

'A Visual Ethnography on  
Cashew factory workers of Kerala'

Submitted in partial fulfilment of the requirements  
of the degree of  
Master of Design

By

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INDUSTRIAL DESIGN CENTRE

INDIAN INSTITUTE OF TECHNOLOGY BOMBAY

2014



**IDC**

**IIT Bombay**

2014





Cashew Factory  
Workers of Kerala:

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A visual ethnography

DRS  
Design Research Seminar

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## Declaration

I declare that this written submission represents my ideas in my own words and where other ideas or words are included, I have adequately cited referenced the original sources. I also declare that I have adhered to all principles of academic honesty and integrity and have not misrepresented or fabricated or falsified any idea/data/fact/source in my submission. I understand that any violation of the above will be cause for disciplinary action by the institute and can also evoke penal action from the sources which have thus not been properly cited or from whom proper permission has not been taken when needed.

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Date:





# Approval sheet

Design Research Seminar:  
**A visual Ethnography on the Cashew factory workers of Kerala**

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is approved as a partial fulfilment of requirement of post graduate degree in Industrial Design

Prof. Nina Sabnani: \_\_\_\_\_  
(Project Guide)





## Acknowledgement

Firstly I thank Prof. Nina Sabnani, my project guide for her valuable guidance and support to do this project.

I am grateful to Shri. P. Ajith, Personnel manager, Kerala State Cashew Development Corporation Ltd., Kollam, for his valuable support in this project.

I also thank the Manager, KSCDC factory, Elampalloor for her helping hand in conducting a smooth study with the staff and the workers.

I also thank those wonderful people who spend their working hours with me to help me in conducting my study with them. Without those working class heroes, this project would not have been a success.

Finally, I thank IDC IIT Bombay for providing me with all the infrastructure facilities.



## Abstract

Kollam in Kerala is known as 'The cashew capital of India'. It holds a major share in the total cashew produced and exported. With around a hundred cashew processing factories both managed by the government and private groups, the cashew sector gives employment to more than 40,000 workers. Surprisingly, 95% of them are women. These people have been working in the factories throughout their life and it is carried over by the next generations.

The KSCDC Elampalloor factory is around 300 metres from my home and I never got any chance to see what is happening in the factory even though I see lot of women going to the factory for the work.

This project is a study on the culture, behaviour and life of the working population in cashew factories.





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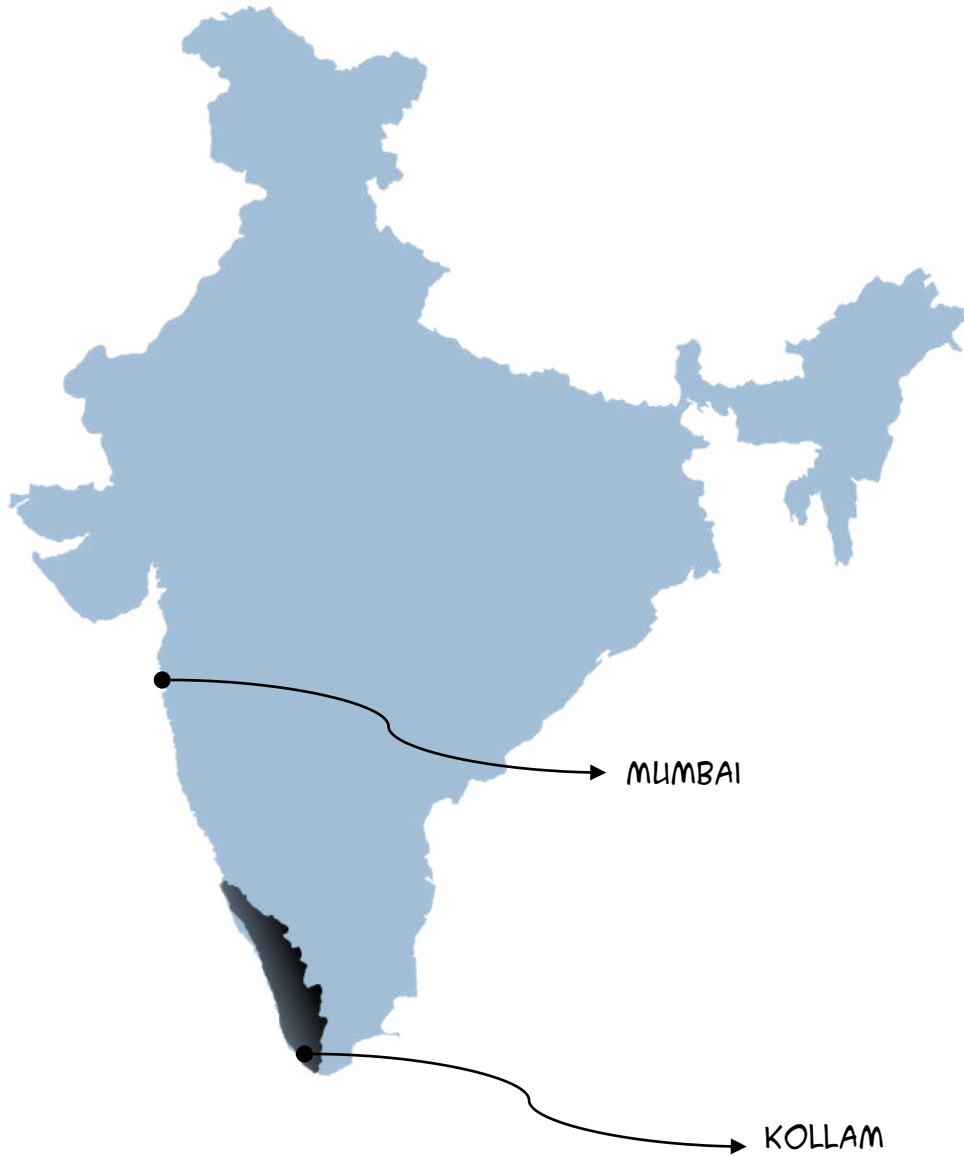
# 1. Visual ethnography

Visual ethnography is more than collecting data and recording them. It is more about understanding people, their behaviour, culture, traditions and beliefs. An ethnographer has to adapt to the life and environment around them to understand them more.

In this project I have tried to showcase the essence of their life not only through images, but also through my experience with them.



## 2. Geographical location

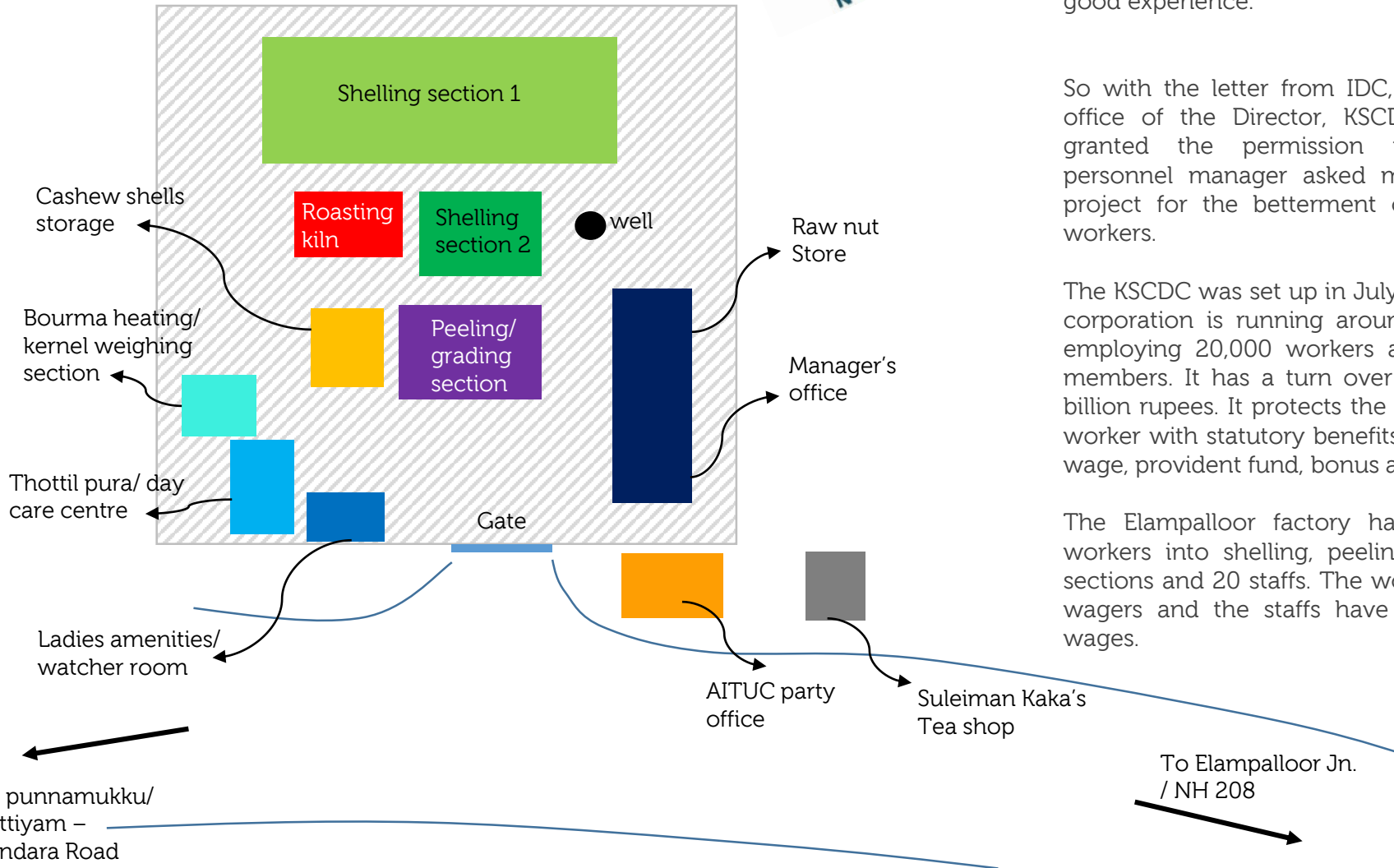


Kollam is located at the south most part of India. When the Portuguese came to India, they brought the cashews along with them. In Malayalam, cashew nut is called as 'Paranki (Portuguese) andi' (nut). The tropical climate of Kerala was perfect for the cashews to thrive and they grew in abundance. But today, most of the cashews are imported from many African countries and these cashews are processed in the factories.

### 3.The journey to KSCDC



Elampalloor KSCDC factory lay out (not to scale)



I have travelled all way back to Kollam from IIT Bombay with the curiosity to start the project. In addition to that, it was my visit to home after 14 months. And also, I travelled in an airplane for the first time. That was a good experience.

So with the letter from IDC, I went to the office of the Director, KSCDC and I was granted the permission instantly. The personnel manager asked me to use this project for the betterment of the cashew workers.

The KSCDC was set up in July 1969. now the corporation is running around 30 factories employing 20,000 workers and 1,500 staff members. It has a turn over more that 2.5 billion rupees. It protects the interests of the worker with statutory benefits like minimum wage, provident fund, bonus and gratuity.

The Elampalloor factory has around 550 workers into shelling, peeling and grading sections and 20 staffs. The workers are daily wagers and the staffs have monthly fixed wages.



### 3.1 Suleiman kaka's teashop

On the next day, I was at the gates of the Elampalloor factory to conduct my study. Many women has already arrived at the factory gate and was having the breakfast from Suleiman kaka's tea shop. Shri. Suleiman's teashop has been there near the factory since I was a kid. It is a small tea shop. I can still remember the taste of the dosa and sambar that I always had when I was a kid. Generally, he don't have a helper in the shop. He has a cook. But, he makes the tea and serves to the people. We can see a long queue for the tea in his shop.

The workers finishes the breakfast and rushes to the gate to get the attendance card. The gate closes at 8.30 am and no one is permitted in after that.



### 3.2 The attendance cards:

One interesting thing that I noticed was the attendance cards kept at the AITCU party office. The attendance cards are numbered with the enrolment number of the worker. Smt. Reetha, 72, was the first cashew shelling worker in the factory with enrolment number. 1. She joined the factory at the age of 13 and her children and her grand children had followed her to the factory. At present, the last enrolment no was 821 which indicates that 820 women has joined the factory after Smt.Reetha.

The workers rush to their attendance cards sorted and kept at the party office by the 'meshiri' (section manager). Many were curious to see me around they started with asking questions like "Which channel/newspaper are you from?", " Will my picture come in tomorrow's newspaper? ". It was hard to convince them that I am student came all way from Mumbai to study them. Susheela, 50, told me, "this is for the first time somebody coming from so far to study us!". And I was also happy when some of the people understood me as someone from their own place. One asked me, "you are Ambili's son, right? "

### 3.3 The Friday market:

There is a small market happening in front of the gate on all Friday's because its the day on which workers collect their wages. Even though I didn't go on a Friday, I could find a street seller in front of the gate in the morning itself.





## 4. The factory

### Divisions:

The factory was divided into many sections according to the work that has to be done.

#### *Cashew roasting:*

One of the main component in the factory is the cashew roasting kiln. The raw nut is fed from the top of the kiln through a hopper. The nut reaches the drum of the kiln. The kiln is heated externally using cashew shell as the fuel. The drum is also rotated manually for uniform heating. Abdul Latheef, 57, who is known as 'Kaka' amongst the workers, said, "there is no specific speed of rotation for the drum. It depends on the heat that you achieve in the kiln. It takes years for one to judge the speed of rotation of the kiln for roasting to the best. If the cashews are not roasted properly, it becomes difficult for the workers to shell it and the kernel could break." The staff in the roasting section are all men because it is more physical work. They have fixed monthly wages.

#### *Shelling:*

Shelling is the next section. The roasted cashews are brought to the shelling section by the men at the cashew roasting section. The roasted cashews are distributed to the workers to shell. the staff at shelling are all women and they beat the fried shell of the cashew with a piece of wood made of coconut wood specially for this purpose. They are daily wagers and they get paid for each kilograms of cashew that they shell. They are paid 23.66 Rupees/Kilograms of cashews shelled. They get the payment only for the unbroken cashew kernel. If the kernels

of cashew breaks to pieces, the time and the effort is lost. Also, they have to return the broken pieces in different categories.

#### *Bourma heating*

It is the section in which the shelled out kernels are heated on a steam pass container to make the cashew more crispy and easy to peel. The cashew after heating in the bourma, is passed to the peeling section. The section has 3-4 staffs.

#### *Peeling:*

It is the section in which workers peel the cashews and make ready for grading. The cashews are peeled with a finger knife or with a grown finger nail. All the workers are females.

#### *Grading and packing:*

It is the section in which the kernels are graded and sorted out according to the quality of the cashew. The cashews are coded by visual examination to 3 digit numbers like 210, 240, 360, 420 etc., in which the smaller number indicates the better grade. The graded cashews are packed after processing. The cashews are categorized into wholes,



## 5. The people

### 5.1. Male workers

There are 12 male workers in the factory. They are not the daily wagers. They have fixed salary per month. Their main job is to roast the raw nuts in the kiln. Once the raw nuts are roasted they turn black in colour. There is 2 batch of 6 people and 2 shifts. Their work is to roast the cashews for the female workers in the shelling section. They start with heating up the kiln at 7.30 in the morning. At first, they bring the raw nut sacks from the storage place to the kiln area. 2 people will then load it to the hopper where one guy will be directing the raw nut to the channel. One man will be busy in heating up the drum of the kiln using cashew shells as the fuel. One will be assigned the task of rotating the drum. One man will collect the roasted nut to the containers. And the last one will supply these roasted nuts to the shelling section. Both the batches will end their work by 12.30 pm. And they would resume the work if the demand of the roasted cashew increases.

As I saw the huge smoke out of the chimney and near the kiln, I asked Shri. Vijaya Raghavan, 49, whether this cause problems and he replied, " this smoke contains lot of tar from the cashews that are roasted and this smoke can cause cancer to us". I noticed that they don't use any masks and when I enquired about the same, Shri.Prasanna Kumar ,45 , replied, "oh! Masks?! we are used to this!".

















## 5.2. Female workers:

Female workers are into the shelling, peeling and the grading sections. Most of the workers are in the shelling section. There are around 300 workers in shelling whereas as a total of 250 into peeling and grading. Most of them are very poor. They have lot of reasons why they have become the cashew workers. Some of them can not run the families only with the wage of their husband/ father. Some are aiming for good education for their children and to give them a better life. Some are widows. Everyone has there own problem. But they forget everything and enjoy their life in the small unity in their factory.

As mentioned earlier, the shelling people are paid per kilograms of kernels they shell out of the roasted cashews. At an average, they shell 8 kilograms of kernels out of the roasted nuts supplied to them. In addition to their daily wage, they have their festival bonus, provident fund and gratuity. So the workers enjoy lot of allowances in addition to their daily wage.

























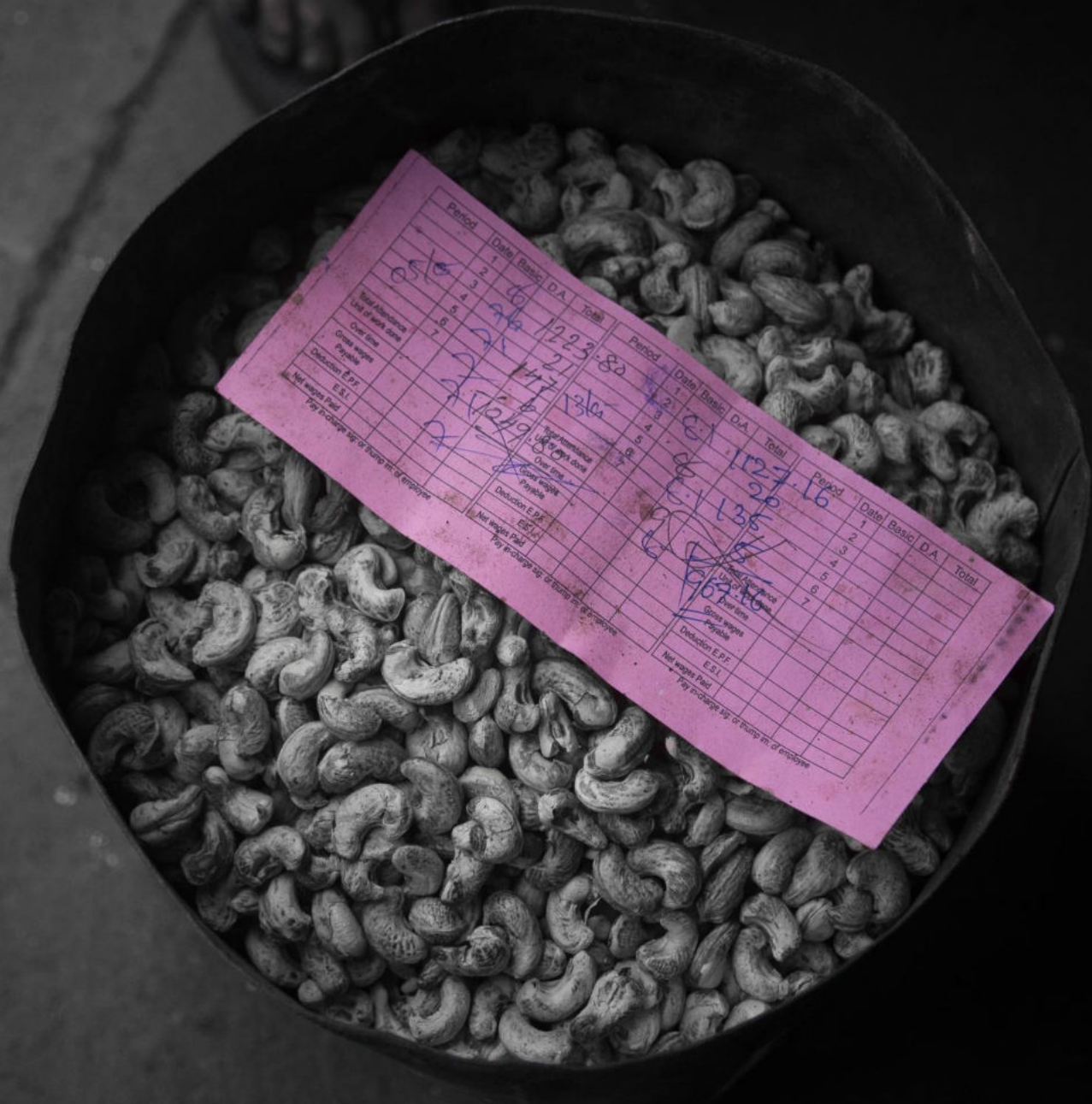






## 6. Weighing the kernels:

The shelling workers will take previous day's kernels that they have shelled out to a section where they weigh them. A staff along with the floor manager weighs and records the kernels in kilograms. That will be recorded in their record as well as the shelling card of each worker. The shelling card indicates the kilograms of kernels that the workers have shelled as well as their basic pay. The workers bring their kernels one after the other according to their enrolment number. The women, older or younger, arrive patiently to record their shelling and they stand in a queue. They weigh their kernels and go back to their place of work.



Period					Period					Period				
Date	Basic	D.A.	Total	Date	Basic	D.A.	Total	Date	Basic	D.A.	Total			
01/06				01/06				01/06						
02/06				02/06				02/06						
03/06				03/06				03/06						
04/06				04/06				04/06						
05/06				05/06				05/06						
06/06				06/06				06/06						
07/06				07/06				07/06						
Total				Total				Total						
1223.80				127.16				167.16						

Star Allowance  
 Unit of work done  
 Overtime  
 Gross wages  
 Payable  
 Deduction E.P.F.  
 E.S.I.  
 Net wages Paid  
 Pay envelope slip of Group no. of employee









## 7. Peeling and grading

In the mean time, the 'meshiri' of the peeling and grading section gets the plastic cartons ready with the peeled and graded cashew kernels. The cartons are tagged with a piece of paper indicating the grade of the cashew kernel. The kernels are all stacked into the KSCDC truck and gets ready to transport them to the processing centre for packing.





## 8. Shelling again!

The shelling workers back in their workplace shells the nuts till 12 noon. Before the lunch break, they collect the cashew shells around their workplace into the baskets provided and place it outside the shelling area.

Surprisingly, on that particular day, the shelling workers had stopped their work by 11.00 am and called for a 1 hour strike. I was curious to know what was their problem of the day.





## 9. The strike !

The workers stopped the shelling and started moving towards the managers office in groups. The entire shelling population were around. Workers union party leaders ( women amongst them) moved to the manager's cabin to present their problem. I asked many people what was the reason that they called for the strike. Sujatha, 48, union leader told me, "son, we are not receiving our bonuses for such a long time. It was supposed to paid long back." Another senior woman told me, "we are working in a govt. undertaking and even the people working under the 'muthalali company'( private company) get their bonuses in time.

The workers continued the strike for one hour and they had long discussions in this period. Some were busy in discussions to take the next step in the strike. Some where enjoying their free time with jokes, chit-chats and gossips.

The factory manger came and addressed the people and promised them that necessary action will be taken soon. The women cheered and went happily back for their lunch. I asked a young lady about what will you do if your needs are not fulfilled and she replied, "we will continue the strike till it is fulfilled."

The workers moved for having their lunches under the trees. One complained, "we don't have enough space for having food. We are sitting in the open space for having our food.

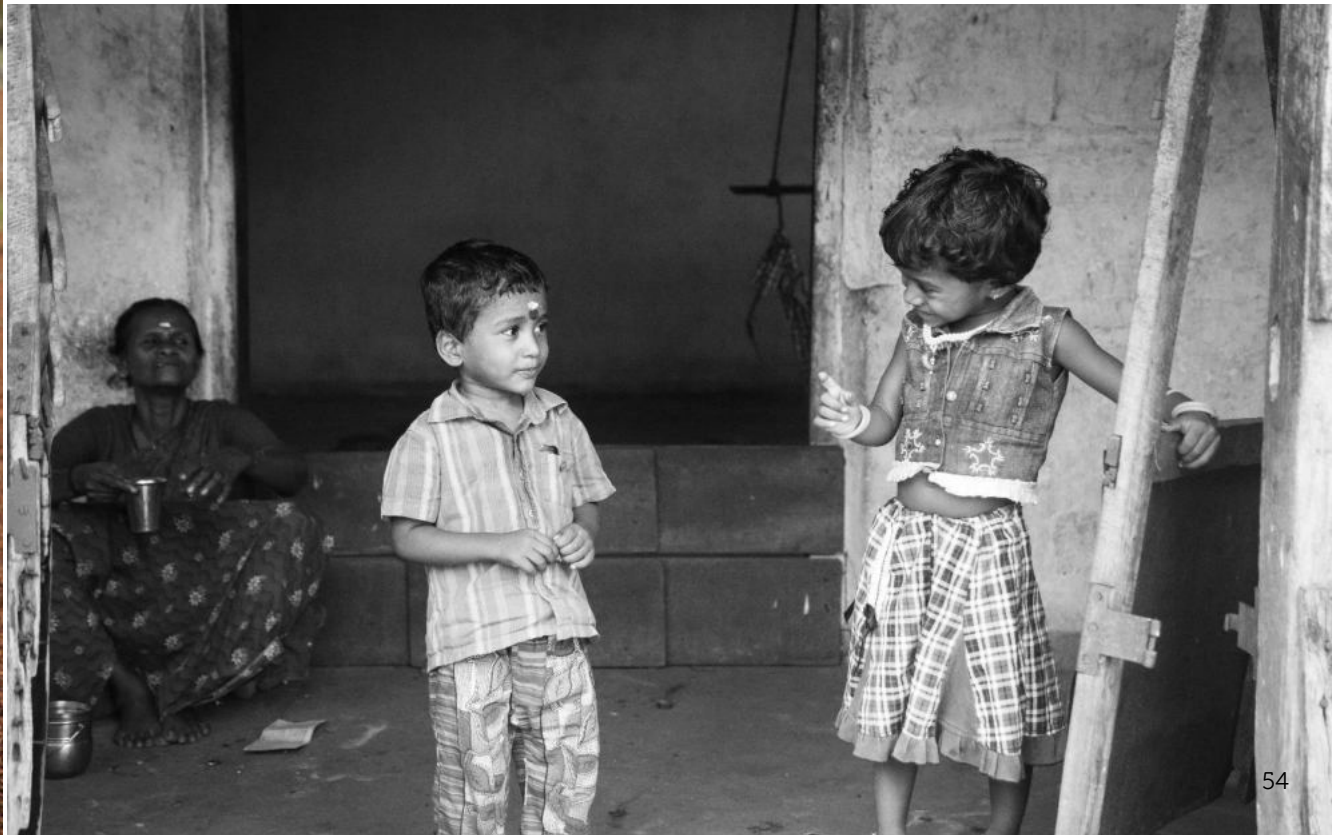
Any time a crow can poop over us or our food". I asked them why the government is not taking any action and one lady replied me, "there is no one to see our problems". one old woman told me "son, you have to show all our problems to the government. Publish your work somewhere so that they will be forced to take actions." I assured them that I will surely do it. Suddenly a young lady answered that old woman, "he can not do that. Its just his project work". I replied her, "its not just a project documentation. The personnel manager has asked me already to find your problems and point it to the corporation". The were so happy hearing that.

Sheela, 32, complained that they do not even have a changing room. I assured them all these problems can be directed to the corporation.



## 10. 'Thottil pura' –The day care centre

Another interesting thing that I noticed was the 'Thottilpura'. Thottilpura is the day-care centre for children. Some of the workers can not leave their children behind at home because they have no one at the home to take care of them. Some children who has not started the schooling will also accompany their mothers to the factory. So there is a lady who takes care of the children in thottil(cradle) pura(house). The workers bring the children to Smt. Sudharma, 54, and move to their work place. Smt. Sudharma is a staff who gets her basic pay for looking after the children. She was No. 9 in the enrolment of shelling workers and she is the daughter who followed her mom , Smt. Reetha (the enrolment No. 1). She did shelling for many years and now she is taking care of the children. She told me, "actually there will be 10-12 kids around and it is very difficult to take care of them. There were days that I used to look after 15-16 children. In case I need help, I call their respective mothers." I asked her about how you take care of the ablution requirements of the children. Then she replied, "I treat them like my own children hence, cleaning them is not a big concern".



## 11.Shelling: Afternoon session

The shelling workers are back after the lunch to their workplace to shell for the rest of the day. As mentioned earlier, the workers are paid only for the full size kernels called as the 240. So they take care in not breaking or splitting the kernels while they shell."Radha, 52, said me that " Initially when I joined for shelling I could not get the kernels in full size. Always they used to break. You need to have lot of patience to get one kernel out of the shell. The strike force on the nut should be proportional to the amount the nut has been fried. Now I can understand how much force is needed to brake the nut shell."

It was fun to observe how the workers shell the kernel out. Once you are in the work place, you hear only the 'tick-tock' sound everywhere. I observed that it takes 2-3 knocks with the wood tool to shell the kernel. In the first knock the worker understand how strong is the shell. In the subsequent knocks , the worker shells out the kernel.

I asked Smt. Vijayalakshmi, 34 , whether she can move her kernel container a bit so that I can click a picture. And she replied me, "No! Once you place your container at a place you are not even allowed to touch it. If you move the container, it will result in a less cashew shelling on that day." I was interested in that belief and she also told me that this was the message that has been passed from her ancestors.



## 12. 'Podi nokkal':the search for tiny bits

There is no particular end time for the day's work. It could stretch to an hour or so than the daily shelling time. Because it solely depends on the amount of raw nuts fried for shelling. If the demand for shelling is more, the roasting section men continue with their work. So they always keep an eye on the demand of the roasted nuts for the shelling. The workers can not leave any roasted nut without shelling because the nut again can not be roasted for the shelling purpose.

At the end of the day the workers collect the cashew shells around their workplace in the baskets and carry it to the open area in front of the kiln. This is not done all together but in batches. One batch brings the shells to the open area and spreads it on the floor. This is called 'podu nokkal' (tiny piece searching) in the local language because they are searching for the tiny broken pieces of cashew in the shell heaps.

Each batch brings there shell out in that area and starts looking for the tiny pieces. The male workers also join them to help. They use a wooden plank to spread the shell and search. I asked Shri. Balachandran, 42, "Is this necessary?". And he replied, "Yes! and we get at least a handful of broken pieces from this heaps!". And he showed me how much they have collected from the entire batch.

It is a work in which they collectively do and help each other. They care for the others and

helps others to bring the baskets to the open area. After one batch is finished with the searching, they collect the shells back into the baskets and carry it to the shell dumping area thereby making way for the next batch to the open area.











## 13.Sorting out the kernel splits and bits:

If there is more kernels to be shelled out, few batches stays for more time and finish off their work.

Next process is the one in which the workers take the split, broken and the rotten kernels to the set of baskets kept outside the workplace. There is a senior worker to supervise the process. The workers come with their containers containing the above mentioned kernels. They sort them into 4 containers and categorise them according to their size and nature. As mentioned earlier, the workers are not paid for the broken, split and the rotten kernels they shell. When I asked a worker whether they can take these split and broken pieces home, she said, "No , we can not take it. We have to return it to these sorting baskets". I asked another lady why this much broken and split pieces and she replied, "It depends on the cashew quality as well as the extend to which the cashews are roasted for shelling. If the cashews are not roasted properly, there is chance of the kernel to split".



## 14. The out pass:

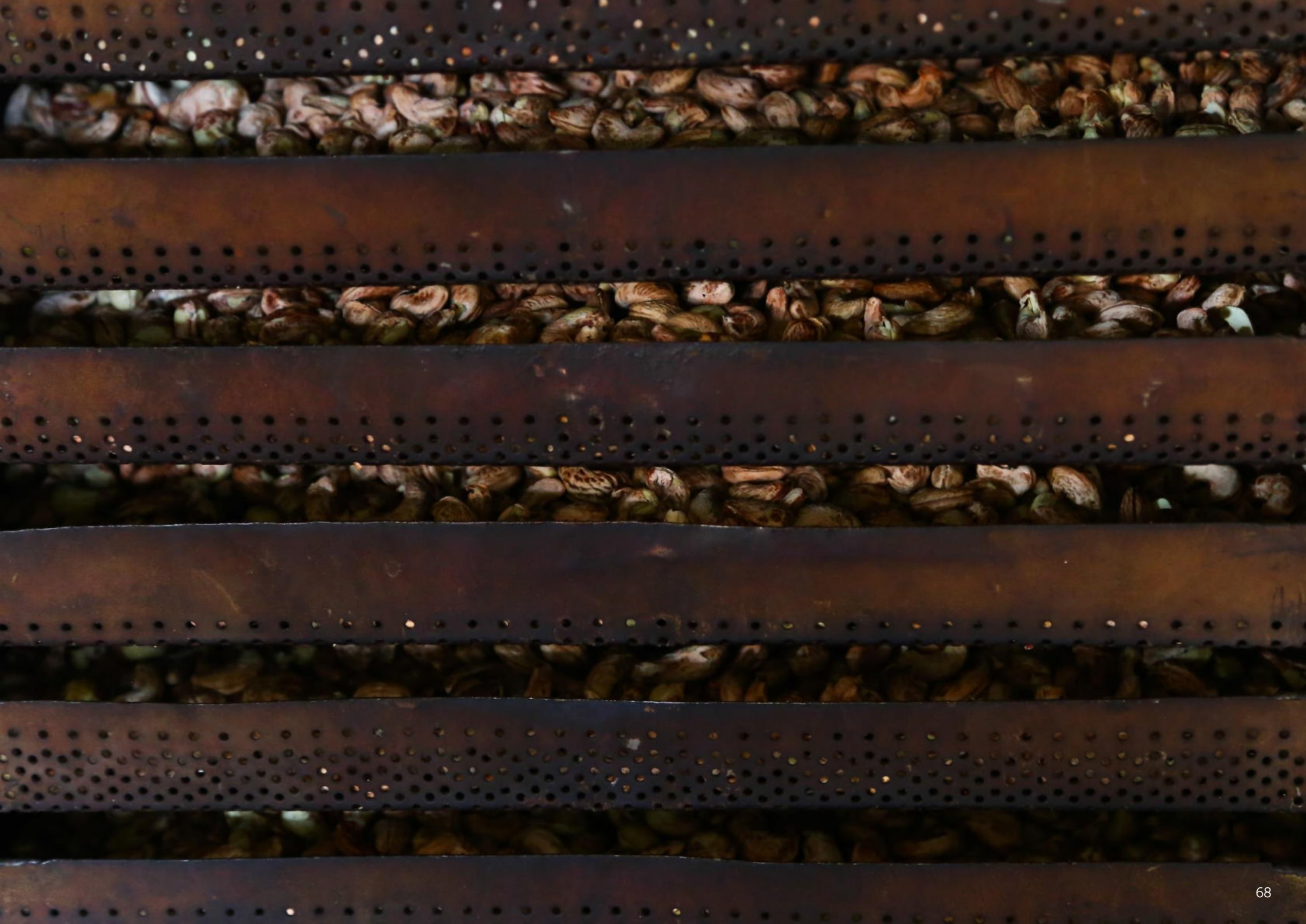
Now the workers are ready to go home. They clean themselves and change dress to go back home to meet their family and children.

Once the workers change and come, they are thoroughly checked by two senior ladies to make sure that they are not carrying any bit of cashews to their home. They check them and give them a round piece of tin as the out pass. This token is submitted to the security at the gate who lets the workers to go out.



## 15. Bourma heating:

The next day morning starts with the staffs at the bourma machine lighting up the machine at 6.30 am. The previous day's kernels are stacked into the racks of the bourma machine. 2 staffs are assigned for this process. In the bourma, a steady steam is passed to the kernels for 3-4 hours. The team makes the kernels crispy and easy to peel. The kernels are unloaded after the process and send to the peeling section. In peeling section there are around 200 workers and all are women. These workers peel the kernels and keep it ready for grading. The graded kernels will be stocked in the plastic containers and will be send for post processing and packaging. This process continues like a chain.







## 16. Sifting:

A lady sift the broken kernel pieces of the previous day and remove the peels. The broken pieces and the half rotten ones are still used in the food industry. They re still edible and added in many food recipes.



## 17. My learnings

Being a product designer, this project was kind of a different experience for me. In addition to that, I could understand the life and the problems these people who are associated with the cashew industry. They were always around me. Most of them knew me and my family. This study took me to a lot of people whom I never knew personally. I could be with them for 3 days and learn a lot of things from them. Their discipline, culture, co-operation, helping mind and their mind set to rise together and solve their problems.

I could also learn about the different hardships of the people to earn their daily bread. Their pain to rise their children well, to offer them good food and education. Their love for the co-workers. Their affection for their family and to raise their standard of living. All of them wake up early, cook the food for them and their family and travel to the company to work. And at the end of the day they can not wait to meet their family and beloved ones.

I tried to be one among them in these three days and I have learned a lot of things from them which will take me in future paths of my life.





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