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## Agrarian Change, Landlessness and Multi- axial Deprivation

The Case of the Paniyas in Kerala

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## Abstract

This paper is an ethnographic exploration of the livelihood negotiations of the landless Paniya Adivasi (indigenous) community in Kerala, India. Through this research, I attempt to open a window into the workings of the growth of India's emerging economy at the rural grassroots. The study finds that landlessness and agrarian change are pushing the Paniyas into a state of deprivation from multiple axes. While work in paddy farming is fast disappearing, they are also being replaced from two other sectors where they sought livelihood - construction and capitalist ginger farming - by other labour communities demanding cheaper wages. Though the Paniyas sought cultivable land from the state to escape this precarity, it is uncertain how state-redistributed land can improve their living conditions in the wake of disappearing agriculture and falling state support for farming. Aralam, a large land redistribution project, has been witnessing the Paniyas abandoning redistributed land. While social movements representing the Adivasis have consistently demanded cultivable land to make peasants of landless Adivasis as a solution to their poverty, the uncertainty surrounding agriculture, given the agrarian change in Kerala's service-and-remittance driven economy, seems not to be factored into their narratives. The state government treats Adivasi landlessness as a residual issue that can be solved through the distribution of an acre of land to each landless household. I explore what this form of land redistribution means in the times of agrarian changes. This multi-axial nature of marginalisations, triggered by landlessness and agrarian change, continue even as the overall economy reports high "growth". Theoretically, the paper tries to understand how land is connected to the agrarian question of labour, given Henry Bernstein's argument that the agrarian question of capital in emerging economies has been bypassed and that the focus should now be on labour. Through my field observations, I drive home the point that the sub-national level is important for an analysis of the actual workings of an "emerging economy" and that everyday negotiations of marginalised people can provide a potent critique of macro-level growth patterns.

## Keywords

Agrarian change, indigenous peoples, land, poverty, social exclusion

## Acronyms

AGMS                      Adivasi Gothra Mahasabha  
MGNREGA Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Act

## I. Introduction

In post-liberalisation India, agriculture no longer generates surplus to fuel industrialisation. In such a backdrop, Bernstein (2006) and Lerche (2013) suggest that attention must be drawn towards the agrarian question of labour, now that the classical agrarian question of capital has been bypassed. Although the agrarian question of labour continues to receive scholarly attention (Pattenden, 2016; Roy, 2018; Naidu & Ossome, 2016), these studies often club small/marginal peasants and landless agricultural labourers, warranting clarity on the specific experiences produced by landlessness. Mintz (1974) had noted this “concealment” in the literature on peasantry early on. In parallel, while studies on Adivasis, the indigenous peoples of India, have devoted considerable attention to land acquisition for infrastructure projects and resistances in response (Baviskar, 1995; Shah, 2010; Sundar, 2016), stories of landless Adivasis vis-à-vis labour relations and struggles for land have received less attention. Kabra and Mahalwal (2018, p. 3) observe that “Dispossession is a sudden, massive and one-time action that foregrounds the role of the state in disrupting local lives and livelihoods. “Land wars” beyond sites of large-scale, sudden or one-time displacement and those that proceed incrementally over a large duration of time, however, remain in the margins. The land struggles of the Paniya Adivasi community in Wayanad district in the state of Kerala, southern India, represents one such case. The Paniyas have lived in slavery under feudalism in the pre-independence era and faced alienation of any land they possessed through waves of in-migration to the highlands of Wayanad in 1930s through 1950s (Kjosavik & Shanmugaratnam, 2015). Adivasi landlessness in contemporary Kerala has been variedly argued to be the flipside of Kerala’s achievements in social development (Steur, 2009; Devika, 2010) or as the fallout of the crisis faced by the model *per se* under liberalisation (Kjosavik & Shanmugaratnam, 2004). The issue has spawned many social movements, most notably the Adivasi Gothra Mahasabha (AGMS, “the grand assembly of Adivasis”). In this chapter, I draw on my conversations with members of the Paniya community in Wayanad to understand what sustains their ongoing demands for cultivable land, read against the context of Kerala’s deagrarianisation. I proceed to delineate the multiple axes through which the Paniyas face loss of livelihoods. I thus attempt to draw attention towards the multi-axial nature in which the agrarian question of labour work on the ground.

This paper is organised into four sections. The next section provides a historical background of the Paniya claims to land. Section 3 attempts to locate these claims in the context of agrarian changes underway in Kerala. In Section 4, I elaborate the sense in which I use the term “agrarian changes” and summarise the characteristics of Kerala’s agrarian crisis. Section 5 elaborates the conceptual tools used in the paper. Section 6 lays out the ethnographic observations on the exclusions faced by Paniyas in the wake of landlessness and agrarian change and explains how these experiences constitute their claims to land. Section 7 concludes. The paper draws on nine months of ethnographic research conducted in Kerala between 2017 and 2018. Interviews were conducted with members of the Paniya community, social movement leaders, frontline workers of the tribal development department of the state government and government officials at the local and district levels, supplemented with participant observations on Adivasi settlements, land struggles, Adivasi village assemblies and activist-led demonstrations across Kerala. The fieldwork was anchored in Ippipaadi grama panchayat<sup>1</sup> next to Sulthan Bathery town which allowed me to understand the agrarian changes related to urbanisation and their impact on Paniya livelihoods.

## 2. Paniya Claims to Land: The Past

Geetha was confident that we could sit down in front of her shack and talk, despite the stares from men in the “colony”. There was clearly no other space available in the cramped settlement and Geetha was insistent that space constraints should not deter our conversations. In a nutshell, colonies are ghettos that present the starkness of Adivasi landlessness in Kerala. I am in Kottavazha, one of the 5,000 Adivasi colonies in the state. Geetha came here after marriage. Her husband does sundry work and the only regular source of income is *thozhilurappu* wages that she earns<sup>2</sup>. Space constraints at her in-laws’ two-room house pushed her to move out with her three children and erect a tarpaulin shack in the little space that was left of the colony. In one of my several visits to Kottavazha, Geetha tells me about her natal home:

“Have you seen the house next to Palkatti bus stop? That was where I was born. My *vallyappan* and *vallyamma* earned wages of 8 annas or one seer paddy. They grazed buffaloes for the landlord, Kunjalikka. They had eight cents of land that was granted to them by the landlord’s ancestors. Once

<sup>1</sup> The names of the grama panchayat, colonies and interlocutors have been changed to protect privacy. A grama panchayat is the lowest tier of local government in rural India.

<sup>2</sup> Thozhilurappu in Malayalam means employment guarantee and refers to the Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Act (MGNREGA), which promises 100 days of public work to one adult member of a rural household.

when their thatched house caught fire, *vallyappan* gave the *pattayam* of the land to Kunjalikka for safekeeping. The landlord added it to his own *pattayam* and never returned it. It has been 30 to 40 years. The house is almost the same - leaking and crumbling. Kunjalikka's family says they don't have the *pattayam* anymore. I went to Mananthavady and asked; a copy of the document was found there. They took away our land then, which is why we are in this condition today."<sup>3</sup>

I recognise the house immediately as I have passed by it several times. The dilapidated house and its poverty stand out in the Palkatti market place; it is right on the road and the only household among the shops. I am in such disbelief that I ask Geetha several questions to confirm its location. She is clearly one of those several Paniyas whose ancestors had their lands alienated from them. The Paniyas have seen a past of slavery under feudal landlords that continued well into the post-independence era and ended - only after a failed Maoist uprising in the 1970s (Steur, 2017). Here, I identify three conjunctures in the history of Adivasi land alienation and resistance that laid the foundations of the Paniya claims for cultivable land that surfaced in the 2000s.

The first conjuncture involved the immigration of communities with higher caste-class status into the highlands of Wayanad. Kunjalikka represents one of those migrants who settled in Wayanad from the plains. Waves of migration by the Nair and Ezhava castes of Hindus, Muslims and Syrian Christians from the plains of Kerala over the 1940s through 1960s resulted in alienation of Adivasi lands, most of which did not have title documents and were available to the Adivasi communities on a layered system of access and management rights (Kjosavik & Shanmugaratnam, 2007). This marks the early signs of the process of slow, staggered dispossession that represent the past of the present-day colonies.

The second conjuncture can be traced to the 1970s when land reforms were implemented in the state and an important piece of legislation reversing Adivasi land alienation was passed. The famed land reforms of Kerala, termed as "redistribution of privileges" by Herring (1980), largely entailed the conversion of tenancy to permanent ownership and to a smaller extent the conferral of permanent rights on plots on which labourer houses stood. Although "land to the tiller" was the rallying cry behind the reforms, the aim of redistributing surplus land above the legislated ceilings failed in its implementation (Herring, 1983). From the

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3 Vallyappan is grandfather and vallyamma is grandmother in this context. 8 annas is equivalent to 0.50 rupees today. The seer is roughly a kilogram. Pattayam refers to land title. Mananthavady is a place in Wayanad district where the government office that maintains land records - the Regional Revenue Office - is situated.

continuing landlessness of the Paniyas in Wayanad, it can be inferred that the move to confer rights on homesteads also failed to benefit this community. A few years later, in 1975, the Kerala Scheduled Tribes (Restriction of Transfer of Lands and Restoration of Alienated Lands) Act was passed in order to track down lands taken away from Adivasis and restore them to their previous owners. However, pressure from the landowning lobbies led to the dilution and repeal of this law through the Kerala Restriction of Transfer by and Restoration of Lands to Scheduled Tribes Act 1999 (Bijoy, 1999; Bijoy & Ravi Raman, 2003). The 1999 law inserted a clause that exempts the restoration of land below two hectares. As a compensatory measure, it sought to provide an acre of land each to all landless Adivasi households in the state (Sudheesh, 2018).<sup>4</sup> This legislation brought in a key shift in land claims from restoration of alienated lands to compensatory one-acre land. Importantly, the interval between the two legislations was used by land appropriators to forge documents for the lands appropriated. Kunjalikka's encroachment of land owned by Geetha's grandparents can be traced to this period.

The third conjuncture belongs to the land struggles of the 2000s that firmly established the Adivasi claims for cultivable land in the mainstream political discourse in Kerala. The most prominent of these was the struggle by the AGMS, led by the charismatic activist C.K. Janu. It began with the *kudilketti samaram* in 2001, when Janu led landless Adivasis to the state capital Thiruvananthapuram and erected shacks (*kudil*) in front of the government secretariat to start a full-fledged struggle (*samaram*). The AGMS was born in these shacks. Janu firmly asserts that all problems faced by Adivasis - poverty, malnutrition, alcoholism, household squabbles - can be distinctly traced to landlessness and that ownership of cultivable land was the only way out. After a two-month protest, an agreement was signed with the government (then led by the Indian National Congress) that guaranteed an acre of land to every landless Adivasi household by the end of 2002. Though the agreement saw a spirited initiation, it soon fizzled out, missing the deadline. This prompted Janu and followers to occupy the Muthanga forests - a few kilometres away from Kottavazha colony - in February 2003. The protesters dreamt of establishing an "Adivasi republic" (Steur, 2017). The struggle was violently crushed by the state government. Fifteen years later, a list of participants in this struggle has been identified as beneficiaries for allotment of an acre of land. Many of Geetha's relatives had participated in the struggle and are still awaiting the inclusion of their names in the list. This event was a major landmark in which the Adivasi identity took a political turn and *swathwa rashtriyam* (identity politics) matured to stand against the communist parties' *varga rashtriyam* (class politics) (Steur, 2011). The Communist Party of India (Marxist) and the Indian National

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4 An acre is 0.4 ha. A cent or one-hundredth of an acre is a commonly used unit of land in Kerala.



Congress - the two major electoral parties of the state - established their own Adivasi wings shortly: the Adivasi Kshema Samithi (“Adivasi welfare forum”) and the Adivasi Congress respectively. Slowly and steadily, the difference between the landed and the landless Adivasi communities also got amplified (Kjosavik 2010).

This conjunctural analysis sought to peel out the layers of history that culminated in Geetha’s landlessness and triggered the demands for cultivable land by landless Adivasis in the state. Yet, the ethnographer was interested in understanding what the claims for cultivable land looked like in a scenario of deagrarianisation, i.e. the large-scale quitting of agriculture by farmers across Kerala, including in Wayanad. This was prompted by the bleak picture that farmers belonging to upper castes as well as the landed Kuruma Adivasi community provided of the agrarian scene in Wayanad. I dwell upon this scenario in the next section.

### **3. The Present: Land Claims in Times of Agrarian Change**

“What will they do with the land in these times of crisis? Is land the way to go ahead?” asked Sujith, a Communist friend interested in Adivasi land rights, in one of our several research-related conversations. I knew that the obvious answers were that this was a matter of social justice, that Adivasi landlessness to a large extent exemplifies the failure of the Communist-led Kerala model of development, that land could be used as an asset if not for farming. However, two strands of interactions brought before me that agrarian changes, which I unpack shortly, were a real factor to be considered in Adivasi land politics. The first was with Paniya men and women who owned a few cents of land, but pointed out their inability to seek loans or sell their assets because of laws that restrict the transfer of Adivasi lands to non-Adivasis. Redistributed lands cannot be sold by law in Kerala, as elsewhere. Chammi, a Paniya woman who received land in the Aralam land redistribution project, was emphatic: “We can’t cut a branch from the trees without permission, let alone sell it or use it as collateral for loans. How do we call it our land, then?”

The second was larger interactions with landed farmers, including those from the landed Kuruma Adivasi community, who expressed their inability to hold on to farming. Inductively, this shows that while the Paniyas would be stuck with farming as the main use to which they can employ any land they receive, they would be facing the agrarian crisis looming large in the economy of the state.

Gopi was once a participant in the Muthanga struggle and has been selected as a beneficiary who would receive an acre of land. He is not disappointed that the news has come 15 years after the struggle. I walk up to Aripaady colony in



Ippipaady grama panchayat on a hot afternoon, along with the tribal promoter for the colony. The promoter soon gets busy in enquiring who has yet to receive ration cards for subsidised grains from the public distribution system. This is yet another increment to the colony's improvement, after it received a facelift with concrete houses built with public funds. Considering the scarcity of land, houses were built with two storeys to accommodate two different households. Now, 11 of the 20-odd households here have received land meant for Muthanga beneficiaries. Gopi currently does sundry work. The second time I visit Aripaady, he would be gone away for the day for painting work. The third time, he would be away in the forests for a week with his wife to collect *noonji*, a snail that is part of the Paniya diet. Access to these forests was highly restricted. I realise this while collecting molluscs from a lake here once along with Babu, Gopi's son, who was visibly scared of being seen by the forest watchers.

This foreword helps understand Gopi's excitement in moving to Meppadi, a site in Wayanad where land has been identified for distribution and becoming the owner of his own one acre. He recently went there with Janu to see the site. "The soil is really good," he tells me. "But is it *vaya* (wetland), Gopiyetta?" I ask out of curiosity to know what he plans to grow. It is highland and Gopi plans to grow cassava. Clearing the land and preparing it for cultivation would take at least six months, but Gopi is confident he and his wife can do it by themselves. He clearly sees a future in becoming a peasant relying on family labour.

Meanwhile, Janu herself has been in the news. C.K. Janu, the firebrand leader of the Adivasis, has bought a car. A photograph of hers holding the steering wheel has come out in the latest issue of the Mathrubhumi Weekly and is circulating rapidly, offline and online. Tea shops, WhatsApp groups and Facebook discussions have become battlegrounds: Janu has abandoned the Adivasi way of life; Janu has betrayed the Adivasis; Janu disappoints again after joining the BJP; Janu is receiving funds from the BJP. The battle - seemingly on Adivasi authenticity - was for me linked to the agrarian future that Janu saw in land.

"Why can't the Adivasi own a car?" Janu's sharp retort comes as an interrogation of the mainstream Malayali society's stereotypes about landless Adivasis living in squalor. Shortly after, she explains in an interview that the money came from the pepper she planted in her one-acre plot that was received through a long struggle in the 1990s. Pepper attracted a boom price of Rs. 700 per kilogram in the previous year and provided half the money she needed. The other half came through a bank loan that she is confident of repaying. Janu states assertively, "My story proves how Adivasis can better their lives if they become owners of cultivable land".

However, Janu's pepper and Gopi's soon-to-be-planted cassava are crops that have been crucially hit by changes in Kerala's agrarian economy. Paddy, the crop

on which the Paniya community of Balan and the Adiya community (also landless) of Janu has traditionally worked on as labourers, have been the worst hit of all. The non-viability of farming in Kerala is generally referred to as a crisis. In parallel, complex land-use changes have also been underway in Wayanad that are intricately linked to the agrarian sector. The most notable ones are the conversion of paddy farms into areca nut farms and commercial banana plantations, conversion of paddy farms also for real estate development, enclosure of forests for conservation, mushrooming of tourism projects that feed on the greenery of the forests and remaining paddy fields and urbanisation. In the field site, urbanisation was officialised through the conversion of the Sulthan Bathery grama panchayat into a municipality, bringing in additional public funds for the development of “urban amenities”. I use the term “agrarian change” to refer to these interlinked, complex processes underway in the landscape of Wayanad. Although I do not elaborate on how these changes are linked to the circulation of capital so as to keep my focus on their impacts on landlessness, Muenster and Muenster (2012) do so by reading nature tourism, neoliberalised forest conservation and commercial forms of farming as markers of capitalist agrarian change, triggered by the non-viability of traditional paddy farming. Next, I go on to elaborate the agrarian changes underway in Kerala, and Wayanad in particular.

#### **4. “Agrarian Crisis” and “Agrarian Change”: How Land in Wayanad is Transforming**

The etymology of the name Wayanad is usually explained using its expanded form “*Vayalnadu*”, which signals the meaning “land of crop fields”. The typical farm in Wayanad has paddy in the low-lying parts, vegetable gardens on the slope and coffee, areca, pepper or coconut in the upland (Jose & Padmanabhan, 2016). The conversion process in the paddy lands begins with the planting of ginger, banana and cassava that hardens the soil. In the next step, areca or coffee is planted, hardening the soil further. This prepares the ground for construction of houses (*ibid.*). In their study, Jose and Padmanabhan found that the most common reasons cited for the move away from farming, paddy in particular, were population pressure on land, reduced viability and scarcity of labour. The researchers report that the switch to pepper and vanilla occurred in the 1970s and the switch to banana, ginger and areca in the 1990s, when paddy was found extremely unviable. Paddy area in 2011-2012 fell to a third of what it was in 1982-1983, while area under banana increased by three times between 1996-97 and 2012-2013. This is the scenario that has been called a “crisis” in the agrarian sector.

As I walk behind Kunhiraman, balancing myself on the farm bunds in his paddy fields, we hear a group of Paniya women labourers singing to themselves. Kunhiraman belongs to the landed Kuruma Adivasi community and retired as a bureaucrat in the forest department. “They are making fun of us”, said Kunhiraman,

explaining why the labourers burst into a sudden song. For Kunhiraman, the non-viability of paddy farming is explained by high labour costs and unpredictable rains. I spot ginger in one corner, areca in another and banana in a third. Not large-scale, but waiting to get there. Rajan, a labourer comes up to me and asks if I have come to study agriculture. As I explain my project, he exclaims, “We have worked in farming traditionally, so we cannot leave it immediately. We feel sad when we see farms lying fallow”. But more than the fallow lands, I worry about labour in plantations. I would eventually visit a number of banana plantations and see Paniya labourers, but I would hardly see any woman labourer. When Rajan quips in front of Kunhiraman that the newly introduced banana has dried up the pond that we are standing next to, I wonder if Rajan cannot himself become a banana or ginger farmer to take advantage of the high prices they enjoy in the current agrarian climate. However, as Muenster (2012) reminds us, a large number of the farmer suicides in Wayanad occurred precisely among those who switched to these two crops while seeking a way out of paddy.<sup>5</sup>

The emerging picture of agrarian crisis in Wayanad mirrors that in the larger context of Kerala. While agriculture contributed 22% of the state’s Gross Domestic Product (SGDP) in the year 2000, this figure fell to 10% in 2016 (Harilal & Eswaran, 2017). In these sixteen years, the service sector swelled in size from 51% to 60% of the SGDP. The study by Harilal and Eswaran finds that the root cause of the dismal state of agriculture in the state is not *scarcity* of land, labour, fertile soil or information. *Preferences* have changed, such that land, labour and capital are moving away from agriculture. This is valid for not only food crops, but also for the entire agricultural sector. In the past three decades, Kerala has lost paddy at the rate of 20,000 hectares every year (*ibid.*). Acreage under cassava, pepper and coconut have seen constant decline. Pepper prices currently stand around Rs. 350 per kg, half of what Janu earned last year. Pepper prices have been volatile, sensitive to local agrarian crisis as well as supplies coming in from other markets, notably Vietnam (Raman, 2018). A one-acre plot like the one that Balan received would make a net income of Rs. 9,000 in a year, while the costs would be a minimum of Rs. 12,000, if we go by the estimates of Harilal and Eswaran, who characterise the “dilution, scattering and desertion” of capital from agriculture as “deaccumulation” (*ibid.*). In this scenario, the authors note that the asset function of land dominates over the production function. However, as we saw before, the

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5 Indigenous people trying out commercial crops with volatile prices to escape poverty and falling prey to price slumps has been documented elsewhere, for example in Li (Li, 2014) where the Lauje people tried cocoa in Sulawesi, Indonesia. By contrast, the state-sponsored scheme of planting rubber in the lands received under the Forest Rights Act by the Jhumia Adivasi community in Tripura has been reported to be a success so far (Pereira, 2009; Karat & Rawal, 2014).

Adivasis are constrained by legal hurdles in making use of the lands they receive or own as assets<sup>6</sup>.

Thus, Gopi's plans to plant cassava and become a small peasant-petty commodity producer or Janu's confidence in pepper and progress stands in stark contrast to this larger trend of deagrarianisation and agrarian crisis. Unlike in parts of central India, where Adivasis hold distinct territories of land under the Fifth Schedule of the Indian constitution, the Paniyas in Wayanad live intermixed with other communities - geographically as well as in terms of labour relations - such that the large economic changes in the state directly affect them. The reasons for the crisis indicated in the footnote above point that this scenario of deagrarianisation is not a phase, but is here to stay. Kannan and Pushpangadan (1990) suggest that small farms could be aimed at either maximisation of surplus or maximisation of income. It is too early to say which objective dominates the efforts of Paniyas who have just started to receive land (Janu seems to aim at the former and Gopi at the latter), but the current scenario of deagrarianisation suggests that breaking even alone is going to be difficult.

Further, in Wayanad, the agrarian crisis has prompted a search for new forms of accumulation that are in turn transforming the landscape. Liberalised forest conservation and nature tourism were noted above. From one of the grama panchayat offices that I visited, I learnt that this panchayat alone has 44 tourist resorts, each built on a minimum sprawl of two acres (Sudheesh, 2017). A further development is speculative ginger farming by capitalist farmers in the neighbouring districts of Karnataka. Ginger farming produced new wealth for old

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6 Different scholars have advanced different theses to explain how Kerala's agrarian crisis came about. An analysis of these theses is beyond the scope of the paper; hence I give only a few pointers. Historian K.K.N. Kurup observes that an early instance of large-scale conversion of paddy fields into spice farms occurred when the export of spices to the United Soviet Socialist Republic (USSR) went up in the 1970s. However, spice prices fell in the 1990s with the fall of the USSR in the late 1980s. The misery was exacerbated by liberalisation of the economy and removal of trade barriers through the Uruguay Round agreements (Raghavan 2006). Harilal and Eswaran (2017) note that the agrarian crisis began soon after the implementation of the land reforms in the 1970s that caused the fragmentation of farms and reduction of economies of scale. However, Balakrishnan (2001) had argued in an earlier paper that rather than the land reforms, the spending boom fuelled by migration of Malayalis to the Persian Gulf, following the oil sector boom in these countries in 1973, could be a better explanation. The spending boom worked like a Dutch Disease in the "small, open economy of Kerala" and triggered a construction boom, creating pressure on land and rendering agriculture non-competitive.

farmers in Wayanad, a trend which saw in the gradual transformation of Sulthan Bathery. The most glaring signifier of this is the Mint Mall that greets one while stepping into the town. Mint Mall and a dozen other building complexes were built on “ginger money” earned from Karnataka and mark the rapid urbanisation of the place. Tony, one of the more than ten thousand ginger farmers who made a windfall and turned a millionaire, insists that “there is no such thing as an agrarian crisis here” and that “farmers say there is a crisis the moment prices go down”. The new avenues of accumulation have thus produced a set of crisis deniers. The desperation for new methods of accumulation by disgruntled farmers has also invited eccentric agrarian experiments: Muenster (2016) notes the growing popularity of “zero-budget natural farming” in Wayanad, an initiative that stands close to right-wing Hindu ideals of glorifying vegetarianism and the native cow and involves an attempt to attain independence from market (and zero production costs). The subscribers of the movement, curiously Syrian Christian farmers, represent the search for alternative modes of accumulation after the “neoliberal crisis” that has hit the agrarian sector in Kerala (*ibid.*). I use the term “agrarian change” to refer to these interlinked processes of sectoral changes in the economy, land-use changes and emerging new forms of accumulation in Wayanad.

### a. Why Land Still?

The picture I paint of Adivasi land claims in times of agrarian crisis might be a sobering one. I next move forward to explore what sustains the Adivasi claims for land despite this sobering context. Why do they not move out of cultivable land as the claim, considering the agrarian changes, which would seem to be the “rational” choice to make? Why do they not seek alternatives from the state, such as welfare measures, especially in Kerala where the state is known for its provision of generous welfare measures? I received vague replies whenever I posed this directly to Paniya interlocutors, pushing me to scratch beneath the “ethnographically visible”. Scattered stories of the Paniyas negotiating landlessness and agrarian changes through precarious livelihoods begin to bring out the answers. With agrarian change, the nature of precarity is transforming. Geetha, who we met before, was an agricultural labourer and now relies entirely on *thozhilurappu*. Because of a tussle between the Paniyas and upper caste and Syrian Christians working in the local *thozhilurappu* site, Geetha wants separate allocation of work to the Paniyas (I elaborate on this tussle in Section 6). But the demand was met with derision: “When I put forward my demand strongly to them (the upper-caste neighbours), they mocked at me, asking ‘How can you be allocated separate work - your people have no land. Where will you work?’”

Geetha’s attempts at surviving the agrarian crisis through *thozhilurappu* are thwarted by casteist attitudes that conspicuously relates to her landlessness. A



number of such anecdotes suggested to me the need to look for the Paniyas' lived experiences that are themselves transforming coevally with agrarian changes. In the next section, I elaborate how agrarian change itself can be explored as a power of exclusion. The section that succeeds elaborates how these exclusions occur simultaneously from multiple directions.

## **5. Landlessness, Agrarian Change and Classes of Labour**

The links between landlessness, agrarian change and rural labour relations in India have been deliberated on by a long tradition of scholarship in India. While the heterogeneity of these links across and within states in India makes any generalisation difficult (Byres, 1999), some “stylised shifts” have been identified in terms of transforming forms of bondage, informalisation including through contracts, reliance on intra-village and migrant labour, and use of “extra-economic sanctions along with voluntary labour (Rao, 1999). Increasing political mobilisation of agricultural labourers and feminisation of rural labour are two other trends that have been reported (Kapadia & Lerche, 1999). Heller (Heller, 1999) has noted that labour in Kerala has secured impressive wage rates through class mobilisation. By contrast Steur (2017) argues in the case of landless Adivasis in Kerala that these achievements that formed a part of the Kerala model of development have crumbled down under pressure from the neoliberal influx of capital. The precarity that resulted and the failure of the Communist Party of India (Marxist) to take account of this with their limited class politics resulted in the embrace of the trope of indigeneity by the Adivasi Gothra Mahasabha. My effort in the next section will be to flesh out the kinds of insecurities that are being produced by a force closer to the ground - agrarian change.

Bernstein (2006) locates land struggles as a productive site to understand the agrarian questions of labour, along with collective actions for better living conditions. Warning that land may not be the only site of struggle for the global proletariat and that it would not be appropriate to theorise land struggles as efforts in re-peasantisation, Bernstein points out that land struggles are “far more complex and contradictory, and by extension more diverse” than is often suggested by their advocates (p. 456). He suggests that this is especially the case when labour today is represented not by a cogent proletariat, semi-proletariat or peasantry, but various “classes of labour” trying to eke out a living by selling their labour, regardless of whether they have land or not. Further, the classes of labour are “fragmented” - they use a combination of wage employment, self-employment and small-scale farming, each of which is subject to oppressive forces along intersections of class, gender, caste, among others. In the case of the Paniyas, the preference for land over welfare clearly shows that land is a clear site of struggle. The demand for cultivable land might seem to be an effort towards

romantic re-peasantisation at first glance. A closer look at the links between this demand and the everyday struggles of the various classes of labour among the Paniyas would show that the demand originates out of the relationship between landlessness and insecurity as perceived by the Paniyas on an everyday basis.

Lerche (2013) adds to this concept by pointing out the footloose nature of the classes of labour as they try out different livelihood options. Building on Breman's observations on footloose labour in India, Lerche observes that "land reforms might help towards subsistence by way of providing miniature subsistence farm plots for such labour" (p. 386). Lerche points out the usefulness of using the framework of classes of labour in a scenario in which the agrarian question of capital in India has been bypassed and the agrarian question of labour needs attention. In my view, what is important to understand is the experience of landlessness and that of negotiating the classes of labour through various insecure livelihoods. More precisely, as I shall show, it is the experience of being pushed out from one class of labour to another that drives the Paniyas to own land. Central to understanding these experiences is how they are formed in the stratified social context of Wayanad. Such a relational approach helps bring out the power dynamics that lie beneath these experiences.

Pattenden (2016) explains the composition of classes of labour thus:

"classes of labour, understood here as net sellers of labour-power who do not produce a surplus, include (i) households that only work as wage-labourers; (ii) those who work more as wage-labourers than on their own land (and/or in other forms of petty production (see below); and (iii) those who primarily work on their own land (and/or in other forms of petty production) but who also work as wage-labourers. The term 'dominant class' refers to net buyers of labour who tend to produce a surplus and includes those who produce exclusively through hired labour".

I attend to capture the specific labour-selling experiences that the *landless* go through as they move between classes of labour. Some of these labour-selling experiences could involve state-sponsored public works programme. Further, classes of labour also help shed light on the growing class differentiation between various Adivasi groups. The landed Adivasi groups that I interviewed are adapting better to agrarian changes and have succeeded in escaping poverty, in spite of being traditionally dependent on land for livelihood. As Pattenden points out, the class-relational approach helps in tracing the "complexity, unevenness and lack of linearity" of labour experiences and therefore tends not to be reductionist or teleological in terms of making generalisations. Further, the class-relational approach understands poverty as relational, i.e. influenced by "historically development economic and political relations" between the poor and the others (Mosse 2010, 1171, cited in Pattenden 2017).



Shah and Lerche (2018) argue that “the entrenchment of social difference in the expansion of capitalism takes place through at least three interrelated processes: inherited inequalities of power; super-exploitation based on casual migrant labour; and conjugated oppression (that is the intertwined multiple oppressions based on caste, tribe, class, gender and region)” (p.2). This renders them into surplus population. The authors draw attention to the distinction between *naukri* and *kam* or work/job and labour - the same distinction could be made between *joli* and *pani* in Malayalam. Shah and Lerche prefer the term “conjugated oppression” over intersectionality to refer to the ways in which caste, class, gender, region, language, race and other social signifiers can intersect to place a person in a position of oppression. As the next section shows, conjugated oppressions at the intersection of class and Adivasi being operate through multiple axes to place the Paniyas in a position of precarity.

## **6. Agrarian Change and Exclusions**

This section attempts at fulfilling two purposes: (1) Demonstrating that exclusions are being produced in the context of agrarian change in Wayanad from multiple directions that cumulatively place the Paniyas in a state of extreme precarity, (2) The everyday experience of these exclusions, intricately linked to the agrarian changes, shape the sustained claims for arable land.

### **a. Pushed out of Paddy: Pragmatic Hierarchies**

Paddy is a signifier of the slave past of the Paniyas. The term “agrestic slaves” used often in academic literature to refer to them imply their relationship with this specific crop. The gradual disappearance of paddy signifies at the same time the disappearance of feudalism from and the sluggish, hesitant arrival of capitalism in Kerala’s paddy farming. Although the implementation of land reforms in the 1970s meant that the predatory landlord class became extinct and labourers slowly started to sell their labour power for wages, capital accumulation that would be reinvested in either paddy farming or industries never really took shape. Capital went to cash crops, such as tea, coffee and rubber, starting with the British and continued by the Malayalis. As a strikingly large body of literature in India has shown, labour relations continued to be characterised by bondage of various degrees. Labour mobilisation in Kerala had raised minimum wages in all sectors including paddy farming and systematised working hours. I was interested to see what all these achievements meant in the context of agrarian change.

I met Balan first when I came to interview Bhaskaran, a retired forest department official who also owns two acres of farmland. Bhaskaran belongs to the Wayanad Chetty community that is listed in the OBC category. Balan’s colony, quite expectedly, was at the fringes of Bhaskaran’s farms. About 10 houses huddle

together in 15 cents of land. Bhaskaran was slowly quitting farming. His two sons were well-placed in government jobs. His daughter was preparing for the highly competitive Public Services Exam for state government jobs. Bhaskaran was very clear of the reasons why he was quitting; he enumerates them in one breath: “There is no surety that you will get twelve (thousand) rupees if you put in ten (thousand) rupees. The youngsters are not coming into this at all. Labour is scarce. In *krishi* (farming), you can’t sow today and reap tomorrow; you have to wait”. And of course, Bhaskaran has a pension, apart from the occasional earnings from areca nut.

For Balan, this means that a ready source of livelihood that his family had had for generations was slipping out of his hands. He was a wage worker who had some surety of finding work in Bhaskaran’s farms. I was once talking to Balan in his colony; the house was a new construction, but visibly left unfinished as funds got exhausted in the panchayat. Bhaskaran joined us and sat on a chair next to ours. The conversation was on ginger farming in Karnataka and how two young men from the colony are in police custody over there over some feud. What struck me during the conversation was the relative ease with which Bhaskaran and Balan sat next to each other and Balan addressed Bhaskaran as *ettan* (brother). The old hierarchies seemed to be disappearing. When I get a moment with Balan, I tried to ask him what he thought of his circumstance. “We keep working. One *pani* per week, that is what I get. Others have land to farm. We have small pieces of land where our children build houses. There was only one house here. Now there are 8-10”. It started to become clear that Balan was well aware of the underlying social hierarchies that place him in a position of insecurity. The semblance of equality in the language only masked the underlying inequality. I asked him if he had thought of alternative ways of finding work. “Some people say that we take land for lease (since Paniyas are good at agricultural work). If we do that, we will have to pay for it. If a rot or disease happens, all the investment will be gone. These people (Bhaskaran/upper castes) have money; they have the land. Even if they incur losses (in paddy), they can make up for it through other means - pepper, coffee. Our *vibhagam* (community/caste) does not have that. There are no savings either.” While language has evened out, the stark contrasts between Bhaskaran’s farm and Balan’s colony that stand next to each other is never questioned.

It slowly emerged that Balan was pragmatically sticking to Bhaskaran because there was simply no other work available. Balan hoped to do whatever sundry work was available in the farm - from clearing weeds to picking areca. The proximity and years of loyalty meant that Bhaskaran still called Balan for work, and when needed Balan’s younger brother Sunny, a graduate in economics. Sunny attended to Bhaskaran’s cattle. He has been trying to give the same PSC exam, but has not made it yet. David Picheritt (2018) refers to the pragmatic bonds that young Dalit labourers maintain with landlords in the wake of insecure alternative livelihoods.

Balan's case is a bit more desperate since alternative work is scarce (as show below). The "inherited inequalities of power" that Shah and Lerche (2018) talk about still continue to operate while Balan is gradually getting pushed out of the paddy fields. Until Sunny finds *joli*, both of them will have to pragmatically hold on to *pani* in Bhaskaran's farms. The capitalist agrarian change in Kerala as a whole presents its miniature picture in this sight - paddy is where capital is moving out, and this has meant more livelihood insecurity in the countryside.

### **b. Pushed out of Ginger**

It has been four years since Balan stopped going to Karnataka to work in the ginger farms. Balan tell me that the local labourers in Karnataka have replaced the Paniyas. His two nephews have still managed to find work - watering the crop at regular intervals, not the usual planting and harvesting work. Watering is still not automated because the supply of electricity is intermittent. This could visibly change anytime however. Balan admits that the local labourers do a lot more work than the Paniyas and take much lower wages. I explore how ginger farming is transforming the plateau. Balan estimates that the local labourers are paid Rs. 450, while they were given Rs. 550 (four years ago). My calculations following fieldwork in Karnataka showed they earned much lesser - as meagre as Rs. 150 per day. From being labourers, they have becoming the floating reserve army of labour in Marx's characterisation, while the local labourers have now become the "stagnant pool" - labourers with wages and living conditions below par. For our analysis here, this case represents the Paniyas' efforts in moving from the extremely uncertain paddy farming to the comparatively more certain ginger farming where there was capital and hence wages, or in other words, one class of labour to another.

The trend of taking the Paniyas as labour was again based on the "inherited inequalities of power". The old hierarchies were incorporated into a new circuit of capital by relying on the colonies as a ready source of labour by farmers who sought new avenues of capital accumulation in the wake of lacklustre paddy. Paniya landlessness, thus, made them available as a readily available source of labour. Over the course of my fieldwork, I met a number of Paniyas who had gone for ginger work, but who are now back. Activists see ginger farming as a main reason for alcoholism in the colonies. Following two deaths, the collector of Wayanad visited the ginger farms in Karnataka, which caught the farmers by surprise. This became an additional reason to frown upon Paniya labourers. The image of colonies in the larger imaginary became that of landless and alcoholism - the twin stigmas that the Paniyas have to constantly face today.

### **c. Pushed out of Concrete**

The rest of the people in Balan's colony found work in construction, a sector that saw a boom recently as elsewhere in India. I met Kunjan in a colony within the

jurisdictional limits of Sulthan Bathery municipality. Kunjan left ginger work three years ago after work became scarce. He managed to find work in the constructions sector through his networks. He, however, fears that this work would soon slip out of his hands as migrant labourers from the east of the country are fast replacing the Paniyas. Kunjan's colony is cut off from the main colony - five houses in about 8 cents. There was some state-owned "wasteland" available next to the colony where he tried to plant banana, but his efforts were consistently defeated by wild animals. "I can't fence the colony with my wages. I get Rs. 550 a day when there is work. I have to feed my three children and my wife. I, I am a person who drinks a bit. Some 150 (rupees) goes into that". Kunjan's concern regarding his expendability from the construction sector could be understood from his sigh: "It's all Bengalis now in *kettupani* (construction work)". Bengali is a sweeping, often pejorative, term used to refer to migrant labourers from Jharkhand, Orissa, West Bengal and Assam. There is no consensus on their numbers in Kerala; some figures put it at a million. The wages earned by migrant labourers in Kerala differs from region to region and from sector to sector. In Wayanad, in construction sector, they earn Rs. 300 to Rs. 400. The catch is that while Adivasi wages, like the market wage in Kerala, are high and stable, the migrant labourers have a highly "unstable" and varying wage rates, allowing the contractors to exploit them cheaply. In many colonies, Paniya men said that they cannot afford to ask for lower wages, a situation that could change soon. As Raj (2018) points out, most of the migrant labourers who come from eastern India are Adivasis themselves. Their vulnerability as outsiders without unions or social capital to back them renders them extremely exploitable. In the tea plantations of southern Kerala where Raj did his fieldwork, these migrant labourers were used as a threat to keep the local Dalit labourers disciplined and not complain as instances of indiscipline meant they could be easily disposed of and replaced with migrant labourers. Although the construction sector is much more segregated a work place, it could very well be that the contractors and investors are themselves happy that the Paniya wages are still higher than the migrant wage rates - the Paniyas are embedded in the local context and can easily seek assistance from local trade unions if there is a wage dispute. For colonies, it means that their labour has become extremely fungible. Their efforts to seek a space in a class of labour that afforded relatively high wage rates at home in Wayanad are meeting with the experiences of being pushed out.

The links between agrarian change in eastern Indian villages and the migration to Kerala have yet to be studied in detail, but several studies report outmigration of labour from these eastern states to other part of the country (See Shah and Lerche 2018 for Jharkhand). It is not clear why they would prefer Kerala over construction sector in their own states if costs of travel and social reproduction in a state away from home are taken into consideration. A larger look at the political and economic geography of these migrations is therefore required. At the local site, looking at

migrant labourers versus local labourers in a construction site in Kochi, central Kerala, Prasad-Aleyamma (2017) calls for the need to look at wages as a cultural relation, not just an economic one, that allows a glance into the processes that produce such a wage. Her ethnography leads her to conclude that trade unions collude with the capitalist investors (in this case, a port receiving ships with petroleum) to keep the wages of local labourers as it was their imperative, given their history and cultural embeddedness. Though the construction sector in Wayanad is more segregated in the form of house and shop sites, the latent effect of unionisation could be said to be playing out here as well.

#### **d. Pushed out of Thozhil: Whither Dignity?**

As elsewhere in India, the MGNREGA has provided a back-up option for rural households in times of agrarian distress. Balan says that his wife did work for *thozhilurappu* (“employment guarantee”), but work is erratic. “When she gets *pani*, she gets it for fifteen days at a stretch. Then there won’t be work for many days”. For Geetha, *thozhilurappu* is not a safety net, but the only livelihood that helps her feed her three children. There was no work in paddy farms. Her experiment with share cropping was a failure. Her husband mostly remains unemployed. I first met Geetha in an *Oorukoottam* that was held for this particular ward of the grama panchayat. The ward member, who was also the grama panchayat president, was away in the capital city Thiruvananthapuram and was covered by another member, who regularly expressed his helplessness in addressing people’s issues immediately since it was not his jurisdiction. Two major issues raised were liquor sale in the colony and *thozhilurappu*. I focus on the latter as it is closely linked with Paniya landlessness.

Geetha was vocal at the *Oorukoottam*. She firmly demanded that a separate muster roll be issued for the “*ST-kkaar*”, members of the Scheduled Tribes, since they were not able to finish the work allotted. I wondered what that meant. I would visit Geetha’s colony several times thereafter, in one of which she explained the matter. Work is allotted under *thozhilurappu* to neighbourhood groups containing ten to twenty women. At the ward level, these groups come together to form the Area Development Society (ADSs). The ADS president and secretary, who come to be locally known simply as ADS-maar (ADSs), control the muster roll and allocation of work. Although there is a provision for separate allocation of muster rolls for STs, this has not been implemented in Geetha’s ward. Her NHG consists of the Paniyas, Kattunaikas and upper-caste Syrian Christians. The ADS secretary at the ward was an upper-caste woman from the same NHG. Upper-caste women have been moonlighting in better-remunerated works, in addition to taking away *thozhilurappu* wages by signing the attendance registers. While *thozhilurappu* wages stood at Rs. 263 per day at the time of fieldwork, coffee picking and areca splitting fetched women up to Rs. 400. Since wages payment under *thozhilurappu*



is strictly enforced on condition of completion of work allotted, Paniya and Kattunaika workers were forced to do the work share of upper-caste women as well for fear of losing wages. Most of the “public work” allotted under *thozhilurappu* come in the form of clearing hedges and weeds from private lands whose owners enlist their plots for work under the scheme. When Geetha confronted the upper-caste workers with the warning that she would seek a separate muster roll, she was derided by one of them, who asked her where she would take her people for work, given they owned no land. “*Kayyookkullavan karyakkaran!*” - might is right - Geetha exclaimed, underlining the social power characteristic of land.

Geetha’s efforts to move into a more secure class of labour - that accorded under an Act of the Indian parliament - thus was met with derision containing casteist undertones. Contrary to studies that show that NREGA provided avenues of dignity for labourers who chose it consciously over farm work despite the latter being available and holding the possibility of in-kind payments apart from wages, this instance shows that *thozhilurappu* is not all together devoid of casteist practices as a universal policy open to all. The micro-politics of the neighbourhood feud also throws open the impact of accumulation strategies of upper-caste workers on the lower castes. If we go by Pattenden’s consideration of NREGA as a safety net from capitalism and hence constitutive of it, this shows that accumulation strategies through a government programme too can impact the livelihoods of the marginalised.

Quite close to the grama panchayat, a different story was unveiling in Sulthan Bathery. Thanks to ginger capital and its location as the gateway to Kerala from the metros of Bangalore and Mysore, Sulthan Bathery has been fast urbanising, shedding its rural, paddy-growing village outlook to become a fast-growing town with malls and apartment complexes. In December 2017, the place was elevated to the status of a municipality. Kunjan’s colony and many other colonies that fell in the jurisdiction of the new municipality received a livelihood shock since *thozhilurappu* stopped functioning as it is meant only for rural areas. This was the pinnacle of agrarian transformation of the village that Bathery was into a modern investment-attracting location. The reverberations of this transformation were felt in the colonies in the form of being pushed out of this important source of livelihood.

### **e. Pushed out of the Forests: A New Beginning?**

Neoliberal conservation of forests in Wayanad as explained by Muenster has pushed out Paniyas in the remote parts of the panchayat into resettlement sites. An amount of Rs. 10 lakhs is awarded to each household, of which a part goes into the purchase of land. When I visited Puthunadu colony where Kattunaika and Paniya families have come, they had just planted coffee and banana. I asked Chippan how he felt about the relocation. “Our children say they want to go back.

Only commutation was a problem. We did not have any other problems there - we did not even catch any disease. We have our shrines there still. We try to go there to offer prayers, but the forest officials stop us. We tried to sneak in when we went for Onam, but we were caught.” Six families from a former colony have been allocated 2.7 acres together. They took only land suitable for crops other than paddy. The coffee planted was left behind by the previous owner of the land.

Kalathingal (2018) records the resettlement of people as part of the project to close down the forest to people for conservation. The high compensation for wild life attacks is often cited as a reason. The Kerala Forest Research Institute had done a study to convert Wayanad forests into tiger reserve under the instructions from the National Tiger Conservation Authority brought out in 2008<sup>7</sup>. As per the study, 10,604 people from 110 colonies had to be displaced. This would add 1700 acres of additional land to the conservation site. Most of this is in the grama panchayat I am studying. The process has already been completed in four colonies and are progressing in five others in the first stage of the project. The official name of the project is “*swayam sannaddha punaradhipasam*” or voluntary rehabilitation. While leaving Chippan’s colony, he finally told me how the process occurred: “we never asked for rehabilitation. The Chettys went to the forest department and said they were ready for rehabilitation. We had to come as well as there was no point living there alone without the Chettys”. The dependence of the Paniyas on the Chettys for work comes out clearly here. Kalathingal points out that this is a clear violation of the Forest Rights Act.

While the immediate granting of alternate land complicates the identification of this process as “enclosure”, it can be seen as a classic example of exclusion through the power of regulation, described by Hall et al. This case brings out the “double edge” of exclusion - conservation efforts work towards the exclusion of Adivasis who had been living in and depending on these forests. For the displaced Paniyas, it represents a move from one insecure labour - in the farms of the Chettys - but with the back-up options provided by the forests to a more insecure option, where they have to start growing their own produce, subject to the vagaries of agrarian changes.

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<sup>7</sup> Project Tiger was inaugurated in 1973, shortly after the enactment of the Wildlife Protection Act in 1972. Margulies (2017) observes that the project emerged from the thinking that tiger conservation was an element of nation building, premised by the serious attention paid to the tiger, an animal that suffered rampant hunting under the British rule, following independence. As a consequence, the tiger became India’s “premiere conservation symbol”.



### **f. Pushed out of Mobility: Class Differentiation in Times of Agrarian Change**

Landless and insecure livelihoods have quite understandably stalled any upward mobility for the Paniyas. Despite being the largest Adivasi community in Kerala, their presence in public employment is almost nil. Recently, the forest department recruited a Paniya woman in the post of forest watcher, a person who checks intrusions into the forests, including by Adivasis. In the grama panchayat that I was anchored in, the growing class differentiation between the Paniyas and the Kurumas was stark.

Kunhiraman, a Kuruma farmer who retired from the forest department, is now trying organic farming. As Kunze shows, Kuruma men still hold on paddy farming to the extent they can, citing its cultural value to the community. Kunhiraman's house is like any other middle-class Hindu Malayali household, decorated with brass vessels and clay figures of popular Hindu gods. We chat endlessly about the receding rains, pepper prices and human (farmer) - animal conflict. Like Kunhikrishnan, the Chetty farmer, Kunhiraman has his sons well placed in government jobs. I would soon realise during the course of my fieldwork that most Adivasi government employees I meet are from the Kuruma and Kurichya communities and there is hardly anyone from the Adiya, Paniya or Kattunaika communities. In Ippipaady, all the ST promoters that I meet were from the Kuruma community, with rare exceptions. All the reserved jobs were being occupied by the Kurumas in the panchayat, clearly.

I soon realised that the Kurumas were adapting to the agrarian changes around them in more ways than securing positions through building layers of privileges. Though paddy is receding, most Kurumas families continue to produce paddy for at least a part of the self-consumption, like Kunhiraman, which allows them to save. They can afford to send their children for coaching classes Public Service Commission exam that provides entry to government jobs. Contacts in government jobs are summoned whenever loans are needed. Adivasi lands are frowned upon as collateral by banks as they need special permission from the district collector to be used for that purpose. Hence government employees standing as surety provide an alternative route. The Paniyas, starting out at zero, do not have access to any of these adaptive mechanisms and hence lose out on social mobility.

At the end of the conversation with Kunhiraman, we walk around his farms. A Paniya colony is at the fringe of the farms. Generations from this colony has served Kunhiraman and his ancestors. He introduced me to them saying, "He is a researcher; he has come to see *you Adivasis*". It struck me that Kunhiraman said "you Adivasis" as if he was not an Adivasi himself. The stigma of poverty laden in

the term Adivasi and in this context, their image as a popular subject of research, was clearly employed here by Kunhiraman, who seemed to distance himself from that identity.

### **g. Pushed out of Redistributive Justice**

The Paniyas' demand for land becomes clearer in this context. The final pushing out that they have experienced is from the land they received through struggles. Scattered land struggles were on in Wayanad throughout the period of the fieldwork. A Paniya colony squatted on government-owned forest land when their colony, at the fringes of a Chetty farmer's land, flooded. They were subsequently allotted land in the same panchayat - land that was hilly but had rubber. The Paniyas found it unsuitable to make a living out of and abandoned it to live in the colony again. This was to be a refrain that I found in Aralam as well. People were given land in Aralam in a designated place. This was given in the form of 99 cents of land to farm and 1 cent to build house. All the one-cent plots were huddled together to mimic the colony structure back in Wayanad. Many people were given rocky land. Those who tried to farm saw their crop destroyed by wild animals. Disappointed, many have left the site and gone back to live in the old colonies. This form of land distribution that is nominal and does not build their capacities to adapt simply defeats the purpose. The Paniyas are thus pushed out of redistributive justice as well.

## **7. Conclusion**

The ethnographic vignettes explored here show that the Paniyas, while demand land in times of agrarian change, are led by their experiences of pushed out from various classes of labour where they have been trying to find security. In each instance, the insecurity that results could be linked back to their status as landless - from difficulties in attaining social mobility to casteist stigma face in sited of state-sponsored public work programmes. In all the cases, it is important to note the conjugality of oppressions at the intersection of class and Adivasi identity, as well as the multi-axial nature of the landless Adivasis' precarity. The agrarian question of labour manifests in the rural landscape of an emerging economy in the form of such multi-axial expulsions from livelihood sectors. These expulsions occur in the backdrop of complex agricultural, land-use and sectoral changes over long periods of time, making their impacts intangible. Inclusive growth would then mean considering the relational character of these changes and factoring them in in efforts of land redistribution and social inclusion.

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## about the author

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