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Relatively Autonomous

Jalari Fisherwomen of Andhra Pradesh

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Women being earners does not always ensure that they acquire autonomy in the family and community. This study suggests that Jalari fisherwomen in Andhra Pradesh have relative autonomy in certain areas of life, and that this is linked to the fact that marketing and cash transactions are their domain.

ANDHRA Pradesh has a long coastline along which nearly 300 fishing villages lie scattered. The fishing community consists of three principal caste groups—Jalaris, Vadas and Pallis. These castes have been categorised by government as backward since 1956. Of the three, the Jalaris are considered the most specialised marine fishing caste group. The Jalaris seem to depend solely on fishing for a livelihood while the others have taken to agriculture too, at least as a seasonal occupation.

Our investigation was conducted in Jalariipeta, Visakhapatnam district. This settlement consists of over 1,600 households. Jalari dwellings are circular and conical huts, made of mud and roofed

with palm leaves. A few terraced houses, belonging to the relatively well off, are scattered about. Government is in the process of building low cost houses for the fishermen, after their huts were destroyed in a fire accident two years ago.

The Jalaris' boats lie on the beach. A boat costs anything from Rs 2,000 to Rs 10,000. Although there is a fishing cooperative, the people said they usually raise the amount by taking loans individually. A small boat can be managed by a single person. Bigger ones are run by crews of two to five persons. The owner hires his crew within the colony, generally from his own kin. The crew members are given shares of the day's catch.

Division Of Labour

While the men bring in the catch, the women take over from the shore. Traditionally, women have dealt with commercial transactions. This role of women is not so markedly present in other occupational communities.

Men's job is deemed over once they reach the shore. They do not exhibit any interest in or patience with the subsequent disposal of the fish. When they reach the shore, the women immediately begin sale transactions. While the women are doing the trading, the men go home, bathe, have their rice gruel, take a short nap and then return to the shore to repair any damage to the nets and the boats.

The boats set out early in the morning and begin to return from noon onwards, depending on the season and the day's catch. The women gather under the trees on the beach and look out for the boats. As the boats approach, the children scramble on to them and the women reach out for the rectangular bags of fish.

Either the boat owner's wife or one of his female family members takes possession of the fish. These women are of a relatively higher economic status and the three holed nosering is a sign of their prosperity.

Brisk trading begins immediately. Very soon, the owner's wife finds her bag emptied. The price of the fish is determined by the type of fish, quantity and the season.

After selling her lot, the owner's wife divides the earnings among the boat crew, keeping two shares for her family.

The women who have bought the fish now rush to market with the baskets on their heads. The day's catch has to be sold immediately since there are no cold storage arrangements in the colony. In earlier years, the women used to walk or go by horse cart to market. Now most women go by three wheeler from a nearby stand and a few use the city bus service.

There are no wholesalers. The women sell the fish directly to the consumers. They go to market either in the morning or evening, more frequently in the evening. They return home around 9 p.m. with the day's earnings and the necessary commodities for family consumption.

We observed that in extended families, the older woman—the mother-in-law usually—goes to the marketing while the daughter-in-law attends the house and children. In a nuclear family, the woman has to shoulder a double workload and the oldest female child looks after the younger children while the mother is away.

Elements Of Autonomy

The social structure of the Jalaris' community is clearly patrilocal and patriarchal. The male is recognised as the head of the household. It is important to mention that wife beating does occur. When we asked them about it, the women said: "They are men. Why won't they do it?"

We observed that although women do have a say in the family, they do not have much of a say at the community level. The headman is always a man. The panchayats held to resolve family disputes or to discuss improvement of services, and the delegation sent to the authorities to complain of delay in construction of their houses, are composed of men.

However, there are certain elements in a Jalaris' woman's life which contribute to her relative autonomy as compared to the female poor of other communities.

For most poor women in India, the division of labour by gender within the household is not very responsive to women's participation in productive

labour. The woman carries a double workload but this does not necessarily lead to greater say in decision making or to equal sharing in family resources.

Another factor that hinders poor women from deriving autonomy from their earning capacity is the restrictions and harassment they face when they operate in male dominated marketplaces. Lessinger's 1983 study of women vegetable vendors in Madras, published in **Manushi** No. 28, found that the cause of the pressure of seclusion norms, women vendors "stick to the techniques of carrying out interactions in public view and working alongside other women or kinsmen" even though this inhibits their business capacity.

Jalari women's economic role departs in some respects from the dominant cultural pattern. Although the women do carry the double burden of housework and economic work, the men appear to recognise the contribution of women. Women's work is very visible because the immediate sale of fish is crucial to the family's survival.

Specifically, the fact that women handle the cash and bring it home, whereas men engage in almost no monetary dealings except those related to the boat, translates into more voice in decision making for women at the family level, although not at the community level. The woman plans family expenditure and buys the necessary commodities daily, weekly or monthly, depending on the family's economic level. She even buys the bait necessary for fishing. She wakes before dawn and travels seven kms by three wheeler to buy fresh bait.

If loans are necessary, she raises them and plans the budget so as to repay them. The men do not interfere in the domestic budget neither do women appear to brook any such interference. Men have to ask women for money for personal expenditure like going to the cinema or drinking. Thus, the family is equally dependent on women's financial and managerial capacities.

At the city markets too, Jalari women stand out distinctly of their aggressive



bargaining and shrewd business sense. The norm of female seclusion, which generally handicaps women's trading, does not appear to operate on Jalari women. In fact, while the women are aggressive, articulate and expressive, men tend to spend their time quietly in their nets and boats, and hardly ever venture out of colony.

Social Patterns

Jalari women, with very few exceptions, are illiterate and although there is a municipal primary school in the colony, attendance is sparse and sporadic. The women were unequivocal in their opinion that education was of no use either to men or women since their access to jobs is very limited. They cited the cases of the handful of college educated boys in the colony who are waiting for suitable employment and are reluctant to take to fishing.

The women also vehemently said that

Getting ready to go to market with their baskets of fish

literacy was of no use to them personally since it could not provide them with economic opportunities. They said they carried on their trade successfully without having learnt to write or count at school.

Thus, women were not uninvolved in the decision not to send children to school. At all times of the day, we saw the boys aged below 10 playing in the water or trying to catch small fish near the shore while the older boys helped their fathers with the nets and other tools. The girls clustered around their mothers, watching the hectic bargaining, and sometimes accompanied them to market.

The female child is not considered a liability by Jalaris and there did not appear to a marked preference for sons. This is reflected in the virtual absence of dowry system. Said Sattamma, mother of four: "We do not buy our household and hearth,

as you people do." The marriage expenses are borne by the groom's family and the ceremony is performed at his house. A few women did report however, that recently, some families have taken to asking for a certain amount of gold from the bride's family.

Widow remarriage is permitted as also remarriage of a divorcee. If a couple decides to separate, the local headman calls a meeting and if attempts at reconciliation fail, a compensation up to a maximum of Rs 3,000 is levied on the wronged party, whether man or woman.

There are three types of marriage — the marriage arranged by parents which is performed with much fanfare, the marriage arranged by the man and woman when they take a liking to each other, and the *ammavaru* marriage where the groom ties the *thali* around the bride's neck in the presence of the community deity and a few close relatives, but no one else is invited

and there is no feast.

In all three forms, the bride seemed to exercise a fair degree of freedom of choice in selection of a partner. Women of the family also seemed equally involved in the decision as did the men.

It is interesting that a comparative survey conducted in 1962 of the three Jalari

colonies in Visakhapatnam city found that in contrast to Pedda Jalaripeta, the other two colonies had a fair number of men, employed as industrial workers who did not engage in fishing. These men controlled the purse, and the women of their families had hardly any say in the management of the household. The woman

of Pedda Jalaripeda, on the other hand was considered an asset to the family owing to her crucial economic role.

It seems, therefore, that as long as fishing remains the principal source of livelihood for the Jalaris in this settlement, women will continue to hold a significant position in the household economy.



The Veil

She is only a child, why ask her?
So, on the wedding day too, we did not ask her,
Having arranged the match
With a prosperous family.

They were all there—
Young and old, neighbours and friends—
And when it was time to leave,
She cried.
We also cried.
Perhaps she cried.
For love of her parental home,
Or—was it perhaps—disstaste?

When we were adorning her, that day,
She said she was afraid.
We assured her
It was only shyness of the unknown.

She insisted she would sleep
With mother or sister
We told her that this was wrong.

Yet, at the door
Of the room clouded with incense,
Camphor, myrrh,
She resisted again.
We pushed her in the bolted the door.
She must have called out,
Wept,
Knocked at the door.
But we did not let her out.
We spent the night guarding the room
With many a joke and repartee.
Was it—perhaps—force?

That day
When she was weeping beside his corpse
We repeated the same things,
Decked her again as a bride.
She ascended the perfumed
Sandalwood pyre,
Holding a pitcher,
Just as she had entered the bridal chamber,
Holding a glass of milk.

With her husband's head in her lap
Maybe she cried
Maybe she screamed
Her voice was drowned
In the shouts of 'Sati Mata Ki Jail'

And we, outside, Imagining the scene on that earlier night,
Lost ourselves
In a circle of swords.
Swear by the smiling face,
Now cordoned off,
Encircled,
Lost—
Was—it perhaps—murder?

—Chandra Mallika
(translated from Telugu)