

Weaving Social Memory: A Revisit of Alappuzha's Coir Labor Heritage

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Abstract

This article re-examines the coir industry of Alappuzha not merely as an economic activity or declining traditional sector, but as a living archive of labor, identity, and collective experience. Drawing on field narratives, archival traces, and institutional histories, the study explores how coir work has shaped everyday life, social relations, and cultural meanings within coastal communities. It argues that coir functions as a form of social memory through which work practices, gendered divisions of labor, skills transmission, and community solidarities have been historically constituted and remembered. At the same time, processes of mechanization, market restructuring, and policy-driven modernization have disrupted these memory-bearing practices, producing dislocation, occupational erasure, and the gradual invisibilization of labor heritage. By analyzing how workers remember, reinterpret, and negotiate the loss and transformation of coir work, the article demonstrates that industrial decline is not only an economic phenomenon but also a cultural and social rupture. The study contends that the fading of coir labor in Alappuzha represents a broader crisis of recognition for traditional working communities, where technological change and development discourse marginalize embodied knowledge, everyday histories, and locally grounded identities. Reframing coir as social memory enables a critical understanding of labor heritage beyond nostalgia, revealing its continuing relevance for debates on work, dignity, and community in post-industrial contexts.

Keywords: social memory, labour heritage, coir industry, Alappuzha, working communities, industrial transformation, occupational identity, traditional knowledge.

1. Introduction

For several centuries, the coir industry has been one of the defining features of Alappuzha's economic, social, and cultural life. Rooted in the region's ecology of coconut cultivation and backwater networks, coir production evolved from a household-based craft into a major industrial activity, shaping patterns of employment, settlement, and community organisation. For generations, coir works structured everyday routines, local identities, and intergenerational transmission of skills, particularly among women who formed the backbone of spinning and weaving activities. The industry thus functioned not merely as a source of livelihood, but as a social institution embedded in the lived experience of coastal communities.

Historically, coir production in Alappuzha was characterised by labour-intensive methods, small-scale units, and close integration between work and domestic life. Workers

exercised a degree of autonomy over the production process, participating in multiple stages from fibre extraction to the creation of finished goods. This mode of production fostered strong occupational identities, collective work cultures, and shared moral frameworks that defined the dignity and meaning of labour. Coir, in this sense, was not only an economic activity but also a way of life, woven into the rhythms of community and the spatial organisation of the town and its surrounding villages.

However, the structure and nature of work in the coir industry have undergone profound transformations over recent decades. Pressures of global competition, changing market demands, and the drive for higher productivity have led to increasing mechanisation and reorganisation of production. What was once a craft-based and household-centred industry has been progressively reconstituted into a factory-oriented and machine-driven system. This shift has altered the very experience of work: labour has become fragmented, tasks have been specialised, and workers' roles have been reduced to narrowly defined operational functions within mechanised processes.

These changes have had far-reaching consequences for the workforce. The reconfiguration of production has weakened traditional forms of employment, reduced the relevance of artisanal skills, and displaced large sections of workers who are unable to adapt to new technological regimes. For many, especially women and elderly workers, the erosion of customary work practices has meant not only economic insecurity but also the loss of occupational identity and social recognition. The transformation of coir production has thus produced a growing disjunction between the industry's technological trajectory and the social worlds that once sustained it.

At the same time, dominant narratives of modernisation and development tend to interpret these changes primarily in terms of efficiency, competitiveness, and market expansion. Such perspectives often overlook the deeper social and cultural costs of industrial restructuring. They obscure the ways in which labour practices encode collective histories, community values, and embodied knowledge, and how the dismantling of these practices reshapes social memory itself. In Alappuzha, the decline of traditional coir work has not only altered patterns of employment but has also disrupted long-standing relationships between work, place, and identity.

This study approaches the coir industry of Alappuzha as a site where labour, memory, and social life intersect. Rather than treating coir solely as an industrial sector in transition, it examines how work practices have functioned as repositories of shared experience and collective meaning. By tracing the transformation of coir labour from craft-based production to mechanised organisation, the article explores how communities remember, reinterpret, and negotiate the erosion of a historically embedded way of life. In doing so, it argues that the decline of traditional coir labour is not merely an economic shift but a social rupture that redefines how work, dignity, and belonging are understood in post-industrial contexts.

2. Review of literature

Scholarship on Alappuzha's coir industry has largely examined it through the lenses of urban transformation, technological change, labour displacement, and institutional governance. Historical studies identify coir as central to the city's emergence as an industrial port, showing how canal networks, port infrastructure, and commercial expansion structured labour settlements and urban morphology (Padath, 2024). Subsequent work situates Alappuzha within peripheral industrialization, arguing that global integration through coir exports simultaneously generated dependency, labour segmentation, and uneven development (Padath, 2025). While this literature establishes coir's economic and spatial significance, labour is mainly treated as a structural category rather than as a site of lived experience.

A substantial body of research analyses technological modernization in the sector. Mechanization is shown to enhance productivity, product diversification, and export competitiveness, particularly in value-added segments (Pratheesh & Florence, 2024). At the same time, modernization restructures labour processes, replacing integrated craft production with fragmented, specialized tasks that reduce worker autonomy and control over output (Pratheesh, 2021). These studies demonstrate how technology reshapes labour relations but largely interpret change in terms of efficiency and competitiveness.

Another key strand addresses labour displacement and spatial reorganization. Empirical studies document declining employment, closure of traditional units, weakening of cooperatives, and relocation of production to neighbouring regions, particularly Tamil Nadu (Pratheesh & Nair, 2022). Export-oriented analyses further reveal a structural paradox: national growth in coir exports has occurred alongside employment contraction, stagnant wages, and declining job security in Kerala's traditional clusters (Padath, 2025). Although these works rigorously map economic outcomes, labour is primarily conceptualized as an input within production systems.

Some scholarship engages with the experiential dimensions of work. Studies on alienation argue that mechanization reduces workers to facilitators of machines, eroding autonomy, occupational identity, and ownership over the labour process (Pratheesh, 2021; Padath, 2025). Research on changing work portfolios similarly shows how artisanal skills are narrowed into specialized operations with limited mobility (Pratheesh & Nair, 2021; Padath, 2025). These contributions are significant in foregrounding subjective dimensions of labour but stop short of interpreting work practices as repositories of collective meaning.

Socio-economic and health-based research highlights low wages, seasonal unemployment, informality, and gendered vulnerability, particularly among women workers (Nair, 1993; Pratheesh, 2025b)). Health studies document chronic illness, respiratory disorders, and musculoskeletal problems arising from physically demanding and unsanitary working conditions (Nair, 1993; Pratheesh, 2025a)). While vital in exposing embodied and gendered costs of labour, this literature remains largely welfare-oriented.

Policy-focused studies evaluate cooperatives, wage structures, and state interventions, showing that institutional frameworks struggle to reconcile modernization with labour protection (KILE, 2016). Recent research (2024–2025) acknowledges the “dual-edged” nature of growth, where export expansion and technological upgrading coexist with labour exclusion, erosion of cooperatives, and rising precarity (Pratheesh & Florence, 2024; Padath, 2025).

Across these strands, existing scholarship convincingly documents industrial growth, technological change, labour displacement, health risks, and institutional decline. However, labour is overwhelmingly treated as an economic variable, policy problem, or social vulnerability. The literature rarely conceptualizes work as a cultural practice through which communities transmit skills, construct identity, and sustain collective memory. This study addresses this gap by reinterpreting coir labour in Alappuzha as social memory, examining how the transformation of work constitutes not only economic restructuring but also a reconfiguration of meaning, dignity, and belonging.

3. Theoretical frame

This study is organised around the premise that labour is not merely a factor of production but a socially embedded practice through which communities produce meaning, continuity, and identity. Work is approached as a historically constituted activity in which skills, routines, and workplace relations function as carriers of collective experience. Within this perspective, coir labour in Alappuzha is understood as a form of social practice that has structured

everyday life, gendered roles, intergenerational knowledge, and community belonging (Pratheesh, 2025).

Industrial transformation is therefore interpreted not only as economic restructuring but as a reconfiguration of meaning. Technological change, spatial relocation of production, and institutional decline are read as processes that unsettle established forms of work, fragment integrated practices, and weaken the symbolic and moral foundations of labour (Pratheesh & Nair, 2022). The shift from household-based and cooperative production to mechanised and market-oriented regimes is treated as a transformation in how work is organised, experienced, and socially valued.

Central to this frame is the idea that labour practices encode memory in embodied skills, work rhythms, spatial arrangements, and shared norms of dignity. When such practices are marginalised or displaced, what is lost is not only employment but also a historically sedimented way of knowing and being. The coir industry in Alappuzha is thus analysed as a site where economic change intersects with cultural continuity, and where the erosion of traditional work forms represents a broader process of social forgetting.

All analytical sections of the article are organised around this lens. Patterns of mechanisation, displacement, and institutional restructuring are interpreted in terms of how they reshape everyday work, reconfigure occupational identities, and transform community-based meanings attached to labour. Rather than treating coir as a declining industry alone, the study reads it as a social world whose transformation reveals the tension between development-oriented rationalities and historically grounded forms of work and belonging.

4. Methodological note

The study is guided by a central research problem: how has the transformation of the coir industry in Alappuzha reconfigured labour not only as employment but as a socially meaningful practice through which memory, identity, and community were historically sustained? The primary objectives are to examine how traditional coir work was embedded in everyday social life, to analyse how technological change and market restructuring have altered work relations and occupational identities, and to understand how workers interpret, remember, and negotiate these changes.

To address these aims, the research adopts a qualitative, interpretive design that aligns with the theoretical emphasis on labour as social practice. Three mutually complementary sources of evidence are integrated. First, archival materials, policy documents, and historical accounts are used to reconstruct the institutional, spatial, and economic contexts within which coir production developed and later transformed. This provides the structural background necessary for interpreting change beyond individual experience.

Second, existing empirical studies on modernization, displacement, health, gendered labour, cooperatives, and export restructuring are systematically reviewed to identify dominant patterns of continuity and rupture in the industry. These sources establish the material conditions—technological shifts, employment contraction, and institutional weakening—within which meanings of work are reconfigured.

Third, qualitative fieldwork was conducted in selected coir-producing localities in and around Alappuzha through semi-structured interviews and informal conversations with workers, cooperative members, and local stakeholders. These narratives were not treated as illustrative anecdotes but as interpretive data through which social meanings of work are articulated. Data were thematically analysed, with attention to skill transmission, workplace relations, dignity of labour, experiences of displacement, and memories of earlier production practices.

Methodologically, the study is designed to complement the theoretical frame: documentary analysis captures structural transformation, while worker narratives reveal how such changes are experienced, remembered, and culturally processed. This triangulation enables the analysis to move beyond outcome-based indicators such as productivity or employment levels and instead examine how industrial change reshapes social memory, occupational identity, and community life. The results and analysis sections are therefore organised around this integrated framework, interpreting economic restructuring through its effects on meaning, belonging, and the lived moral worlds of labour in Alappuzha.

5. Results and analysis

This section presents the findings of the study in relation to the central research problem: how the transformation of the coir industry in Alappuzha has reconfigured labour not only as employment but as a socially meaningful practice embedded in memory, identity, and community life. Rather than treating change as a purely economic outcome, the analysis interprets patterns of technological restructuring, displacement, and institutional decline through their effects on work practices, occupational identities, and the cultural continuity of labour. The results are organised thematically, moving from transformations in the organisation of work to their implications for skills, dignity, and collective memory.

5.1 Reconfiguration of work and the erosion of traditional labor practices

The first and most visible transformation concerns how coir work is organised and experienced. Field narratives, documentary evidence, and secondary studies converge in showing that production has shifted from integrated, household-based and cooperative modes to mechanised, segmented systems. This section analyses how this reorganisation has altered the meaning of work by fragmenting skills, weakening social relations within production, and marginalising practices that once carried shared memory and identity.

Table 1. Transformation of coir work in Alappuzha: Organization, skills, and social meaning

Dimension	Traditional Production Regime	Mechanised / Reorganised Regime	Social Implication
Organisation of work	Household units, cooperatives, community-based production	Factory units, machine-centred processes, outsourcing	Work detached from community life
Skill structure	Multi-stage craft skills; workers involved from fibre extraction to finished goods	Task specialisation; machine operation	Loss of holistic skill and embodied knowledge
Labour autonomy	Worker control over pace and method of production	Standardised operations, machine-led rhythm	Reduced agency and decision-making
Gendered roles	Women central to spinning and weaving; work integrated with domestic space	Limited access to mechanised units; exclusion of older women	Intensified vulnerability and occupational exit
Social relations at work	Collective routines, mutual dependence, shared norms	Individualised tasks, weakened solidarities	Erosion of occupational community
Meaning of work	Source of dignity, identity, and intergenerational continuity	Instrumental employment or residual activity	Decline of labour as social memory

The findings demonstrate that the transformation of coir production in Alappuzha is not merely a technological or organisational shift but a reconstitution of the social meaning of work. Under earlier production regimes, labour was embedded in domestic spaces, cooperative

structures, and everyday community life. Workers exercised control over multiple stages of production, allowing skills to be transmitted across generations and reinforcing a shared sense of dignity and occupational identity. Coir work functioned as a social practice through which collective memory was sustained.

In contrast, the mechanised and reorganised regime fragments production into specialised tasks governed by machine rhythms. Workers' roles are narrowed to operational functions, significantly reducing autonomy and weakening interdependence among workers (Pratheesh, 2021a). This fragmentation has cultural consequences: the disappearance of holistic craft knowledge undermines the continuity of skills as lived traditions, while the relocation of work from households and cooperatives to factory spaces detaches labour from community life.

The gendered impact of this shift is particularly significant. Women, who historically constituted the core of spinning and weaving, face structural exclusion due to skill mismatches, age barriers, and limited access to mechanised units. For many, this represents not only job loss but the erasure of a socially valued identity rooted in work. Consequently, labour ceases to operate as a carrier of memory and becomes a precarious or residual activity.

Overall, this segment establishes that the decline of traditional coir practices involves a transformation in how work is experienced and remembered. The erosion of integrated labour forms marks a shift from work as a culturally embedded way of life to work as a detached economic function. This finding provides the analytical foundation for the subsequent sections, which examine how displacement, institutional weakening, and worker narratives further illuminate the loss of labour as social memory in Alappuzha.

5.2 Displacement, mobility, and the reconstitution of occupational identity

The reorganisation of production in Alappuzha has been accompanied by large-scale labour displacement and altered mobility patterns that extend beyond the loss of jobs. Workers' narratives and institutional records indicate that the decline of household units and cooperatives, combined with the relocation of production to neighbouring regions, has fragmented long-standing occupational pathways. For many workers, particularly those with skills tied to traditional processes, exit from coir work has been involuntary rather than transitional. Employment opportunities in mechanised units require technical competencies and age profiles that exclude a substantial segment of the existing workforce, producing what is experienced locally as occupational closure rather than labour mobility.

Displacement has also been spatial (Pratheesh & Nair, 2021). The migration of production bases to other states has reconfigured the geography of work, converting Alappuzha from a production hub into a peripheral node within a wider supply chain (Pratheesh & Nair, 2021a). This spatial shift weakens the embeddedness of labour in place: work is no longer organised within neighbourhoods, canal-side settlements, and cooperative spaces that once integrated production with social life. As a result, the relationship between occupation and locality—central to workers' sense of belonging—has been disrupted. Workers who remain in the region increasingly depend on irregular, low-intensity engagements or exit the sector altogether, often into informal or casual employment that bears little continuity with their previous skills.

The social consequences of displacement are unevenly distributed. Women, older workers, and those with craft-specific competencies face the steepest barriers to re-entry (Florence & Pratheesh, 2024). Where traditional coir work once provided stable if modest livelihoods embedded in household and community routines, the new regime offers limited points of access. For many, this has meant not merely income loss but the erosion of a socially recognised role. Work that once conferred identity—being a spinner, weaver, or cooperative member—has been replaced by occupational ambiguity or dependency on precarious alternatives. The reconstitution

of occupational identity is therefore marked by a shift from craft-based self-definition to a condition of uncertain attachment to work.

At the institutional level, weakening cooperatives and shrinking collective production have further accelerated this transformation (Pratheesh, 2021). Cooperative spaces historically mediated employment, training, and mutual support; their contraction has removed a key mechanism through which displaced workers might have retained continuity with the industry. Without such intermediating structures, labour adjustment is individualized, and displacement is experienced as personal failure rather than as a systemic outcome of industrial restructuring. This individualisation of risk contributes to the fading of collective narratives that once framed coir work as a shared livelihood.

Taken together, these patterns indicate that displacement in Alappuzha is not simply a matter of labour reallocation. It entails a redefinition of what it means to be a coir worker, severing the link between skill, place, and identity. As work exits community spaces and re-enters as distant, mechanised, or inaccessible employment, the social memory embedded in occupational practice is weakened. The transformation of mobility—from locally rooted continuity to forced exit and precarious substitution—thus represents a fundamental shift in how labour is lived, remembered, and valued.

5.3 Institutions, cooperatives, and the fragmentation of collective work

The transformation of coir labour in Alappuzha has been accompanied by a parallel weakening of institutional structures that historically sustained collective work. Cooperative societies, small production units, and community-based arrangements once functioned not only as mechanisms of employment but also as social spaces where skills were shared, work norms negotiated, and occupational identities reproduced. The contraction of these institutions under conditions of market restructuring and technological upgrading has fundamentally altered how labour is organised and socially experienced.

Evidence from field narratives and policy records indicates that many cooperatives have either ceased operations or shifted toward limited, mechanised production with reduced labour absorption. Where cooperatives once provided relatively stable work, mediated access to markets, and buffered workers from volatility, their present role is increasingly residual. This institutional decline has disrupted long-standing networks of mutual dependence among workers, replacing collective coordination with individualized employment relations. As a result, labour is no longer embedded in shared organisational frameworks that enabled collective bargaining, informal training, and intergenerational continuity of practice.

The erosion of cooperative structures has also transformed the moral economy of work. Earlier forms of production were governed by norms of reciprocity, shared responsibility, and recognition of skill acquired through experience rather than formal certification. These norms shaped how workers evaluated effort, fairness, and dignity. In contrast, the contemporary production environment privileges standardisation, output metrics, and machine compatibility, marginalising experiential knowledge that cannot be easily codified or integrated into mechanised systems. Institutional spaces that once validated such knowledge have diminished, leaving workers with few avenues through which to assert the value of their labour beyond immediate productivity.

This institutional fragmentation further intensifies the individualisation of risk. Without cooperative mediation, workers confront market fluctuations, technological displacement, and employment uncertainty as isolated actors. The disappearance of collective platforms also reduces opportunities for skill transmission and shared learning, accelerating the erosion of embodied practices that historically anchored coir work within community life. For

younger generations, entry into the industry increasingly occurs through detached, short-term engagements rather than through apprenticeship within household or cooperative settings, weakening the continuity between past and present forms of labour.

Importantly, the decline of collective institutions has implications beyond employment. Cooperative spaces once functioned as sites where occupational identity was collectively produced and publicly recognised. Their contraction removes a key arena through which workers could articulate belonging to a shared labour tradition. What remains is a fragmented landscape in which work is experienced as episodic and instrumental, rather than as participation in a socially meaningful practice. In this context, institutional weakening contributes directly to the fading of labour as social memory: as organisational forms that once preserved and reproduced work cultures disappear, the histories embedded in everyday practice lose their social anchorage.

Overall, the restructuring of institutions in Alappuzha reveals that industrial transformation is not confined to production techniques or market orientation. It entails a reconfiguration of the social infrastructures through which labour was collectively organised, valued, and remembered. The fragmentation of cooperative and community-based work thus represents a critical dimension of how coir labour has been culturally and socially displaced in the contemporary period.

5.4 Gender, generation, and the disruption of intergenerational labor continuity

The transformation of coir production in Alappuzha has had uneven consequences across gender and generations, reshaping who participates in the industry and how labour knowledge is transmitted. Historically, women constituted the backbone of spinning, weaving, and household-based production, while skills were passed through familial and community networks that linked work with everyday domestic and social life. These arrangements enabled the continuity of labour practices not through formal training but through embodied learning, shared routines, and observation across generations.

Technological restructuring has weakened these pathways. Mechanised production systems prioritise speed, standardisation, and technical compatibility over experiential knowledge, reducing the relevance of skills developed within household and cooperative settings. Many women workers, particularly those trained in traditional processes, encounter structural barriers to participation in mechanised units due to skill mismatches, age constraints, and spatial relocation of work sites. As a result, exit from the industry is not primarily a matter of choice but of exclusion, disproportionately affecting those whose labour was once most central to production.

Generational discontinuity is equally pronounced. Younger workers are increasingly absent from traditional coir work, either because viable employment within the sector has narrowed or because entry points no longer exist within community-based production spaces. Where earlier generations acquired skills through apprenticeship within households or cooperatives, contemporary engagement tends to occur, if at all, through short-term or peripheral roles in mechanised units. This shift weakens the transmission of craft knowledge and disrupts the social reproduction of occupational identity. Coir work is no longer learned as a way of life but encountered, when it is encountered at all, as fragmented and instrumental labour.

The combined effect of gendered exclusion and generational withdrawal is the erosion of labour continuity as a social process (Pratheesh et al., 2024). Skills that once circulated through families, neighbourhoods, and cooperative networks are increasingly rendered obsolete or unrecognised within dominant production regimes. Workers' narratives frequently frame this loss not simply in terms of income or employment but as the disappearance of a meaningful

inheritance—of knowledge, pride, and belonging associated with work. For women in particular, the decline of household-based production severs the historical integration of labour and domestic life, reconfiguring both economic roles and social identities.

These shifts also alter how work is remembered. In the absence of sustained practice and intergenerational transmission, coir labour persists primarily as recollection rather than as living activity. What remains are narratives of past routines, tools, and collective rhythms that once structured everyday life but now lack institutional and economic support. Memory, in this context, is no longer reproduced through practice but through retrospective accounts of loss and displacement.

The gendered and generational restructuring of the workforce thus reveals a deeper dimension of industrial change. Beyond employment contraction or skill obsolescence, it signals a breakdown in the social processes through which labour traditions are sustained. As women's work is marginalised and younger generations disengage, coir ceases to function as a shared occupational culture and becomes instead a residual or symbolic reference. This transformation underscores that the decline of the industry in Alappuzha is not only a matter of economic transition but also a reconfiguration of how work, identity, and collective memory are socially reproduced.

5.5 Work, narrative, and the persistence of social memory

Although institutional decline, displacement, and technological restructuring have transformed the material conditions of coir production, workers' accounts reveal that labour continues to persist as a form of social memory. In interviews and informal conversations, coir work is repeatedly recalled not only as employment but as a moral and relational practice—structured by shared routines, embodied skills, and collective rhythms of everyday life. These narratives do not merely describe past work; they actively reconstruct its meaning in the present.

Workers frequently frame their experiences through contrasts between “earlier work” and “present conditions.” Descriptions of walking with spinning wheels, collective retting, shared production spaces, and cooperative routines function as mnemonic anchors that link labour to place, family, and community. Such recollections foreground values of mutual dependence, experiential knowledge, and dignity acquired through practice rather than certification. Even among those who have exited the industry, coir work remains central to self-understanding, indicating that occupational identity persists beyond material participation.

These narrative patterns demonstrate that memory is not simply retrospective but socially produced through storytelling, comparison, and evaluation. In recounting the erosion of traditional practices, workers do not present loss as individual misfortune alone but as a collective rupture. The decline of household units, the disappearance of cooperative spaces, and the inaccessibility of mechanised production are interpreted as the dismantling of a shared way of life. Memory thus becomes a critical resource through which workers interpret change, assign responsibility, and preserve the significance of their labour in the absence of institutional recognition.

Importantly, these narratives also reveal selective continuity. While material practices have been displaced, symbolic elements of work—such as pride in craft, identification with specific tasks, and moral claims about “real work”—are actively maintained. In this sense, social memory does not merely record what has vanished; it reorganises meaning under conditions of rupture. Workers' accounts convert embodied labour into narrative heritage, ensuring that coir remains a referent for dignity, belonging, and community even when the industry no longer provides stable livelihoods.

From a methodological standpoint, this demonstrates the value of qualitative narratives as more than descriptive supplements. They function as analytic sites where structural transformation is culturally processed. By thematically analysing how workers remember, compare, and morally evaluate past and present work, the study shows how labour is reconstituted as social memory. This confirms the study's central claim: that industrial change in Alappuzha must be understood not only through employment outcomes or institutional decline but through the ways in which work is remembered, narrated, and endowed with meaning in everyday life.

The persistence of memory in narrative form also reveals the limits of development-centred rationalities. Even as modernization renders traditional skills economically obsolete, workers' recollections preserve alternative valuations of labour grounded in experience, reciprocity, and community. The coir industry thus survives as a social memory long after its material foundations have been weakened. This continuity in meaning, despite discontinuity in practice, underscores that the transformation of coir in Alappuzha is as much a cultural and moral reordering as it is an economic one.

6. Discussion

The findings demonstrate that the transformation of the coir industry in Alappuzha cannot be understood solely in terms of productivity, employment decline, or institutional efficiency. Instead, the restructuring of production has reconfigured the social meaning of work itself. The shift from household and cooperative systems to mechanised, market-oriented regimes has not only fragmented labour processes but has also disrupted the cultural and relational foundations through which work was historically experienced as a shared way of life. What is at stake is therefore not merely occupational change but the erosion of labour as a socially embedded practice.

Across the results, technological reorganisation emerges as a key driver of this transformation. While mechanisation has enabled standardisation and export expansion, it has also narrowed the scope of skills, reduced worker autonomy, and detached production from community life. The replacement of integrated craft labour with segmented machine operations represents a fundamental shift in how work is valued: experiential knowledge and embodied skill give way to technical compatibility and output metrics. This transition explains why displacement is experienced not simply as job loss but as a loss of occupational identity. Workers' inability to re-enter the industry is shaped less by individual deficiency than by structural redefinition of what counts as legitimate labour.

The weakening of cooperatives and collective institutions further intensifies this process. Earlier organisational forms provided more than employment; they sustained norms of reciprocity, facilitated intergenerational learning, and publicly recognised the dignity of craft-based work. Their decline has individualised risk, fragmented labour relations, and removed spaces in which workers could negotiate meaning, rights, and belonging. As institutional mediation disappears, labour adjustment becomes a private burden rather than a shared social concern. This helps explain why restructuring is narrated locally as abandonment rather than transition.

Gendered and generational effects reveal how deeply these changes penetrate everyday life. Women, once central to production through household and cooperative arrangements, face systematic exclusion under mechanised regimes. Younger generations, encountering coir work only as peripheral or precarious activity, no longer inherit the skills or identities embedded in earlier production systems. Together, these dynamics interrupt the social reproduction of labour traditions, transforming coir from a lived occupational culture into a residual or symbolic reference. The industry's decline thus involves not only economic contraction

but also the breakdown of pathways through which work-based identities were historically sustained.

Most significantly, workers' narratives show that labour persists as social memory even after its material foundations have weakened. Accounts of past routines, tools, and collective rhythms do more than recall history; they actively reinterpret industrial change, assign moral value to work, and preserve alternative understandings of dignity and worth. Memory here is not passive remembrance but a cultural practice through which communities make sense of displacement and loss. By foregrounding these narratives, the study demonstrates that industrial restructuring is culturally processed, and that what development frameworks treat as obsolete continues to live on in social meaning.

These findings contribute to broader debates on industrial transition, labour heritage, and development. Much contemporary scholarship evaluates industrial change through indicators of growth, competitiveness, and technological adoption. While such measures capture economic outcomes, they overlook how work is embedded in social relations, identities, and moral worlds. This study shows that when labour practices are dismantled, what is displaced is not only employment but a historically sedimented form of knowledge and belonging. In this sense, the case of Alappuzha illustrates a wider pattern observable in traditional and community-based industries facing global restructuring: development produces not only efficiency but also cultural loss that remains analytically under-theorised.

The implications extend beyond the coir sector. Policies that prioritise modernization without engaging with the social organisation of work risk deepening marginalisation by rendering experiential knowledge invisible. The persistence of labour as social memory suggests that workers' attachments to craft, place, and collective identity cannot be addressed through reskilling or market integration alone. Without institutional spaces that recognise and incorporate these dimensions, industrial transformation is experienced as cultural dislocation rather than progress.

By interpreting coir labour through the lens of social memory, this study repositions industrial decline as a social and cultural rupture, not merely an economic adjustment. It highlights the need for analytical frameworks that account for how work produces meaning, how that meaning is disrupted by technological and institutional change, and how communities actively negotiate loss through memory and narrative. In doing so, the article contributes to an emerging body of work that treats labour heritage not as nostalgia, but as a critical site for understanding the human consequences of development and industrial transition.

7. Conclusion

This study has re-examined the coir industry of Alappuzha not simply as a sector in economic decline but as a social world in transformation. By analysing changes in work organisation, displacement, institutional weakening, and gendered and generational exclusion, it demonstrates that industrial restructuring has reconfigured labour from a socially embedded practice into a fragmented and increasingly marginal activity. What has been lost is not only employment but a historically constituted form of work through which identity, dignity, and community were sustained.

The findings show that technological upgrading and market integration, while enhancing productivity and export potential, have simultaneously eroded the cultural foundations of labour. Mechanisation narrows skills and detaches work from everyday social life; the decline of cooperatives dissolves collective structures of recognition; and gendered and generational shifts interrupt the transmission of embodied knowledge. Together, these processes transform coir from a lived occupational culture into a residual or symbolic reference.

Crucially, the study reveals that labour does not disappear with institutional decline. Through workers' narratives, coir persists as social memory—carried in recollections of practice, moral evaluations of work, and claims to dignity rooted in experience rather than certification. Memory thus becomes a site of continuity amid rupture, preserving meanings that economic frameworks render obsolete. This insight repositions industrial change as a cultural and social process as much as an आर्थिक or technical one.

By foregrounding labour as social memory, the article contributes a critical perspective to debates on development, heritage, and industrial transition. It argues that modernization policies that disregard the social organisation of work risk producing not only exclusion but also forms of cultural loss that remain unaccounted for in dominant assessments of progress. The case of Alappuzha suggests that sustaining livelihoods in traditional industries requires more than technological adaptation; it demands institutional arrangements that recognise embodied knowledge, collective identity, and the moral economies of labour.

Ultimately, this study calls for a rethinking of how industrial decline is understood and addressed. Coir in Alappuzha is not merely a fading industry but a repository of social meaning whose transformation reshapes how communities remember, value, and imagine work itself. Recognising this dimension is essential if development is to be evaluated not only by growth and efficiency, but by its capacity to preserve dignity, belonging, and the lived histories of labour.

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