

Socio-Economic Status of Coir Workers in Kerala

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Abstract

1. Problem :The coir industry is an agro-based and labor-intensive traditional industry that originated in the state of Kerala which provides livelihood to nearly 3.7 lakh people and contributes significantly to poverty eradication by providing employment opportunities to semi-skilled and unskilled people in rural areas of which 80% of them are women. Hence it is important to understand the socio-economic conditions of coir workers in Kerala. The broad objectives of this study are to examine the socio-economic status of coir workers, to analyze the income and consumption pattern of coir workers, and to identify the problems of coir workers and some suggested measures to resolve them in Kerala. **2. Approach:** The study was based on both primary data and secondary data collected through a random sampling method from 250 coir workers from the Alappuzha, Kollam, and Kottayam districts where the majority of coir workers exist. Analysis of data is carried out by cross tab, chi-square test, and t-test. Secondary data is obtained from various sources like books, journals, articles, government publications, etc. **3. Findings :**It is found that 86% of coir workers are women and 44% of the workers belong to the age group of 50-60. The social classification of the coir workers shows that 42% of the coir workers belong to OBC followed by 28% of the General category. The educational attainment of the coir workers reveals that 42.4% of the coir workers have only primary schooling. It is found that 32% of coir workers receive a monthly income between Rs.1500 to Rs.20000. It also shows that the majority (76%) of the coir workers have debt burdens. There are 62% of respondents who depend on banks for debt. The causes of debt are house construction (44%), education of their children (16%), and marriage purposes (13%). The study also reveals that there are 45.6% of coir workers who have defaulted their loans. It also shows that 38% of the coir workers have more than ten years of work experience and 38% of the coir workers face health issues like back pain and allergy. **4. Conclusion:** The study found that there is a significant difference between male and female workers on per capita expenditure on food and nonfood expenditure. The per capita expenditure on non-food items by female workers is greater than that of food expenditure by them and per capita expenditure on non-food items by male workers. The workers in the coir industry face a wide range of issues, including a lack of raw materials, unpaid pay, lack of market demand, lack of government backing, lack of modernization, and lack of value-added goods. Due to their inadequate educational background, they are even unable to pursue alternative employment opportunities. Therefore, the government and other officials need to come up with some solutions to the problems facing the coir workers. Otherwise, they will have a sad existence.

Keywords: 1. Socioeconomic conditions, 2. Income and consumption pattern, 3. Debt burden, 4. Health issues, 5. Defaulter, 6. Production problems, 7. Coir industry

Introduction

The coir industry is an agro-based traditional industry that originated in the state of Kerala. It is a labor-intensive and second only to agriculture as a source of employment in Kerala. Coir is a coarse fibre extracted from the husk, the fibrous outer shell of coconut. Ropes and cordage made out of coconut fibre have been in use since ancient times. Indian navigators, who sailed the seas to Malaya, Java, China, and the Gulf of Arabia centuries ago, had been using coir as their ship's cables. Matting and other floor coverings were started on an Indian factory basis over a hundred and fifty years ago when the first factory was set up in Alappuzha in 1859. It is an export-oriented industry having the potential to enhance exports by value addition through technological interventions. Coir products are in great demand in the domestic markets as well as in foreign markets.

Coir and coir products make good progress in the domestic as well as international market because of their unique qualities of durability, biodegradability, and eco-friendliness. Exports of coir pith, tufted mats, geotextiles, coir rugs, and carpets registered growth in terms of value and volume. Products such as coir yarn, handloom mats, rubberized coir, and power loom matting showed a decline in volume but an increase in value. Coir pith, with export earnings of 1,349.63 crore, constituted 49 % of the total export of coir products from the country in the last financial year. Value-added products constituted 33%. Coir is a 100% organic and biodegradable fiber that has great water absorption and a definite edge over synthetic geotextiles in terms of environmental aspects and issues.

Kerala accounts for 61 per cent of coconut production and about 85 per cent coir products in India. The coir industry continues to be a major cottage industry in the state of Kerala because it provides livelihood to nearly 3.7 lakh people. The coir industry in Kerala has been segmented into five divisions such as household, co-operative, private, public and export sectors. The workers and small producers fully engaged in this industry neither have adequate capital nor any organisation to support their common cause. Since coir is a labour-intensive and export-oriented industry, the government has also played a vital role in reviving the lost fame of the traditional Indian industry by introducing various schemes and programmes to promote it.

Statement of the Problem

The Coir industry contributes significantly to poverty eradication by providing employment opportunities to semi-skilled and unskilled people in rural areas. Coir Sector is a major traditional sector of Kerala in terms of the employment generation and foreign exchange earnings. The coir industry continues to be a major cottage industry in the state of Kerala because it provides livelihood to nearly 3.7 lakh people and about 80% of them are women. The industry employs vast numbers of disempowered social sections, mostly from the lower castes and outcasts. An overwhelming majority of them are women. The women are mainly involved in the yarn-spinning sector and the men in the product-weaving sector. This highlights the importance of this sector for Kerala's economy. The relatively low wages in the traditional coir sector and the shortage of raw materials are challenges facing the industry. The majority of the coir workers are women; they work under inferior working conditions. Kerala accounts for 85% of the total production of coir in the country and

supplies coir value-added products to all parts of the country.

The COVID-19 pandemic adversely affected the livelihoods of coir workers. Coir products have piled up at coir units due to large cancellations of orders and a decline in exports. However, in the present globalised scenario, like any other industry, the coir industry is also prone to problems and constraints. In light of the growth prospectus of the industry, the development of coir industry workers is considered to be the most important for the prosperity of the coir industry. Therefore it is important to understand the socio-economic conditions of coir workers in Kerala.

Objectives of the study

The broad objective of this study is to know the socio-economic status of coir workers in Kerala. The major objectives of the study are-

1. To examine the socio-economic conditions of coir workers in Kerala.
2. To analyze the income and consumption pattern of coir workers.
3. To identify the problems of coir workers and some suggested measures to resolve them.

Methodology

The study was based on both primary data and secondary data for the purpose of understanding the socio-economic conditions of workers in the coir industry. Primary data is collected from 250 samples from Alappuzha, Kollam and Kottayam districts where the majority of coir workers exist. The selection of respondents was done through a random sampling method. Primary data has been collected through a structured schedule and personal interviews. Analysis of data is carried out by cross tab, chi-square test, and t-test. Secondary data is obtained from various sources like books, journals, articles, government publications etc.

Findings of the study

The data collected are classified and tabulated. The tables are scientifically explained. The Interpretations of the data are given with skill and neatly.

Gender Classification

The respondents' gender is explained in table 1. A significant majority of the coir workers are female (86%). In the household production unit, women make up 96% of the labour force, with men making up the remaining 4%. In the Kottayam district, women make up 76 percent of the labour force, while men make up only 24 percent. Women make up the vast bulk of the coir labourers. The conclusion is that the coir industry is dominated by women.

Table 1: Gender Wise Classification of the Respondents

Coir workers	Gender		Total
	Male	Female	
Alappuzha	9 (10%)	81 (90%)	90 (100%)
Kottayam	8 (11.5%)	62 (88.5%)	70 (100%)
Kollam	18 (20%)	72 (80%)	90 (100%)
Total	35 (14%)	215 (86%)	250 (100%)

Source: primary data

Age composition of coir workers

The age distribution of coir workers is shown in the table. The age range of 51 to 60 years is represented by the majority of coir employees (48%). Only the group of domestic workers includes employees over the age of 70. Only 10% of the workforce is made up of workers who are between the ages of 30 and 40. The size of the youngage group is small, as evidenced by this.

Table 2: Age Composition of Respondents

Age group	Total
30-40	30 (12%)
41-50	70 (28%)
51-60	110 (44%)
61-70	30 (12%)
Above 70	10 (4%)
Total	250 (100%)

Source: Primary data

Social Classification

The socioeconomic classification of the respondents is explained in the below table. The

vast majority of the coir workers are from OBC category (42%), 20% from the OEC, 25 % from the SC/ST, and 28% from the general group. The respondents from forward community are quitelow.

Table 3: Social Classification of Respondents

Type of coir workers	Social Classification				Total
	General	OBC	OEC	SC/ST	
Male workers	10 (28.5%)	15 (42.8%)	5 (14.2%)	5 (14.2%)	35 (100%)
Women workers	60 (27.9%)	90 (41.8%)	45 (20.9%)	20 (9.3%)	215 (100%)
Total	70 (28%)	105 (42%)	50 (20%)	25 (10%)	250 (100%)

Source: Primary data

Education Qualification

In the table 4 shows the educational qualification of the respondents. Majority (42%) of the respondents are Primary level qualified. It is clear that lack of education leads to lacking opportunity in other sphere of employment and they joined in the group of coir workers.

Table 4: Educational Qualification of Respondents

Type of coir workers	Educational attainment			Total
	Primary level	Highschool	Higher secondary	
Male workers	16 (45.7%)	10 (28.5%)	9 (25.7%)	35 (100%)
Female workers	90 (41.8%)	75 (34.9%)	50 (23.3%)	215 (100%)
Total	106(42.4%)	85 (34%)	59 (23.6%)	250 (100%)

Source: Primary data

Land ownership

In the table 5 shows the two-sample t test conducted on land ownership between male workers and female workers. The mean land holdings of male workers are 40 cents and female workers are 21 cents. The conclusion emerged from the t-test is that the average land holdings of the male workers exceed female workers but not significant.

Table 5: Two Sample T-Test for Equality of Means

Variable	Type of coir workers	Number of Observation	Mean	Std. Deviation	't' value	Significance
Land holdings	Male orkers	35	39.64	54.668	1.491	.143
	Female workers	215	20.88	31.167		

Source: Primary data

Type of family

The majority of the respondents live in a nuclear family (90%) and the remaining 10% have joint family system.

Type of house

The sort of home that the respondents are living are classified as the majority of respondents (58%) live in concrete homes, whereas the remaining respondents (42%), live in thatched-roofed homes. Basic amenities are lacking in thatched homes. It demonstrates the type of unclean lifestyle that the respondents lead.

Monthly family income

The distribution of coir workers' monthly earnings reveal that the majority (34%) of coir workers earn between Rs 1,501 and Rs 20,000 per month. Only 10% of workers earn more than Rs 20,000 each month.

Debt liability

The respondents' debt liability shows that majority of the respondents (76%) have debt, whereas the remaining respondents (24%), do not have any liabilities. This demonstrates that they solely use credit to get by.

Debt sources

For borrowings, the majority of respondents (62%) rely on banks. Only 2% of borrowers rely on SHGs for borrowing. 12 percent of respondents depend on payday lenders as a source of debt, while the remaining 24 percent did not rely on any of these sources for borrowing.

Table 6: Debt Sources of Respondents

Type of coir workers	Debt Sources				Total
	None	Bank	Moneylenders	SHGs	
Male workers	7 (20%)	24(68.5%)	3(8.6%)	1(2.9%)	35(100%)
Female workers	50 (23.2%)	117(54.5%)	48(22.3%)	Nil	215(100%)
Total	57 (22.8%)	141(56.4%)	51 (20.4%)	1(0.4%)	250 (100%)

Source: Primary data

Purpose of debt

The purposes of the respondents' debt are such that 13.2 percent of respondents overall have debt related to the marriage of their children, 44 percent have debt related to building their homes, 16.4 percent have debt related to their children's schooling, 3.6 percent have debt related to other necessities, and the other 22.8 percent do not have any debt.

Table 7: Purpose of Debt

Type of purposes	Type of coir workers		Total
	Male workers	Female workers	
None	7 (20%)	50 (20%)	57 (22.8%)
Education of children	6 (17.1%)	35 (16.3%)	41 (16.4%)
House construction	15 (42.8%)	95 (44.2%)	110 (44%)
Marriage of children	5 (14.3%)	28 (13%)	33 (13.2%)
Others	2 (5.7%)	7 (3.2%)	9 (3.6%)
Total	35 (100%)	215 (100%)	250 (100%)

Source: Primary data

Debt repayment status

The majority (45.6%) report default payments. 31.6% of the total respondents are in prompt repayment status, while 22.8 % of the respondents are debt-free. This demonstrates their inability to escape the grasp of local bankers and money lenders. They are heavily indebted and caught in a debt cycle.

Savings

The vast majority of the respondents have savings (73.6%), and the remaining 26.4 percent (or respondents) have no savings. The majority of coir workers are conscious of the value of saving money

Pattern of saving

30.8 percent of respondents have savings in SHGs, 24 percent have savings in chit funds, 18.8 percent have savings in banks, and the remaining 26.4 percent have no savings. This demonstrates that women make up the majority of coir workers and that they have SHG savings.

Table 8: Pattern of savings

Pattern of saving	No. of respondents	
	Frequency	Percentage
Bank	47	18.8
SHG	77	30.8
Chit funds	60	24
None	66	26.4
Total	250	100

Source: Primary data

Work experience

The timeline for their involvement in this industry is displayed in the table below. The majority of respondents have been doing this for five to ten or more years. This indicates that they have the necessary skill and had been working in this field since they were young.

Table 9: Years of Work Experience

Type of coir Workers	Work experience			Total
	Below 5 years	5-10 years	More than 10 years	
Male worker	4 (8%)	8 (40%)	23 (52%)	35 (100%)
Female workers	30 (40%)	65 (36%)	120 (24%)	215 (100%)
Total	34 (24%)	73 (38%)	143 (38%)	250 (100%)

Source: Primary data

Working days and coir welfare board benefits

All coir workers are the members in the coir welfare board. The coir workers are assigned 3 to 6 days of work per week. The majority of responders (50%) have 6 days of work, while 22% have 5 days, 8% have 4 days, and the remaining 20% have 3 days. Compared to domestic workers, the coir society employees work more days each week. 36% of respondents said they had never gotten any aid from the Coir Welfare Board. The remainder of the responders have benefited from things like educational grants, marriage counselling, pensions, and health care support.

Health issues

The prevalence of chronic illnesses is higher among respondents who are household members. Additionally, only workers in the coir industry are reported to be predisposed to skin illness. Both the domestic employees and the coir society workers experienced allergies and back pain. The majority of coir workers (56%) experience health problems.

Table 10: Health Issues of Respondents

Type of coir Workers	Type of Diseases					Total
	Allergy	Back pain	Skin diseases	Others	None	
Male workers	16 (45.7%)	7 (20%)	Nil	2 (5.7%)	10 (28.6%)	35 (100%)
Female workers	67 (31.1%)	87 (40.4%)	10 (4.6%)	Nil	51 (23.7%)	215 (100%)
Total	83 (33.2%)	94 (37.6%)	10 (4%)	2 (0.8%)	61 (24.4%)	250 (100%)

Source: Primary data

The chi-square test is employed to find out the association between the health issues of male workers and female workers. The value of the chi-square statistic (X^2 , 4, N=250) = 3.592, $P=.464$ with four degrees of freedom is 3.592 which is not significant. Hence there is no association between the health issues of male workers and female workers

Personal problems

The study shows that the majority (78%) of coir workers experience personal issues. The major personal issues faced by the workers are health issues (56%) and lack of family support (22 %). The remaining 22 percent of respondents have no personal issues.

Production problems

The major problems related to production faced by coir workers are lack of raw materials (44%), lack of training (14%), poor quality of raw materials (12%) etc. Only the domestic employees exhibit a lack of infrastructure. The chi-square test is employed to find out the association between the production problems of male workers and female workers. The value of the chi-square statistic (X^2 , 5, N=50) =14.620, P= .012) with 5degree of freedom is 14.620 which is significant. Hence there is a significant relationship between the production problems of male workers and female workers.

Job loss situation

The table foretells that the coir employees will lose their jobs during the time of COVID-19. The table shows that throughout the Covid-19 era, 100% of respondents experienced employment loss. Both the household and the coir society unit's coir workers experienced job loss.

1. Hypothesis

H₀: There is no significant difference in the expenditure on food and non-food items of male workers and female workers.

H₁: There is a significant difference in the expenditure on food and non-food items of male workers and female workers.

Table 11: Two sample 't' Test for Equality of Means

Variable	Category	No. of Observations	Mean Value	Std. Deviation	't' value	Significance
Per capita monthly expenditure on food	Male workers	35	4160	1498.054	.387	.701
	Female workers	215	4020	1015.300		
Per capita annual	Male workers	35	11644	3774.705	-3.181	.003

expenditure on non-food	Female workers	215	14996	3676.670		
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Source: Primary data

The conclusion that emerged from the test is that there is no significant difference in the monthly per capita expenditure on food of the respondents in male workers and female workers and the per capita annual expenditure on non-food is significantly higher in the case of female workers as compared to male workers at 5 percent level of significance.

Findings of the Study

1. It is found that 86% of coir workers are women and it is similar to findings of the studies conducted by many researchers. The analysis of the age group of the coir workers reveal that 44% of the workers belong to the age group of 50-60. The percentage of young workers are only 12%.
2. The study of the social classification of the coir workers show that 42% of the coir workers belong to OBC followed by 28% of General category. The share of SC and ST among the coir workers is less than 10%.
3. The educational attainment of the coir workers reveals that 42.4% of the coir workers have only primary schooling. There are 34% of respondents with high school education and only 23% have secondary education.
4. The study examined the monthly income of the coir workers and there are 32% of coir workers who receive a monthly income between Rs.1500 to Rs.20000. It also shows that majority (76%) of the coir workers have debt burden. There are 62% of respondents who depend on banks for debt. The causes of debt is for house construction (44%), education of their children (16%) and for marriage purposes (13%). The study also reveals that there are 45.6% of coir workers who have defaulted their loans.
5. It also shows that 38% of the coir workers have more than ten years of work experience and 38% of the coir workers face health issues like back pain and allergy.
6. The study also found that there is a significant difference between male and female workers on per capita expenditure on food and nonfood expenditure. The per capita expenditure on non-food items by female workers are greater than that of food expenditure by them and per capita expenditure on non-food items by male workers.

Recommendations of the study

The in-depth analysis of the socio-economic conditions of the coir workers has led to the following recommendations. In light of the foregoing analysis and findings, the following suggestions can be made to improve the conditions of the coir workers.

1. The government should give necessary and adequate training to the workers to increase the efficiency of the workers.
2. Efforts must be taken to strengthen product diversification and modernization of the coir sector.
3. The modernization in the industry will attract more young people into the industry and

increase the level of confidence among the workers.

4. For the purpose of identifying and treating workers' health difficulties, the Coir Welfare Board should host a free health camp.

5. The coir workers are to be provided with basic amenities and welfare schemes.

Conclusion

The study was intended to analyze the socio-economic conditions of coir workers in Kerala. The male workers and female workers are two categories of coir labourers. In many ways, coir society workers are better off than household coir workers. Workers in the coir society put in more workdays and hours than household workers. Male Workers in the coir society earn more wages than household female workers do. The majority of the coir workers are older than 50. They started doing this work when they were younger. Although the status of coir workers has improved since before, full empowerment has not yet occurred. Only a small percentage of the workers in the coir industry is taking advantage of the many welfare programmes that the government and coir welfare board have developed. Worker productivity increases as a result of mechanization. Apart from this, workers in the coir industry face a wide range of issues, including a lack of raw materials, unpaid pay, lack of market demand, lack of government backing, lack of modernization, and lack of value-added goods. Due to their inadequate educational background, they are even unable to pursue alternative employment opportunities. Therefore, the government and other officials need to come up with some solutions to the problems facing the coir workers. Otherwise, they will have a sad existence.

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