinspector Jugti Ram, provides an insight into one possible reason for the growing tendency of the Indian police to repress their humane instincts. Jugti Ram, who hails from a village in Haryana, has been under suspension, receiving half pay, since November 1984 when he helped rescue and protect some Sikh women and children during the riots.

On November 2, 1984, Jugti Ram was on duty at block 20, Trilokpuri. At about 8 p.m., two men came to request police help to escort about 50 women and children from village Chilla, where they had sought refuge when Trilokpuri was attacked, to a relief camp.

Jugti Ram took the men to DCP Sevadas and ACP Malhotra and asked for a CRP vehicle and some policemen. These officers were not interested in taking action and told Jugti Ram not to act overcoura-geous. When he insisted on the need to go to the rescue of the victims, they told him he could go but on his own responsibility, and warned him that he would risk getting the van burnt.

Jugti Ram proceeded to Chilla, with some junior policemen, and brought the women and children to Kalyanpuri relief camp. After this, he continued on duty all night. But when he reached the police station next morning, he found to his amazement that he had been sus-pended.

The charges against him were vaguely worded as "insubordina-tion" and "indiscipline." Jugti Ram was thoroughly bewildered and pleaded with various authorities, all to no avail. He found himself isolated and ignored. Even his neighbours, because of the generally prevalent mistrust of policemen, think he must have been involved in some corruption case. He and his family face great financial hardship.

The report presented by DCP Sharma, appointed to enquire into the case, found that Jugti Ram is innocent, but he remained under suspension. Many of the women and children whom he rescued and who are now in Tilak Vihar, are ready to give statements, but the police have not approached them.

What is interesting in this case is how speedily the machinery moves to punish anyone who takes initiative in saving lives while it is completely inert when required to restrain those who are bent upon massacre.

Stop **Press** : Jugti Ram was reinstated in July but legal proceedings against him continue.

Without Comment

The following two news items appeared on page 7 of *Indian Express* July 12, 1986 :

India eleventh poorest nation India remains the eleventh poorest country in the world with a per capita gross national product of $ 260—Not only is the country's per capita income one of the lowest, but it is growing at a meagre annual rate of 1.6 percent compared to China (4.5 percent), Sri Lanka (2.9 per-cent) and Pakistan (2.5 percent)... Life expectancy at birth, which is simply the number of years a new-born infant can be expected to live, is placed at 56 years for India as compared to 70 years for Sri Lanka and 69 years for China...

Govt. to import latest revolvers The government is planning to import latest revolvers to equip officers up to the level of assistant subinspector of police. This is a part of the government scheme to equip police and paramilitary forces with the modern weapons... The home ministry is informing the state governments about the avail-ability of sophisticated equipment to enable them to place purchase orders....