

Chapter 3, excerpted from:

Franke, Richard W. 1993. *Life is a Little Better: Redistribution as a Development Strategy in Nadur (Panjal) Village Kerala*. Page numbers do not correspond exactly. Literature references are to the bibliography in the main book.

[Back to Panjal Intro Page](#)

[To Global Exchange Tour Main Page](#)

## 3

---

# Panjal Village

Kerala's capital city is Thiruvananthapuram (Trivandrum). From most of its hotel terraces or housetop gardens one can see in microcosm Kerala's 3 major geographical regions that we introduced in Chapter 2: the coast, the midlands, and the mountains, each a narrow strip running north-south for the 576 kilometers length of the state, which lies between 8 and 12 degrees north latitude. Looking due west to the Arabian Sea, one's eyes are drawn to an unbroken mass of coconut trees, their bright green leaves in rounded tops one next to the other. They are thick and almost uniform in shape and size, each tree about 100 feet high, some standing straight, others at nearly a 45 degree angle, bending gracefully over streets and housetops or towards the water's edge.

When one looks to the south or towards the central and northern parts of Kerala, the endless mass of coconut tops continues, up and down the beach as far as the eye can see. To the south is Kanyakumari (Cape Comorin), 86 kilometers distant where the Indian subcontinent gives way to the Indian Ocean on multicolored beaches. To the north, one sees Kerala's narrow alluvial coastline, only a few kilometers wide. The soil is rich and supports a substantial harvest of rice and coconuts. Farther up the coast, at Alleppey, the sea invades the land at many points, creating backwaters where boats are the main form of transportation and long canal-like seaways are dotted with the retting piles of coconut husks that are left for 6 to 9 months in the salt water and then dug

out and scraped clean for the fibers that are spun into rope and woven into mats. Kerala's coir, or coconut fiber, industry, was one of its 19th century attractions to British and American investors, but today the industry languishes because of the competition from synthetic fibers. Farther north, the alluvial coastline is known as the Malabar coast, one of Kerala's most ancient areas of contact with the outside.

Farther east one sees the central strip of Kerala, a series of low laterite plateaus from 62 to 185 meters alternating with hills and valleys. In the valleys more rice is grown, while on the hillsides one finds gardens of coconut, bananas, pepper, ginger, jack fruit and mango. Cashew nuts and rubber are also grown in this area which extends most of the length of Kerala. Until recently the hills were covered with large patches of forest. Elephants carried lumber and wild pigs and deer could be hunted. Today, most of these forest areas have been cut for crop land. Some areas have been denuded by impoverished peasants or workers turned forest wood gatherers. These areas are now a source of soil erosion. Unlike most of India, which uses cow dung for fuel, Kerala cooks with wood fires. In this central region, a day's journey to the north, lies Panjal Village.

Farthest towards the east, stand the magnificent Ghat ("step") mountains. Peaks rise to more than 2,300 meters and harbor important temple and pilgrimage sites for the state's 60% Hindu population. The mountains were formerly the home of various tribal groups. During the 19th century these mountains were intensively developed by British tea and coffee plantation investors. Like the hillsides of the central strip, the mountains today are seriously denuded of their tree cover, and may be losing soil at a rapid rate. In 1905, 44% of Kerala was forested. By 1965 this had dropped to 27%, in 1973 to 17%, and in 1983 to only 7-10%. Experts fear that Kerala's decreasing rainfall may be due to the loss of mountain forests. Average rainfall has declined from the 1960s through the 1980s. Soil studies seem to confirm severe erosion in the Ghats. Kerala's once abundant water supply may have been destroyed by intensive 19th century capitalist plantation production combined with the desperate search for income from firewood sales by impoverished peasants and workers (Kannan and Pushpangadan 1988:A125-A126).

To get to Panjal, one can best take the train. Although Kerala's road length of 2,010 kilometers per 1,000 square kilometers is 5 times the all-India average and nearly twice the nearest competitor state of West Bengal (Westley 1986:313), congestion and the many forms of traffic make bus and taxi

commuting both slow and dangerous. Kerala has the highest road accident rate in India.

Half an hour north of Thiruvananthapuram's Central Station we arrive at Varkala. Along the tracks some of Kerala's homeless squatters have put up cardboard shanties. Behind these are sturdier structures, and a central business district. Just down one of the main streets to the east, in front of a row of high hills, we see a sparkling dome of an unusual looking temple.

This is the burial site of Sri Narayana Guru, Kerala's great early 20th century social reformer and founder of the Ezhava Caste Improvement Association, described in Chapter 4. Narayana Guru is commemorated at this large temple. All across Kerala one finds smaller neighborhood shrines with a seated figure of the guru inside and his famous slogan —"One Caste, One God, One Religion for Mankind" — painted outside.

An hour later, at Tiruvalla, north of the ancient coastal city of Quilon, the tracks turn inward and the train moves slowly along the edges of the central hill area, bypassing Aleppey and the heart of the lowland rice and coconut backwaters area. After 4 1/2 hours, it arrives at Ernakulam-Cochin, Kerala's major port, a city of more than 750,000 people, and, after 2 more hours, it reaches Thrissur (Trichur), the "town of the name of sacred Siva" (GOK 1962:1), a major tile producing industrial town and a center of traditional high caste Nambudiri Brahmin culture.

The Thrissur area contains some of Kerala's most ancient sites, known back to at least Roman times. Historians equate the ancient pepper and cinnamon port of Muziris with the modern Thrissur coastal town of Cranganore (Kodungallur) (Menon 1984:49). A little farther up the coast, near the town of Chavakkad, one comes to the Palayur Church. According to Kerala tradition, it was founded in 52 A.D. by the Apostle St. Thomas, making it one of the oldest Christian communities in the world. Nearby are the remains of a Jewish synagogue.

In Cranganore, one also finds the Cheraman Juma Masjid, or mosque. Built in 629 A.D. as an extension to a Hindu temple, it is considered the oldest mosque in India. The founder, Cheraman Perumal, is said to have met the prophet Mohammed on a trading mission to Jeddah where he was converted to Islam. (GOK 1980:41)

A few kilometers distant stands Guruvayur temple, one of the most famous in India. This temple is more than 6 centuries old, with sculptures of heads of elephants and bulls, and fresco paintings depicting the adventures of the Hindu *avatar* Arjuna (GOK 1981:38). In 1931 Guruvayur was the site of a famous

*satyagraha* or “truth struggle” which involved the Indian nationalist leader Mahatma Gandhi. Low caste Hindus and their high caste supporters pressed for the opening of the temple to all castes. This was finally achieved in 1946 (GOI 1966:82). Guruvayur Temple hosts almost continuous prayer services and festivals and is a popular place for expensive marriages and celebrations of other major life cycle events for Hindus from throughout India.

From Thrissur the train continues north through the central midlands of Kerala. In the low areas are rice paddies, flanked as always, by coconut trees, but many of the hillsides have lost their tree cover. Thirty minutes north of Thrissur, we arrive at the Shoranur railway junction.

Now it is time for a bus or taxi ride to Panjal. The asphalt highway winds out of town towards the southeast and crosses over the *Bharatapuzha* river to the south. During the major monsoon of June to August, the Bharatapuzha is a giant muddy wash; in the late dry season from March through May the river dies down to a thin, clear stream in the sandy bottom. Trucks descend to the river bed to retrieve sand for concrete mixing. *Mahoots* lead their elephants into the pools of the wet bottoms where the giant animals are coaxed to lie down sideways to be brushed and scrubbed clean.

Across the bridge one passes a long series of shops, schools, and a hospital. As in so much of Kerala, the street bustles with the activity of small vendors with their metal pots hanging out in front of their shops. In the air are the pungent smells spices and, of meat hanging under the rafters of the butcher counters, of a large pile of limes standing next to a blender in which various fruit drinks can be concocted. At the right time of day, what seem to be thousands of students pour from the school ground on their way home. Many walk, while others with longer trips stand at the bus stops.

The drive continues south, passing the *Kerala Kalamandalam*, a traditional dance and music school established by the state’s famous poet Vallathol Narayana Menon. Vallathol (1878-1958) was a man of many talents. He translated the *Rigveda* and *Ramayana* from Sanskrit into Malayalam. He wrote fiery nationalist poems including an homage to Mahatma Gandhi. He also strove to preserve and enrich the traditional arts of *Mohiniattam* [a folk dance genre] and *Kathakali*, Kerala’s most famous dance-opera with its intricate movements, elaborate costumes, and plots from traditional Hindu literature. The Kalamandalam today is a major training center for Kerala’s

thriving traditional dance and music scene. Its students come from many parts of India as well as from Europe to learn the highly disciplined dance routines of ancient Kerala.

### Entering Panjal

A few kilometers south of the Kalamandalam, a large open field appears at a road junction. Here on Tuesdays is an animal market. It is surrounded by various house compounds enclosed in plaster walls on which are painted the ever-present Kerala political slogans and drawings including numerous hammers and sickles of Kerala's 2 major Communist Parties.

At the junction, the vehicle turns east toward the mountains. After a kilometer, the road becomes choppy and wet; a water pipe alongside has been broken for some time. We are entering the Moslem neighborhood at the western edge of Panjal. Women in brightly colored patterned skirts and blouses with colorful lacy scarves over their heads are lined up at a faucet. Each holds 1 or more aluminum pots that come to nearly a close at the top and then open again with a wide pouring mouth. These pots allow the women to carry water for long distances without spilling. If it is late in the dry season, many have walked 1 or 2 kilometers to the road from more inland house sites for a few liters of water for drinking and washing. Some are accompanied by young girls; men and boys rarely carry water.

We see a *madrassa*, a religious school on one side of the road. Although the Moslems in this part of Kerala are poor, many attempt to offer Arabic education to their children. For those who cannot pay for the religious school, the government public school is open to them, but is 2 kilometers away near the center of the village.

The vehicle now passes houses with mud walls. Every half kilometer or so is a small shop with tea, warm soda, plastic cups and buckets, and a few other household items, along with some local food supplies such as gourds and squashes. Most shops are at small junctions where dirt paths lead off from the main road. These paths are often wide enough for a taxi to enter, but they may not be passable at the height of the rainy season.

After a turn in the road we have a magnificent vista of rolling hills and valleys, and suddenly we realize that the vehicle is moving along a ridge top. Below in the distance we see rice fields

lined with coconut trees. Houses stand scattered on the hillsides. Most appear to have permanent tile roofs, and a few are clearly quite large. Some have 3 stories and 1 or 2 boast water tanks on their roofs. Both telephone and electric power lines lead along the roadside into the village.

After 2 kilometers the road comes to a 3-way junction with a large and beautiful banyan tree as a divider. To the left a dirt road branches off and a small thatch-roofed shop stands with the word *arrack* written in Malayalam. This road connects 1 of the Pulaya outcaste colonies to the village. The arrack shop serves a locally grown rice or coconut liquor.

The vehicle turns right along the paved road and we arrive at a small business district: 2 tea shops, a 1 room post office, and the village Panchayat, or government headquarters. Here the village Chief Executive Officer works with his staff and a number of elected counselors from the village neighborhoods. A few hundred meters and a Y-junction is reached. To the left the road passes the village library and the school. Farther down that road is another outcaste colony on rocky terrain where even coconut trees do not thrive.

The 2 tea shops at this junction are small, 1-room stalls with open front walls giving them a porch-like appearance. On the meter-high front wall are brightly colored posters advertising Malayalam movies. Most have mildly titillating scenes of scantily-clad Indian women. In the morning, many men stop at these shops on the way to work for a glass of tea costing 1/2 rupee. Some also purchase fried flour dumplings called *dosai*, or steamed flour *iddilies* for another rupee, served up with a spicy vegetable sauce called *sambar*. An even spicier thin "pepper water" called *rasam* is often part of a Panjal meal. The well-known south Indian *mulligatawny* soup is derived from the Tamil-Malayalam word *mulaku*, meaning "pepper," and Tamil *tawni*, meaning "water."

Although the village library subscribes to several daily and weekly papers, it is in the tea shops where most men seem to do their reading. The shops subscribe to 2 or 3 Malayalam language papers brought by the early morning bus. While sipping their tea and eating their doshas, men talk about the weather, the harvest, recent movies, and what is in the papers.

The availability of newspapers in the tea shops and the high literacy rate in Kerala are part of the state's lively and active political life. Party leaders spend much time in the shops defending the views put forth in their papers and attacking those of opponents. Women are mostly absent from the tea shops.

Our vehicle turns right and we begin a kilometer long descent of a hill with spectacular views of the rice fields below and row after row of hills in the distance behind. Near the bottom we pass Panjal's *Ayurvedic* Pharmacy, run by a former low-caste household that now does well from this business. Ayurvedic medicine derives from ancient Hindu theories about the nature of the human body, going back to well before 500 A.D. when they were more or less formalized in texts. According to the Ayurveda, good health depends on balances of 3 "humors" within the body: wind, fire, and water. Diet, enemas, induced vomiting, surgery, life style advice, and various pills and powders are used by ayurvedic physicians (Jefferey 1988:43-44; Murthy and Pandey 1985). To Panjal villagers, as to many rural Indians, ayurvedic medicine is more available and substantially cheaper than Western medicine. In addition to the pharmacy, there are at least 2 ayurvedic doctors in Panjal. Although there is no clinic or hospital within the village, hospitals are located within 2 to 5 kilometers in neighboring towns.

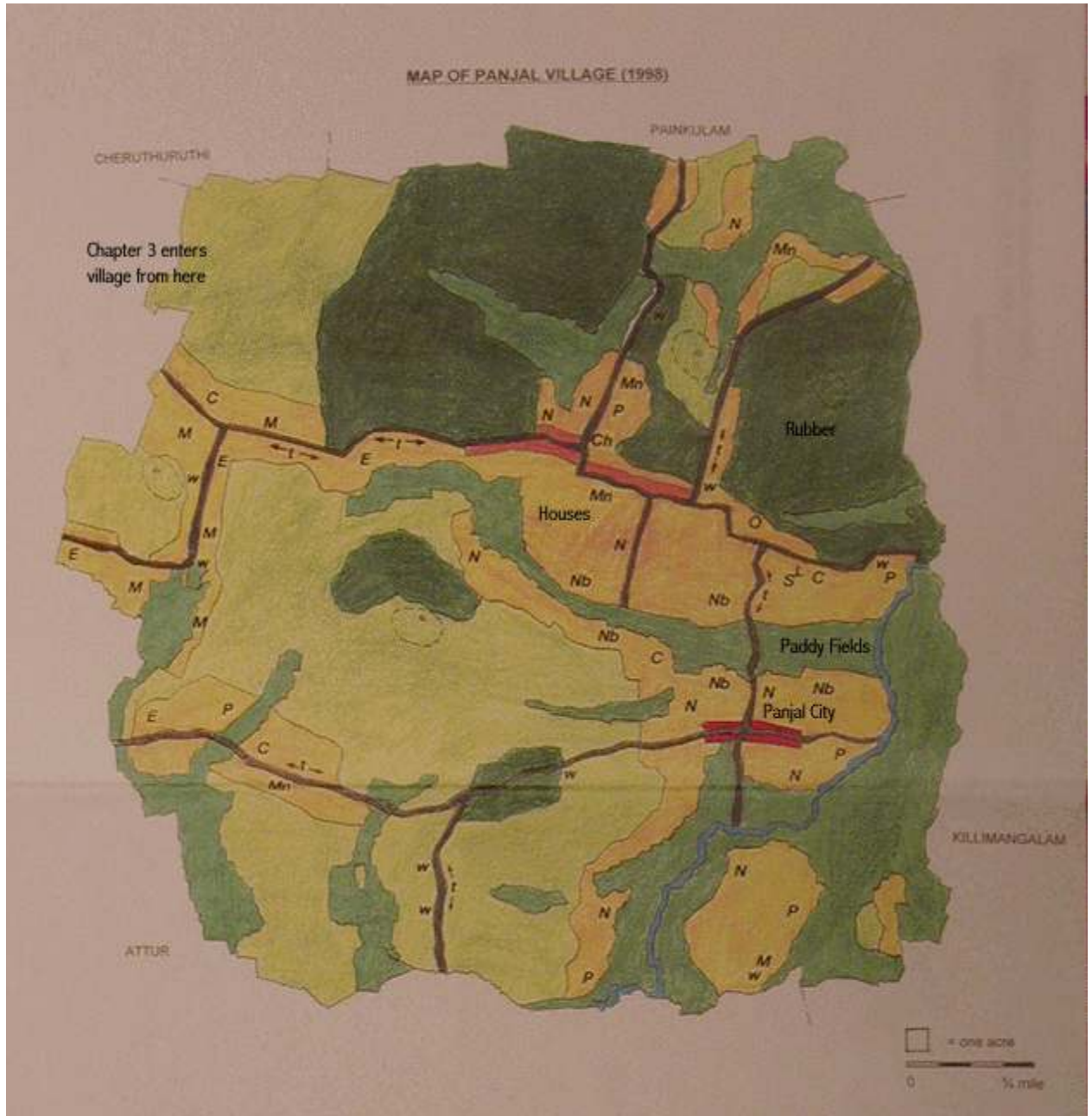
After passing the pharmacy, the vehicle crosses a lowland rice field. We stop to inspect the electrical transformer on the main post in the middle of the field. This is the Panjal substation, the last link in a long line of wiring that brings limited current to the village. In the 1987 Panjal sample, only 24% of households actually had electricity. Looking up the valley, we see it is flanked by the most splendid of Panjal's houses, many of them 2 and 3 stories tall with tile roofs and large front and side gardens. These are the homes of the Nambudiri Brahmins, the Thrissur area's traditional landed elite and temple priests for Kerala Hindus. These Brahmin houses have the best views, access to cooling winds during the hottest part of the year, and, because of their low placement on the hills, wells that never run dry. The houses face onto the rice fields traditionally owned by that family so that they could watch their tenants and farm laborers from the verandahs.

One section of the hillside is crowded with smaller houses and fewer coconut trees. This is the craft caste neighborhood. Here live the carpenters, blacksmiths, and goldsmiths. Some of the Pulaya farm labor caste houses are grouped on hillsides behind the Brahmin mansions. The laborers' household names are derived from their former Brahmin overlords.

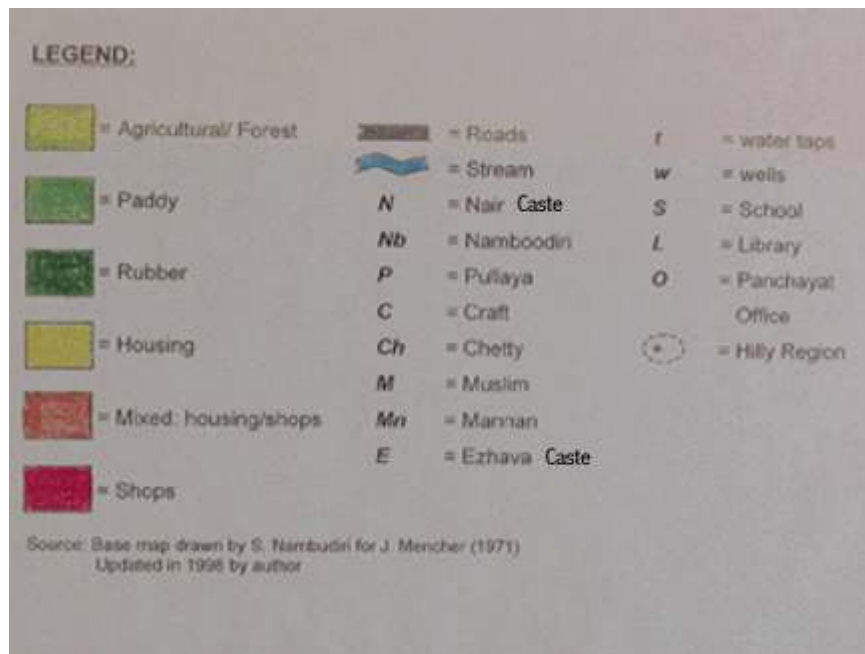
### **Panjal's Main Temple**

On another side of the field, we see a 3-storeyed building several hundred feet long built in a square around a central pond. This is Panjal's Hindu *ambalam*, or major temple. Like many village temples in India, it is several hundred years old and contains beautiful stone and wood carvings. Part of the temple building was used for rice storage prior to the Kerala land reform. Temples in Kerala sometimes served as conduits for Brahmin households to control rice land. Brahmin priests were fed at the temple from the produce of the lands it controlled. Today the temples are run by a government-appointed temple board and have significant secular input into their management. They are gathering sites for the many festivals of the agricultural year. Panjal's ambalam is dedicated to Lakshminarayana, another name for Vishnu. As with many Indian temples, this one has associations with local deities that can be incorporated into the Hindu pantheon without difficulty. Alongside the Vedic Siva and Vishnu, Panjal residents also worship Baghavati (Kali), the Malabar-Cochin goddess of war, smallpox, and soil, and Ayyappan, the god of forests, hills, and wild animals. Some households venerate ancestors at shrines inside their houses and others have set small outdoor stones on platforms for gods specific to their caste. Panjal's ambalam was opened to all castes in 1951 along with the 5 smaller temples dispersed across the village. The temples also provide certain community services. Panjal's Lakshmi temple has a large pond in the center courtyard where people outside can bathe. Another large temple, farther up the valley, has a pond outside the walls as well as a large grass field that provides a grazing area for animals.





See next page for map legend. The map was drawn by Kala Krishnan, October 1998, for her Master of Urban Planning Dissertation, McGill University, *An Experiment in Grassroots Planning: Kerala's People's Plan and Female Participation*. School of Urban Planning, McGill University.



Our vehicle crosses the rice fields and climbs up a gently sloping hillside. We pass the village branch of the State Bank of India and several small newly-built houses that are part of Kerala's ambitious program to build decent quarters for its poorest farm laborers. With 250 square feet of floor space, 3 rooms, a hard foundation, cement floor, sun-dried brick walls, and a tile roof on hardwood beams, each house is a vast improvement over the mud floor, 1 room, thatch walls and leaf roof structure it replaced.

### Panjal City

After 1/2 kilometer we arrive at another hilltop. A 4-way junction appears with a taxi stand and 1 taxi waiting at the corner. Panjal's only taxi and 1 of 2 automobiles in the village, it is owned by a local merchant. A business area with about 15 shops heralds our sighting of what villagers call "Panjal City." A mailbox, a tailor's shop, a goldsmith, the village ration shop, and several tea shops and provision shops line the dirt road. There is also a barber shop, complete with a real barber's chair, an electric fan to cool the customer, and life-size girlie wall posters with Western women in various stages of undress and mildly erotic poses.

The paved route follows the hillside down towards the interior and on to the next village. At the far end of the shopping area [only about 200 meters long] there is a small rise in the ridge, some grazing land, and at the very top a small Hindu shrine to Siva.

The shrine, a *kavu*, or minor temple, is built on the top of one of the highest hills in Panjal, in the shade of a large banyan tree. The outer platform is about 2 meters high and 20 meters on a side. In front to one side is a large carved linga. The temple itself is an L-shaped structure 5 meters wide at the front, 10 meters at back, and another 10 meters across at the longest part of the L. In the front is a gate behind which a small platform stands which has the altar. To the side is a latticed wall with 3 linga-shaped tablets inside. In the back is a small porch. During festivals kerosene or coconut oil lamps are hung all along the edges and around the gateways, somewhat as American-style Christmas lights are strung along the roofs and sides of homes and businesses. The flickering oil lamps create a more mystical touch than electric lights.

### **A Walk Through the Lanes**

From the temple we walk down the hillside to a narrow lane flanked on both sides with mud walls. Part of the descent is steep; rough steps have been cut in the soft rock. We pass houses with tile roofs and cement foundations with plaster over brick walls. Smoky fires at the back signal women working in the kitchens. Quarters are close and the wood fires produce serious air pollution. Respiratory diseases are a major problem for Kerala women. Plans have been made for high-efficiency *chulhas* or ovens [*aduppa* in Malayalam], but few have yet been introduced.

Each courtyard in this area is about 10 meters per side. These are the craft households. The goldsmith's house is by far the best in appearance with glass windows in the front and a newly painted verandah. Just behind are 2 blacksmith houses, 1 with thatch roof, the other tiled.

At the bottom of the hill we look straight across the rice fields to the opposite hill. About 100 meters of rice plants are crisscrossed by a few narrow dikes and a 5-meter-wide *thodu*, or canal that provides water for the minor monsoon crop planted in October and harvested in January. As we start across the fields we notice a stream of people walking in small groups along the middle of the fields toward the road where they branch off in several directions. Some carry umbrellas to ward off the hot afternoon sun. Even at 4:00 or 5:00 p.m. it can be punishing. Others have 40 kilogram sacks on their heads, filled with rice, or several liters-full containers of kerosene for lighting their electricity-less houses at night. Many of the items were purchased at the ration shop.

We come to the middle of the rice valley and see that it extends nearly as far in both directions as our eyes will take us. In the far eastern edge some low hills break up the valley. To the west we see only rice flanked by coconut trees right to the horizon. As the sun sets, a spectacular light show takes place in dry season Panjal above the rice fields and the coconut trees. The rice fields glow a brilliant fluorescent green while the sky lights up with opalescent blue, pink, red, and purple.

We come to the edge of the fields and notice a large open well. It is 2 meters on a side. In the rainy season, water is almost at ground level. As the dry season progresses, this well is one of the few in this section of Panjal that continues to have accessible drinking water. The table may drop to 7 meters below the ground, and people will leave a bucket and rope for public use. But many

will walk 1 or 2 kilometers twice daily by April and May to get a few liters of water to drink and wash with. The well is on the property of a wealthy Nambudiri Brahmin household. Nothing is charged for its use.

We look up the hillside and see the large house of the high caste family whose well this is. The Nambudiri house is 1 of the largest in Panjal. Like most other Brahmin caste homes, it is multi-storied, with a fine verandah with tile floor and a wonderful cool breeze off the rice fields even in the hottest time of year. Inside are 12 rooms including one filled entirely with religious artifacts and used for prayers. Behind is a private pond for bathing. The house stands on 2 acres of land with many coconut, mango, teak, and other trees.

In front of the verandah of this house has been set a group of stones shaped like an eagle. On a platform like this in a nearby field in 1975 a 12-day vedic "ritual of the fire altar" was performed by local priests at the request of foreign researchers who filmed the event. More than 10,000 people attended the final day of the ritual (Staal 1983).

As we continue up the hill, the lane turns left and we enter a much poorer neighborhood. The houses here have 2 or 3 small rooms and courtyards of only 5 meters on the front and 10 to the back. The house must fit in this area, leaving room for only 1 or 2 coconut trees and only rarely enough for a mango or other economically valuable tree. Yet here and there we see a slightly finer house, and sometimes a cow or goat tethered at the side. This neighborhood is mostly Nair caste households whose adults work as field laborers in the rice season or house compound workers during the dry season. Here many houses are without verandahs or have only a small patch of hardened earth in front under a roof overhang to use as a place to catch a cool breeze during the hottest times. We see no electrical lights here; only the dim flickering of the oil or kerosene lantern. Looking through the front doors and glassless window openings, we see almost no furniture, not even chairs or tables. People sleep on coir mats and eat sitting on the ground.

### **The Seasons at Panjal**

Our visit shows us Panjal's beauty along with its dependence on the land. Life in Panjal is governed by 2 major sets

of events: the agricultural cycle and the Hindu festival year. Panjal villagers have several methods of time reckoning. Following Hindu traditions, they consider overall time infinite. To Vedic priests, one year for the God Brahma equals 311 trillion human years. Many such Brahmas have been and will be (Padmanabha Menon 1986:262). The more modest Kerala Malayalam calendar dates from the Christian year 825 A.D. or Hindu Kali year 3,926 when King Udaya Marthanda Varma revised certain elements of the traditional Hindu calendar then in use, based on astronomical observations combined with the signs of the zodiac, (Padmanabha Menon 1986:265). By subtracting 825 years from the Christian calendar, we arrive at the year in the “Malayalam Era,” or M. E. The calendar established in 825 created a year with 365 days, corresponding to that now in use in the West, but maintained many other features of local Hindu and Kerala traditions. Days are broken down into 60 *nazhikas* of 24 minutes each, the precise opposite of the Western way of thinking of 24 hours each of 60 minutes. The Malayalam *nazhikas* are broken into 60 *vinazhikas* then 10 *gunitam*, 4 *muhurtha*, and 8 *noti*, or “snappings of the fingers.” Because the Malayalam months are grouped by the signs of the zodiac, they fall almost exactly in between the lunar months used in the West. Thus, the Kerala new year begins in the month of Chingam under the sign of Leo and corresponds to the last half of August and first part of September. Dhanu is governed by Sagittarius, starting in mid-December and running into mid-January. High-caste priests are responsible for the knowledge of the Malayalam months that govern Hindu rituals. Moslems follow their religious leaders for ritual events. Both the Western and Malayalam calendars are used for government records.

Agricultural and religious events are coordinated through the Malayalam calendar. Here is how the year proceeds at Panjal.

### ***Onam: The New Year and Harvest Festival***

The Malayalam new year comes in late August or early September. The major rains have fallen during June to August, on average 2,200 mm. (GOI 1966:8). This southwest monsoon produces the *virippu*, or autumn rice crop. It is the largest. People have been waiting for the skies to clear and the harvest to be brought in. The *Onam* new year festival spans several days with games, sports, festive meals, special food and clothing allowances at the ration shops, and beautifully arranged flower designs at the house front or in the courtyard.

The floral patterns are said to be welcoming signs for Maveli, an ancient Kerala king whose story lies behind the Onam events. During Maveli's reign, Kerala was free of inequality, crime, injustice, poverty, and all other social evils. So just and successful was this king that the gods became jealous. Vishnu incarnated himself and tricked Maveli. Appearing as a small boy, he asked the king to grant him all the land he could cover in 3 footsteps. The generous king agreed, but then the small boy grew suddenly to such a size that he covered the entire universe in just 2 footsteps, placing his foot for the third step right on top of Maveli's head. Before being pushed down to the underworld, Maveli asked for, and received, the right to visit his people in Kerala once each year (George 1983:184; Iyer 1981, vol 2:67-68). Thus, when the granaries are full, the skies are clear, and the flowers and trees are in their fullest bloom, Kerala's people celebrate the harvest, the new year, and the memory of a glorious past.

***Mundakan: The Little Monsoon Rice Season from October to January***

Soon after Onam, it is time to plow, hoe, dike, ditch, smooth, and plant the rice fields for the *mundakan*, or winter crop that will be harvested in January. In October and November, the retreating northeast monsoon deposits an average of 469 mm. of rainfall in Thrissur District (GOI 1966:8). A stream runs down the long valley between Panjal's 2 ridge tops, providing irrigation water for 2/3 of the fields. With a smaller area to cultivate, farm labor opportunities are less than in *virippu*. Yields average only 69% compared with the *virippu* season planting.

Field preparation, planting and cultivating costs are paid at 20 rupees per day for men and 12 for women. Plowing costs 50 rupees per day for bullocks and 80 rupees per hour for a tractor that farmers can rent with driver from a nearby village. Farmers say the tractor does a better job and is ultimately cheaper; one result has been a severe decline in plowing opportunities that previously had supported some low caste households. Preharvest cash outlay runs at about 1/6 of the gross return if rains are normal and if insects or birds do not get too large a share.

Harvesters are paid in cash or unhusked rice that averages about 1/6 more of the gross. Planting, transplanting, weeding, and harvesting are done mostly by women; men do the plowing,

ditching, diking, and smoothing. In January the women harvesters return from the fields with their heads nearly hidden by the sheaves of rice they are bringing in for threshing. Their pay is measured in fixed containers held by the owner. The *para* (7.2 kilograms) is the standard unit. For smaller amounts, owners use the *idangazhi*, 1/10 *para*, and the *naazhi*, 1/4 *idangazhi*.

### ***Tiruvatira***

The January harvest does not produce such a grand celebration as Onam. The end of the mundakan rains brings on the long dry season that lasts until late May or early June.

During the Malayalam month of Dhanu (December and January), Panjal villagers celebrate *tiruvatira*. This festival commemorates the death of Kamadevan, the Hindu Cupid, who gave up her life for love (Fawcett 1985:299). In Panjal, it is a special ritual of the Nair caste and is understood also as the birthday of the god Siva. The festivities also contain elements of an American Halloween in the taking of food or money by children and of "Mardi Gras" in the disobeying of certain traditional caste rules.

In Panjal, the 1987 (M.E. 1162) *tiruvatira* began on the 30th day of Dhanu, January 14, at 2:00 a.m. Twenty Nair caste boys from our local neighborhood arrived on the verandah of our Nambudiri landlord's house, shrieking and making dramatic begging motions of the hands. They were dressed in elaborate costumes of dried banana leaves. One carried a cane, wore a mask, and acted crippled. Our landlord made a contribution of 10 rupees. The contribution was duly noted in a ledger book which the youths suddenly produced. In earlier times, such children would not have been allowed on the premises of their higher caste neighbors. But in costume, and with a special religious purpose, the caste barrier could be temporarily lifted. In 1987, the caste barriers had long been officially abolished.

The following day, the festival passed to the women. In some villages, *tiruvatira* is celebrated by loud singing of groups of women at the bathing ponds, the use of bamboo swings, and generally gay and unrepressed behavior from the gender that does not usually act in such ways in rural Kerala. Panjal held a more sedate ritual. In mid-morning, women gathered at different homes where they chewed betel nut preparations that are normally only for men. The betel nut produces a mild high after which the



women turned to some altars in the home and prayed for long lives for their husbands. Taking betel once a year is said to be good for one's married life.

Later that second evening, women gathered again and sang and danced on the verandahs both religious and secular songs. The dancing was initially subdued: the women took 2 or 3 steps in 1 direction, bowing in rhythm to the singer's beat, sometimes clapping hands together with the woman next to them, then returning only 1 or 2 steps backwards so that a circle slowly wound round clockwise.

After 20 minutes, things livened up. Secular, happier, faster, and more rhythmic dancing started. There was much laughter and clapping of each others' hands now. This went on for more than an hour.

At this dance, 3 different castes were present, touching each other, dancing, and singing together. In the distance we could hear wilder drum sounds from other neighborhoods.

### ***The Early Dry Season: January and February***

During and just after tiruvatira, farmers harvest the mundakan rice crop. January gives several days' harvest and threshing labor to Panjal farm workers. As the grains turn brown and the plants begin to bend and sag on the fields, harvesting women appear in small groups. They work the fields of landowners. Of 61 rice-land-owning households in the Panjal sample, 33 do only supervising work. They own on average 1.1 acres each compared with 0.63 acres for the 14 households that both work on and supervise other laborers on their rice fields and 0.55 acres for the 14 households that do all the work on their rice fields. Those who only supervise work no days on their fields as laborers; households combining supervision with household labor average 13 days agricultural labor on their fields. Those who do all the work themselves put in 31 days labor to produce their crops. Harvesters' children miss several days of school at peak labor times to help their parents. The long dry season is beginning: it is a time of plenty tempered with anxiety.

Days begin to warm up through February. Wealthier households hire laborers to repair fences, plant vegetables in the house compound land, or pull down coconuts or the ripened mangoes from the compound trees. For the poorest farm workers, February and March are 2 of the most difficult months. Days are

hot and dry, work peters out. Food is mango stew, mango curry, mango pickle, fried mango, mango snacks, and mango dessert. From December through February, only 52 mm. of rain fall; from March to May there will be 403 mm., but most of that falls in May. As the dry season progresses, water tables fall. Some wells dry up altogether on the highest parts of the ridge where many of the poorest households live. Day by day, more poor women appear at the Nambudiri wells at the edges of the brown and dusty rice fields. In March goats graze the stubble of the mundakan rice harvest. Landowners who can see their fields from their cool verandahs call out to children playing soccer or cricket on the fields "Adu, Adu — goat, goat." They are supposed to chase them to another field, but usually they are chattering and running and pay no attention to the calls. By April the goats can find no more stubble to graze. Still there are no clouds in the sky. Temperatures rise at 4:00 p.m. to 105 degrees Fahrenheit, dropping only into the 80s at night. Sleep is difficult. Work is hard to find. Without the sufficient supplies at government-controlled prices at the ration shop, many poor families would fail to eat on many days during this time. As we shall see in Chapters 8 and 10, even with the shop, some households do not get enough.

The long dry season at Panjal provides good reasons for Kerala's attachment to the coconut: this crop comes in during the very portion of the year when rice is most difficult to obtain. In Thrissur District, 50% of all coconuts are harvested during the months of February through May (GOI 1966:27). Since a coconut tree can yield 10 nuts per month during this period, even a poor household with only a single tree derives substantial nutritional benefits from it. The leaves can be used to repair the house. Some families are able to sell the harvest. At 4 rupees per nut, 3 trees can provide 120 rupees per month, enough money to supply the annual food needs of 1 adult member of the household.

Eighty-one per cent of Panjal sample households owned at least 1 coconut tree in 1987. One household had 75 trees; the average number was 7. Most poor households owned 1 or 2: the 32 households (19%) having no trees suffer during the long midlands dry season.

### *A Dry Season Wedding*

The early dry season is a time for weddings. The cool, dry air combines with the nearness of the January harvest to offer a time for public ceremonies of this kind.

Panjal marriage ceremonies are greatly influenced by the wealth of the families involved. Rich Brahmins hold ceremonies lasting several days with lavish feasts and prolonged and expensive religious rituals. Poor low caste farm laborers hold brief, simple events. For those with even a bit of money, at least some crowd of friends and relatives will be invited, musicians and fancy dress employed, and some food offered.

Panjal marriages are mostly arranged. A very small percentage of "love marriages" occur, but these are usually without parental consent and do not receive public celebration. The average age of marriage in Panjal is 27 for men and 19 for women. The male average is higher than the 1981 Indian average of 23, but Panjal women equal the all-India average and are below the Kerala state average of 21 years (Franke and Chasin 1989:88; see also Tables 11.7 and 11.8).

Astrologers are consulted to determine whether a proposed union is auspicious. A latent function of the use of astrologers is that either family can back out of the marriage for almost any reason including displeasure by either partner after they meet. The astrologer discovers inauspicious elements in the horoscopes: the marriage is canceled.

When the wedding takes place, a canopy covers part of the house compound courtyard of the bride's family. Floral designs on the ground reminiscent of the Onam decorations designate an altar. Small piles of limes, incense sticks, flowers, and fancy cloth surround a 2-liter cooking oil can filled with rice stalks. The foods are fertility symbols. Nearby stand several *vilaku*, or coconut oil lamps to be lit during the brief formal ceremony.

The groom's party arrives down the road, accompanied by 1 or more drummers and Indian oboes, the *nagaswara*, or "snake voice." The groom and his followers enter the canopied area where the bride's party greets them. They are seated on the fancy cloths. After a few short prayers, the groom places a string or necklace around the bride's neck. This *tali*, or thread tying, is the traditional act of marriage among many Kerala castes, although it is said to have originated among the Nairs. It was previously part of a child marriage ceremony which betrothed a 10-year-old girl to 1 of her uncles for ritual purposes. When older, she had great sexual

freedom, including the opportunity to select lovers from among Nair and Nambudiri Brahmin men. Because the traditional Nair kinship system was matrilineal and women lived together and held property in common in their lineage, it was not necessary to know the identity of the biological father. We shall describe Nair marriages and household structure in more detail in Chapter 4.

Today's marriages are greatly modified by a series of British and Indian laws pushing the system towards a patrilocal nuclear or extended family. The bride and groom most likely move to his parents' house until the new family accumulates enough wealth to construct a new house on the parental compound. The wife thus moves in with her husband's parents and other relatives where she becomes part of a crowded environment of strangers. If she is from Panjal, she can visit her own family fairly easily, but many marriages are arranged from other villages and she may face a period of adjustment in her new house without much social support from her existing friendship and family networks. In the village, she will probably not work outside the house unless the family are mostly agricultural laborers or unless they are from professional groups such as teachers where the woman's income-earning potential may have played a role in the match. Among 164 marriages over the past 30 years for which we collected data, 37 (23%) included payment of a dowry. Money, gold, jewelry, or a plot of land have been used as dowries in Panjal.

Following the tali-tying, bride and groom may also exchange rings after which people lightly knock together the newlyweds' heads and join them in smearing sandalwood paste on each others' foreheads. The entire formal ceremony of arrival, tali-tying, head-knocking, and sandalwood paste smearing takes only 15 minutes.

Now it is time to eat. Guests are seated on the ground in rows with banana leaf plates and rented plastic cups before them. Water or tea may be served along with rice and several curries and pickles dished out of aluminum buckets by passing “waiters” from the bride’s family who move along the guest rows with giant ladles. Food is eaten with the right hand.

After the main course, a moderate to wealthy wedding will include Panjal Nambudiri *payasam*, a sweet rice pudding made with jaggery, a sugar produced from coconut sap turned to toddy and then cooked down to a thick molasses. If possible, milk will be added to make the *payasam* rich and delicious. Nambudiri men specialize in festival and wedding cooking for a fee. This work helps them compensate for their losses in the land reform. Foods are prepared in enormous vats brought to the site for the occasion and cooked over wooden or charcoal fires. Several castes may eat together, breaking older traditions prohibiting the intermingling of castes.

After the meal, guests line up at buckets where waiters pour water over their outstretched hands for cleaning. Guests leave behind small contributions of money. These are auspicious if in uneven amounts. Better to give 59 rupees rather than 60. Better yet to give 61!

### ***Puuyam: Subramanian’s Birthday***

In mid-February, just before the dry season begins to pinch incomes and create water problems, Panjal celebrates *puuyam*. This festival honors the birthday of Subramanian, the son of Siva and Parvathy, 2 important Hindu deities. Subramanian rides a peacock, a bird which eats snakes. His father Siva is often symbolized by the snake.

In Panjal in 1987, the *puuyam* committee was headed by one of the village goldsmiths, who arranged the first stage of the festival at his house late on the night of 11 February. Men gathered in front of the house while women and children huddled together on the sidelines. Inside, Nambudiri priests chanted vedic prayers while making offerings to fires burning in coconut oil lamps. They smeared their foreheads with sandalwood paste. Following this, men began shouting and twirling furiously in the front courtyard.

The men’s enormous headdresses were made of flowers. Many were higher than the dancers. They came in beautifully

colored combinations, shaped like tops, and made a spectacular sight. With 10 such whirling dancers and several drums beating and nagaswaras blowing, a state of ecstasy and excitement was quickly reached. The dancing went on for hours.

The next morning, the dancing continued, followed by a procession of musicians and onlookers who paraded through the village lanes, across the rice fields, and past each of the major temples where they stopped for several minutes to twirl as on the previous night. They were joined by a *panchavaadyam*, or 5-piece musical group consisting of drums, trumpets, nagaswaras, and string instruments. The festivities moved on to the village center on the north ridge between the post office and panchayat office where a crowd of several hundred watched the music, the twirling, and each other. A few enterprising snack sellers appeared with fried goods and drinks. The ceremony finally died out in the afternoon at one of the other temples.

### ***March-April: The Dry Season Turns Hot and Difficult***

In March and April, clouds begin forming as the searing heat over the Indian Ocean sucks huge amounts of moisture upwards. Slowly the monsoon drifts north and east towards the Indian subcontinent. As the monsoon gathers, heat and humidity turn Panjal into an oven of unpleasant days and oppressive nights. Laborers find no work. Farmers tap their harvest supplies. Those with government salaries or private sector employment in tea stalls or other establishments are best off since they have regular cash incomes during this trying time.

Each day brings more women to the few wells that still have water. Morning and evening they come, lining up behind others who arrived before them.

### ***Puram: Birthday of Ayyappan***

Times may be difficult for many, but *Puram* must be celebrated. It is the birthday of Ayyappan, the god of the local temple. A village committee has been working for weeks to prepare the day's events. Rice and flower designs are laid out before gates in a fashion similar to that of Onam. Contributions are collected: 51 rupees is the recommended amount, but many of the poorest villagers contribute less or even nothing.

April 12 was the day for Panjal Puram in 1987. The celebration began at the Siva kavu above Panjal City. Members of all castes were present. A hired troupe of panchavaadyam musicians played. Three elephants stood facing the shrine, “caparisoned,” with gold coverings draped over their backs and heads and running down their trunks. Their front feet were chained at a distance allowing them to walk but not run. On their backs sat men with ornate umbrellas. When the trumpets called out over the drums, the riders stood, lifted the umbrellas, and held up ceremonial spears and shields, the latter beautifully designed with animal skins and bird feathers of different colors.

Suddenly a deafening blast pierced the festive atmosphere. Rocket fireworks exploded 20 meters in the air, spreading smoke over the crowd.

Just after noon, the musicians, elephants, and riders led a procession down the grazing field in front of the shrine. They passed quickly through Panjal City and turned north towards the rice fields, passing the bank, the electrical transformer, the Ayurvedic pharmacy, the village office. Slowly, noisily, they made their way to each of the main temples, ending at the one farthest from the center of Panjal where 2 large fields flank the temple. Here fruit sellers had set up watermelon stands, nut confectioners wrapped a handful of peanuts in a small piece of newspaper for 1 rupee, lime drinks were available, and cheap plastic toys and other small shop goods were on sale. For this one time in the year, even ice cream could be purchased in Panjal.

The fireworks continued at this *maidan*, or temple ground, for hours. Five hundred people took part. Finally the elephants and the musicians departed. Darkness fell, but kerosene and gas pressure lanterns appeared, making this a night for staying out at Panjal. As the evening wore on, many went inside the temple walls where they sat, prayed, talked, laughed, but did not sleep for the rest of the night. Ayyappan's birthday had its cost. Rental for each elephant was 700 rupees, with a few hundred more for the musicians and the fireworks. Altogether the formal costs of the festival must be equal to the average annual per capita income of 2 Panjal households. Puram creates much excitement and joy, however. Perhaps it is a necessary diversion to prepare for the April heat and time of work shortage. For some villagers, the loud rocket blasts help open the skies for the monsoon, telling the storm gods where to bring their rains.

### ***May-June: The Big Planting***

The heat becomes more oppressive. For the poor, water is a major daily task. Women walk up to 2 kilometers in the morning to reach a functioning well, then carry their containers of precious liquid back to the house. In the late afternoon they repeat the ordeal. As the water situation becomes more desperate, a rich high-caste household arranges privately for a deep bore to be dug into the rock behind their house. For 2 days the motorized drill goes down, finally hitting the water table 50 meters below the surface. The family's own diesel motor pump is hooked up to the long tube. The starter is tugged, and suddenly water flows copiously from the spigot. Every day a government truck comes to the house to collect thousands of liters of water to be driven to various locations in Panjal at specified times. For a while, the women's walk for water has been shortened while the high-caste household has made a contribution to the welfare of the poorer groups. The son in this high-caste household is a local leader of the Communist Party-Marxist. As leaders of the newly-elected state government, they have pinpointed the provision of water as a major short-term goal. Meanwhile, the Panchayat officer eagerly awaits a drill-rig that is to put in more permanent and public water access such as a tube well right in the Panchayat office garden centrally located in Panjal. The officer wants another well dug from the highest point of the village so that the piping system,



installed a few years ago, can be used to bring water to the main road at intervals of a few hundred meters where faucets already are in place. The lowest caste households, far from the main road, will then have to walk only 1/2 kilometer for their water. If the drill rig comes, much of Panjal's suffering can be removed; but this season it does not arrive.

As the rain clouds gather in late May, the humidity rises and life becomes ever more lethargic. With temperatures over 100 degrees Fahrenheit and humidity nearing 100%, the great monsoon is clearly approaching. Late afternoon is sunny and bright and even a bit cool.

Landowners call their workers. Workers come to the owners' homes looking for work. The tractor or animal plowing was done in early May. Now it is time to hoe and seed.

A late May planting operation may include additional plowing. The animals drag the plow diagonally across the previously plowed and furrowed fields. The soil is remixed so that different layers contribute their unique minerals and bacteria to the top levels. The soil absorbs oxygen. Fertilizer is laid down.

On one field an old man appears. His 2 oxen tug slowly at the plow. He moves across the half-acre field of the landowner at 4:00 p.m., taking 45 minutes to replot. Shade from the coconut trees makes the work less exhausting.

Then he moves out with a coir basket filled with seed saved from the previous harvest. He is well over 60 years old, but the muscles on his body look strong and sturdy. He wears no shirt and ties up his Malayalam *lungi* or sarong so he can hunch down close to the earth. He flings out the seeds in semicircular patterns with his hands.

The shadows lengthen, the afternoon turns cool, the planter finishes his work and begins whipping his oxen forward towards the road from which he will turn them homeward for feeding and bedding down. Once he did many such fields for several days in May; now the tractor has replaced him and his oxen on most fields.

### ***The Monsoon Arrives***

In early June thick black clouds move across the village. The rains are late this year. The air is so heavy it seems hard to breath.

Without warning lightening flashes crackle almost to the ground; the peal of thunder seems right next to one's ears. Water pours from the sky; it falls so hard that some power above the clouds seems to be pushing it down with a force to send it through to the underworld where Maveli lives. Is Vishnu the god of the monsoon's water?

The rains stop. Sometimes for an hour or two the foggy denseness lifts a bit. Other times the earth just steams. Then the rains come again; sometimes with sharp bolts of lightening followed by incredible thunder blasts; sometimes quietly with nothing but the sound of water dripping and pounding, splashing, running, and gurgling.

For 2 months and more the rains pour down on Panjal. The lanes become so slushy that walking requires constant energy to pull up one's feet from the sucking mud. The coconut trees bend and sway in the winds and rains that batter their top leaves. The rice fields fill with water to a depth of 15 centimeters. The overflow runs down the valley. Everything seems to be covered with fungus; villagers report the cobras are coming out of their holes along with numerous other dangerous reptiles and stinging insects. It is hard to believe that this is the season for which people had yearned.

On the paddy fields, green shoots appear. Each day they seem to grow to almost twice their previous size. Still the waters pound down.

The rice reaches a height of 1 meter. Men and women appear on the fields, sometimes adjusting the height of the dikes so that water will flow more or less, other times pulling the weeds that might compete with the precious food stalks, planted 25 centimeters apart.

Gradually the rains diminish. In August blue sky appears in the afternoon, stars are visible at night. The rice flowers and then the grains appear at the end of the stalks. The rice plants start to lodge or fall; the fields are drained by cutting into the dikes next to the *thodu*.

The rice browns and suddenly rows of women appear in the fields, cutting the stalks with sickles. While the harvesters bend gracefully over the landowners' produce, Kerala's magnificent green parrots sit plaintively on coconut tree crowns, on the branches of banyan trees, on the electric power lines, awaiting their share. Another Malayalam year has passed; it is *Onam*.

Now food is abundant; the ration shop has special offers of cooking oil and cloth. Flowers bloom everywhere in tropical abundance in bright orange and red and purple. Maveli's great sacrifice is recalled. Reverence combines with dancing and games and feasting in an atmosphere of life and vibrancy that is a fitting memory to the great ancient mythical king[and also to the hard-working farmers and farm laborers[the ones who make the land fertile and yielding as no king has ever done. They now celebrate briefly the material rewards of their hard work this season. Perhaps they reflect too on their decades-long political struggles for justice and a greater share of Kerala's substantial bounty.