

Ramapurath, Sudheesh

**Working Paper**

## Persistence of poverty in an indigenous community in Southern India: Bringing agrarian environment to the centre of poverty analysis

UNRISD Occasional Paper - Overcoming Inequalities in a Fractured World: Between Elite Power and Social Mobilization, No. 1

**Provided in Cooperation with:**

United Nations Research Institute for Social Development (UNRISD), Geneva

*Suggested Citation:* Ramapurath, Sudheesh (2019) : Persistence of poverty in an indigenous community in Southern India: Bringing agrarian environment to the centre of poverty analysis, UNRISD Occasional Paper - Overcoming Inequalities in a Fractured World: Between Elite Power and Social Mobilization, No. 1, ISBN 978-92-9085-102-8, United Nations Research Institute for Social Development (UNRISD), Geneva

This Version is available at:

<https://hdl.handle.net/10419/244370>

**Standard-Nutzungsbedingungen:**

Die Dokumente auf EconStor dürfen zu eigenen wissenschaftlichen Zwecken und zum Privatgebrauch gespeichert und kopiert werden.

Sie dürfen die Dokumente nicht für öffentliche oder kommerzielle Zwecke vervielfältigen, öffentlich ausstellen, öffentlich zugänglich machen, vertreiben oder anderweitig nutzen.

Sofern die Verfasser die Dokumente unter Open-Content-Lizenzen (insbesondere CC-Lizenzen) zur Verfügung gestellt haben sollten, gelten abweichend von diesen Nutzungsbedingungen die in der dort genannten Lizenz gewährten Nutzungsrechte.

**Terms of use:**

*Documents in EconStor may be saved and copied for your personal and scholarly purposes.*

*You are not to copy documents for public or commercial purposes, to exhibit the documents publicly, to make them publicly available on the internet, or to distribute or otherwise use the documents in public.*

*If the documents have been made available under an Open Content Licence (especially Creative Commons Licences), you may exercise further usage rights as specified in the indicated licence.*



United Nations Research Institute for Social Development

# UNRISD

## **Persistence of Poverty in an Indigenous Community in Southern India**

*Bringing Agrarian Environment  
to the Centre of Poverty Analysis*

*Sudheesh Ramapurath Chemmencheri  
University of Oxford  
United Kingdom*

---

Occasional Paper 1

**Overcoming Inequalities in a Fractured World:  
Between Elite Power and Social Mobilization**

August 2019





The United Nations Research Institute for Social Development (UNRISD) is an autonomous research institute within the UN system that undertakes interdisciplinary research and policy analysis on the social dimensions of contemporary development issues. Through our work we aim to ensure that social equity, inclusion and justice are central to development thinking, policy and practice.

UNRISD, Palais des Nations  
1211 Geneva 10, Switzerland  
Tel: +41 (0)22 9173020  
[info.unrisd@un.org](mailto:info.unrisd@un.org)  
[www.unrisd.org](http://www.unrisd.org)

This United Nations Research Institute for Social Development (UNRISD) Occasional Paper is a revised and peer reviewed version of a paper originally prepared for the UNRISD International Conference, Overcoming Inequalities in a Fractured World: Between Elite Power and Social Mobilization (November 2018). The conference was carried out with the support of UNRISD institutional funding provided by the governments of Sweden, Switzerland and Finland. The Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung Geneva Office and the International Geneva Welcome Centre (CAGI) provided direct support to conference participants for their travel and accommodation.

Copyright © UNRISD. Short extracts from this publication may be reproduced unaltered without authorization on condition that the source is indicated. For rights of reproduction or translation apply to UNRISD, which welcomes such applications.

The designations employed in UNRISD publications and the presentation of material therein do not imply the expression of any opinion whatsoever on the part of UNRISD concerning the legal status of any country, territory, city or area or of its authorities, or concerning the delimitation of its frontiers or boundaries.

The responsibility for opinions expressed rests solely with the author(s), and publication does not constitute endorsement by UNRISD.

ISBN 978-92-9085-102-8

## Contents

Abstract.....	ii
Keywords.....	ii
Author.....	ii
Acknowledgements .....	ii
Introduction .....	1
Agrarian Environment .....	2
Methods .....	3
Changes in the Agrarian Environment in Kerala.....	4
Livelihood Struggles and the Agrarian Environment.....	5
Disappearing Paddy Farms .....	5
The Informal Sector and Livelihood Competition .....	6
Public Works Programme.....	6
Ginger Farming.....	7
Urbanization .....	8
Nature Tourism.....	8
Land Distribution.....	8
Class Differentiation.....	8
Conclusion.....	9
References .....	10

## Abstract

This paper draws attention to the need for centring the agrarian environment in poverty analysis and development policymaking. Through an ethnographic enquiry into the persistence of poverty among a landless indigenous community in the southern Indian state of Kerala, this paper tries to understand the community's negotiations with changes in the agrarian environment. The community is losing out on livelihood strategies and adaptation measures on multiple fronts simultaneously. The multi-directionality and simultaneity of the exclusions produced by changes in the agrarian environment warrant attention in poverty analysis, the paper argues. I follow members of this community in their quest to find alternative livelihoods in the wake of rapid deagrarianization in Kerala and show how they are systematically losing out on each of these livelihood pathways. I also follow them in sites of migration in the villages of the neighbouring state of Karnataka, where they are fast being replaced by cheaper labour. Fieldwork in sites of state-sponsored land distribution shows that receiving land does not necessarily work towards lifting them out of precarity. From these observations, the paper concludes that the stealthy ways in which changes in the agrarian environment further the exclusions of marginalized communities need to be paid greater attention.

## Keywords

Agrarian change, indigenous peoples, land, poverty, environment

## Author

Sudheesh Ramapurath Chemmencheri is a D.Phil. candidate at the Oxford Department of International Development, University of Oxford. His research explores the impacts of agrarian changes and land policies on landless indigenous communities in the southern Indian state of Kerala. His publications have appeared in the *Indian Journal of Human Development*, *Citizenship Studies* and *South Asia: Journal of South Asian Studies*.

## Acknowledgements

The author would like to thank Maggie Carter, Research Analyst, UNRISD, and the two reviewers for their detailed feedback.

## Introduction

It has been argued that development efforts must be geared towards achieving environmental sustainability and social change simultaneously. This “eco-social turn” (UNRISD 2016) would involve analysing development issues not only from the perspective of economic growth, but also from those of ecology and social justice. This is especially significant in the case of issues pertaining to indigenous peoples, whose livelihoods and social organization are closely linked to the environment. In this case, the eco-social turn would mean recognizing and understanding how ecological and social justice goals themselves are interlinked.

This paper attempts to unpack these linkages by highlighting the ways in which complex changes in the agrarian environment impact an indigenous community living in poverty. These impacts and the power dynamics underlying them in the rural setup are key to understanding the persistence of poverty in the community, the paper argues. The term “rural” is used here taking into account its fluid nature. The paper focuses on the slow, incremental transformations brought about in rural agrarian society by economic, land-use and environmental changes. Precisely because of the inconspicuous nature of these changes, they are often missed in poverty eradication and land redistribution programmes. The evidence collected highlights the need to centre changes in the agrarian environment in poverty analysis.

The paper draws on initial observations from fieldwork conducted over nine months in the district of Wayanad in the southern Indian state of Kerala. The Paniyas, the focus of this paper, are officially classified as a Scheduled Tribe and form the largest indigenous community in the state. The term “Adivasi”, meaning first inhabitants, is commonly used by them to refer to themselves, especially as a political identity (Steur 2014). Despite the small population of Scheduled Tribes (1.5 percent) in Kerala and the state’s social development achievements, poverty and landlessness are rampant among many of these communities, including the Paniyas.

The Paniyas have been landless throughout recorded history (Kjosavik and Shanamugaratnam 2015). The property rights system in early Wayanad consisted of different communities living in a gradation of rights over land without absolute landlordism. In this arrangement, the Paniyas cultivated patches of land and accessed forest resources with permission from chiefly communities. By early fifteenth century, immigrant communities had assumed the role of landlords and incorporated the Paniyas into the agrarian system as slave labourers. Agrestic slavery continued during much of colonial rule and practically persisted until the 1970s (Kjosavik and Shanmugaratnam 2007). Land reforms implemented in the state in the 1970s failed to benefit the Paniyas, who were still largely agricultural labourers. The reforms focused more on abolishing rentier landlordism, and less on redistribution of surplus land above officially set limits on ownership or transfer of those plots to labourers on which their dwellings stood (Herring 1980, Radhakrishnan 1981). The Paniyas today live in ghettos, locally called “colonies”, which spatially represent the continuing social exclusion they face. Adivasi social movements have consistently demanded arable land from the state to correct this historical injustice (Bijoy and Ravi Raman 2003, Steur 2017).

The paper is organized into six sections. The next section elaborates the concept of agrarian environment that runs through the paper. This is followed by an explanation of the methods adopted. I elaborate the changes in agrarian environment underway in Kerala and the complex

ways in which they influence Paniya lives in the succeeding sections. The concluding section reiterates the need to consider the multi-directionality and simultaneity of livelihood expulsions produced by changes in agrarian environments in development thinking.

## Agrarian Environment

I draw the term “agrarian environment” from Agrawal and Sivaramakrishnan (2000), who stress the irreducibility of the rural setup into either agriculture or the forests or some other particular landscape. Agrarian environment thus refers to the mutually overlapping nature of the agrarian and the environmental realms. Further, the term draws attention to *changes* in the rural landscape and to the fact that the changes in the agrarian and the environmental domains are linked. The authors also stress that the term includes “social negotiations around the environment in predominantly agrarian contexts” (Agrawal and Sivaramakrishnan 2001,1). While the authors’ intent is to underline the need to pay attention to the environment in agrarian studies, I use the term more broadly to highlight the need to attend to the complex, inter-related changes in both domains in analyses of poverty. The framework of agrarian environments is especially useful for the analysis of poverty among indigenous communities, which are traditionally studied with reference to forests alone. The case of the Paniyas taken up here would show that a host of environmental, land-use and agrarian changes are crucially impacting the lives of these indigenous people and thus have a direct bearing on the poverty experienced by them.

Wayanad, the field location, represents an agrarian environment where livelihoods, and the changes therein, are intricately linked to the changes in its intermeshed landscape of agriculture and forests. Net sown area covers 53 percent of the district, while forests cover around 37 percent (GoK 2016). Of the district’s workers, 15.5 percent are cultivators and 30 percent agricultural labourers (Census 2011). Paddy, black pepper, banana, arecanut and ginger are the main crops grown. Traditionally agricultural labourers, the Paniyas have until recently depended on paddy farming for much of their livelihood. Although not conventionally regarded as a forest-dwelling community, the Paniyas have relied on the forests as a safety net for food, firewood and other forest products. Many Paniya colonies stand on the fringes of state-owned forests. Of late, some Paniya households have received titles to forest land under the Scheduled Tribes and Other Traditional Forest Dwellers (Recognition of Forest Rights) Act, passed by the Indian parliament in 2006. This backdrop indicates the possible impacts of changes in the agrarian environment on Paniya livelihoods. As indicated above, the term agrarian environment also signals the social negotiations occurring in the rural landscape. This warrants an analysis of the sociological position of the Paniyas in Wayanad and the changes underway therein. The past of agrestic slavery among the Paniyas have placed them at the lowest rung of society in Wayanad, spatially visible in the form of colonies interspersed between plots held by more affluent communities.

Agrarian change is a theme that has a long scholarly tradition, especially in India. This scholarship has meticulously tracked the transition from pre-capitalist to capitalist production relations in Indian agriculture, contemporary agrarian changes and the concomitant labour dynamics (Patnaik 1990, Mohanty 2016). In the current economic context of the country, shaped by liberalization of the economy in the 1990s, agriculture no longer contributes significantly to economic growth (Lerche 2013). This trend has particular relevance in the Kerala context, where agriculture contributes only around 10 percent of the state Gross

Domestic Product and the service sector has been progressively playing a dominant role. Rural households combine various sources of income – agricultural and non-agricultural – to earn their livelihoods. This brings up important questions regarding the impact of agrarian changes on rural labour, especially in a place like Wayanad, where 30 percent of the workers are agricultural labourers as mentioned above.

Exactly how the dynamics of labour have been unfolding in India is a question that has attracted much attention, though without consensus (see for instance, Byres, Kapadia and Lerche 1999). Regional analyses within the country have produced a diversity of trends, making generalizations difficult. However, the rising casualization of labour, pluriactivity, migration and increasing livelihood insecurity are aspects that can be seen across the country.<sup>1</sup> The case of the Paniyas presented here shows how a labouring community can face exclusion from every other alternative livelihood that they seek.

Capital is known to change the environment as much as it does agriculture. The changes in these interrelated domains can precipitate stark sociological changes. Gidwani (2008), for instance, analyzes the rise of the Patels as a newly consolidated caste group as a result of profound changes in the soil in the Matar district of Gujarat in India. As capitalist relations took over agriculture, changes occurred in soil conditions, creating a need to consolidate arable land holdings. This spurred landholding communities to mobilise and organise themselves, resulting in the formation of a new caste. In a different set up, Li (2014) analyses the changes that occurred in the indigenous Lauje community in Indonesia, following the planting of cocoa. The move led to enclosure of common lands on which the community earlier depended for food and livelihood, producing winners and losers among kin. In the case of the Paniyas, the intervening forces have been slower and more intangible, eroding livelihoods from multiple directions as they navigate the agrarian-environmental changes occurring around them.

## Methods

The fieldwork in Wayanad was done over nine months in 2017-18. Interviews were mostly conducted with ordinary Paniya men and women, roughly in equal numbers. Consent was taken orally from the participants, following an explanation of the research objectives. The methodology used was previously approved by the Central University Research Ethics Committee of the University of Oxford. The interviews were open-ended conversations in Malayalam and often involved moving around the colonies and their neighbourhoods with the respondents. Thus, walking was explored as a method to note down the changes in the agrarian environment. The colonies became a part of the fieldwork organically as I followed the main issues taken up for research. The interviews were complemented with interactions with social movement activists, bureaucrats and members of other communities, including those Adivasi communities that have traditionally owned some land. The fieldwork was anchored in the colonies of one *grama panchayat* (the lowest tier of local government) which had a substantial Paniya population. However, interviews often went beyond the *grama panchayat*. Life after receiving land was studied through fieldwork in Aralam, a land distribution site in the neighbouring district of Kannur, where many Paniya households from Wayanad had received land. The names of interlocutors referred to here have been changed to protect privacy.

---

<sup>1</sup> Breman 1996; Lerche 2009; Guerin, Venkatasubramanian and Michiels 2018.



In addition, fieldwork was conducted in an *Oorukoottam* (the state-sponsored assembly of Scheduled Tribe members at the level of wards/subunits of grama panchayats) and in sites of land struggles and protests. Observing these processes and interacting with the participants at these platforms offered insights into the Paniyas' formal articulations of their livelihood struggles. The information received through these methods was corroborated with the emerging scholarly evidences on changes in the agrarian environment in Kerala.

## Changes in the Agrarian Environment in Kerala

The etymology of the name Wayanad is usually explained using its expanded form “*Vayalnadu*”, which signals the meaning “land of paddy 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 and Padmanabhan 2016). The most conspicuous form of change in the agrarian environment of Wayanad is in land-use, marked by the conversion of paddy fields into other uses (Fox et al. 2017). 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 (Jose and Padmanabhan 2016). In their study, Jose and Padmanabhan found that the most common reasons cited for exit from farming, paddy in particular, were population pressure on land, reduced viability and scarcity of labour. The study reports 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 the area under banana production increased three times between 1996-97 and 2012-2013 (Jose and Padmanabhan 2016). The trend of losses and indebtedness that have crept into the farming sector is often called a “crisis”. As Muenster (2012) notes, a large number of farmer suicides in Wayanad occurred as a result of the crisis precisely among those who switched to banana and ginger while seeking a way out of paddy.

The emerging picture of agrarian crisis in Wayanad mirrors that in the larger context of Kerala. While agriculture contributed 22 percent of the state's Gross Domestic Product in the year 2000, this figure fell to 10 percent in 2016 (Harilal and Eswaran 2017). In these sixteen years, the service sector swelled in size from 51 percent to 60 percent. In the past three decades, Kerala has lost paddy at the rate of 20,000 hectares every year (Harilal and Eswaran 2017). Harilal and Eswaran characterize the “dilution, scattering and desertion” of capital from agriculture as “deaccumulation”.

Scholars have advanced various theses to explain how Kerala's agrarian crisis came about. An analysis of these theses is beyond the scope of this paper; hence I give only a few pointers. Kannan (2011) considers the changes in Kerala's agricultural sector as structural and long-term. 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 went up in the 1970s. However, spice prices fell in the 1990s with the fall of the republic in the late 1980s; the misery was exacerbated by liberalization of the economy and removal of trade barriers through the Uruguay Round agreements (Harilal and Eswaran 2017). Harilal and Eswaran (2017) note that the agrarian crisis began soon after the implementation of the 1970s' land reforms 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 Kerala's workforce 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 economy of Kerala and triggered a construction boom, creating pressure on land and rendering agriculture non-competitive (Balakrishnan 2001).

The Paniyas' livelihood negotiations must be placed in this larger trend of deagrarianization 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 larger economic changes in the state directly affect them. The reasons for the crisis indicated in the paragraph above indicate that this scenario of deagrarianization is not a phase but is here to stay.

Further, in Wayanad, the agrarian crisis has prompted a search for new forms of accumulation that are in turn transforming its landscape. Tourism is one of them. I learnt from the office of the main grama panchayat where fieldwork was conducted that this panchayat alone has 44 tourist resorts, each built on a minimum sprawl of two acres (Sudheesh 2017). To feed the tourism industry, forest conservation is being undertaken vigorously. At times this translates into the relocation of forest-dwelling households, including many Paniya households, to sites outside the forests by paying a compensation, under problematic conditions of consent-seeking (Kalathingal 2018). A further development is capitalist ginger farming by farmers from Wayanad in the neighbouring districts of Karnataka. Ginger farming produced new wealth for old farmers in Wayanad, a trend which saw the gradual transformation of a rural landscape into an urban one. One of my interlocutors, who was among close to ten thousand ginger farmers who tried their luck in ginger, 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. Muenster and Muenster (2012) interpret these trends in tourism, nature conservation and commercial forms of farming as changes triggered by the non-viability of traditional paddy farming. They argue that these new forms of accumulation followed when exploitation of the environment reached its ecological limits. The next section moves to the story of the Paniyas and details the impacts of these dynamic changes in the landscape of Wayanad on their daily lives.

## Livelihood Struggles and the Agrarian Environment

I capture the Paniyas' negotiations with the changes around them through glimpses of a set of livelihood exclusions that they are facing. The crucial lesson that comes out lies in the larger picture emerging from the totality of these exclusions: The Paniyas are losing out on multiple fronts at the same time in their quest to navigate agrarian-environmental changes. The multi-directionality and simultaneity of exclusions place them in a position of extreme precarity.

### Disappearing Paddy Farms

The first and the most obvious direction in which the Paniyas are facing insecurity is the process of deagrarianization underway in Wayanad, as elsewhere in Kerala. Colony after colony where I conducted fieldwork struggled with unemployment. The traditional skills of the Paniyas in paddy labour are no longer in demand. As observed before, the colonies are located at the fringes of farms owned by more affluent communities; these farms had provided labour to generations of Paniyas households. These affluent farmers are moving out of paddy as it is no

longer remunerative, owing to the high cost of cultivation and labour. Although this could suggest the breaking away of Paniya households from dependence on landowning households into new avenues of work, alternative work is highly scarce in the field context. This means that many Paniya households stick on to any sundry work available in the landowning households' farms, from clearing weeds and picking areca to looking after cattle. Employing their traditional skills in paddy on leased land is a risky option for the Paniyas. As an interlocutor vividly described to me, landowning families could take the risk of paddy cultivation as they could try out areca or bananas the next year to make up for any losses in paddy from a previous year. By contrast, the Paniyas had no savings and could not take the risk of incurring losses in farming a plot taken on lease.

This meant that sticking with the landowning households was the pragmatic way out. While calling this attachment neo-bondage could be an overstatement, the fact that Paniya households have few other options in the labour market shows how changes in the agrarian environment have the impact of continuing their marginalized position in society.

### The Informal Sector and Livelihood Competition

Pluriactivity is often pointed out as one of the most recognizable features of rural labour today. Rural households increasingly earn their income from multiple sources. Many Paniya households today seek work in the construction sector of the district, if and when such work is available. The construction boom in Kerala was fuelled by remittances flowing in from the Persian Gulf, where people from Kerala migrated in the backdrop of the oil boom. Although Wayanad has not been a major contributor to this migration wave, it has caught up of late with respect to the real estate boom. The construction sector paid up to Rs.500 a day at the time of fieldwork. However, of late, migrant labourers from the eastern parts of the country are taking up these jobs as they demand considerably lower wages, sometimes just half of what local labourers ask for. This wave of migration could be seen as linked to the agrarian changes underway in the villages of eastern India, coupled with the higher wage rates of Kerala acting as a pull factor. Many of these labourers are themselves Adivasis (Raj 2018). What emerges through this case is a larger picture of changes in the agrarian environment in India: such changes in different rural locations can become interlinked. For Paniyas, this means that they face competition for an alternative source of livelihood. Although participation in labour unions has meant that the Paniyas have so far not lowered their wage demand, this could change anytime in the near future, prompted by extreme precarity.

### Public Works Programme

To tide over the precarity, many Paniya households rely on the public works programme called the National Rural Employment Guarantee Scheme (NREGS), locally known as *thozhilurappu* ("employment guarantee"). The scheme was implemented under the National Rural Employment Guarantee Act of 2005 and provides 100 days of guaranteed work to households in rural areas regardless of income/poverty status. The impacts of the scheme have been well-documented (Deininger and Liu 2013). NREGS can be seen as an important coping mechanism for the poor in the context of agrarian-environmental changes. In Kerala, the scheme is implemented through Kudumbashree, a state-government project that started out as a thrift-and-credit programme for women, but soon grew to become a nodal agency for a host of development programmes. Kudumbashree functions through a well-oiled bureaucratic machinery that has district-level offices and representatives at the level of neighbourhoods. Because of its history, almost all participants of the project are women. For the same reason, the

participants of the NREGS also tend to be mostly women. In many colonies, NREGS was found to be the only current livelihood source of Paniya households. At the time of fieldwork, NREGS wages stood at Rs.263 per day. Even if a household were to receive all 100 days of work, the amount would be far below what would nominally be required to survive a year.

At an Oorukoottam, I was thrown into the micropolitics of this crucial adaptation strategy of the Paniyas as it played out at the ground level. Of late, it had become difficult to get 100 days of guaranteed work a year. It was found that many of the public works were undertaken on plots of private households that expressed willingness to have their lands included in the programme. The neighbourhood groups that were allotted work were largely managed by women from affluent communities, giving Paniya women little or no say in decision-making processes. Paniya women at the Oorukoottam demanded separate allocation of work to Scheduled Tribe participants. However, the request was not registered in the proceedings. One of my Paniya interlocutors was met with derision from her upper-caste neighbours, who mocked her asking where the Paniyas would do the work, if allotted separate work, given they had no land. Lack of voice in the neighbourhood groups meant that the Paniya women could hardly question these irregularities in work allotted or payments.

This vignette demonstrates how the Paniyas are on the verge of being pushed out from an adaptation strategy as well and how their landlessness makes them victims of discriminatory attitudes. The changes in the agrarian environment are thus reproducing old social hierarchies in new ways. The vignette also presents a glimpse of the gendered impacts, given Paniya women are the main breadwinners in those households that rely mainly on NREGS for their income.

### Ginger Farming

The agrarian crisis in Wayanad prompted landed farmers to seek new avenues of accumulation, a quest that took them to the neighbouring state of Karnataka, where land was available in plenty, unlike in Kerala (Muenster 2015). Wayanad farmers take large plots of land for lease from local landowners in Karnataka and plant ginger. Ginger is a crop that attracts a boom once in a while, spurring Wayanad farmers to speculate over its prices. The slow perishability of ginger allows them to keep the crop under the soil for extended periods of time. Muenster calls the whole affair a “gamble” as volatile prices pose the risk of serious losses. The trend started in the 1990s and has started to wane, although farmers I met in the villages of Mysore district, Karnataka, still hoped to make a windfall in a possible boom.

The labour in these farms came from the Paniya community until recently. This was clearly based on old ties between the farmers and the Paniya labourers back home. Advance payments were made in Wayanad that tied the labourers to the farmers for the duration of farming. Activists as well as Paniya men and women I spoke to concur that alcoholism became a major issue among Paniya labourers following this wave of migration to the ginger farms. Tussles among the labourers and between labourers and locals in Karnataka villages became common, leading to a few deaths. What is revealed is the extreme desperation in Paniya colonies to seek work in a risky environment. However, of late, the Paniyas are being fast replaced by local labourers in the ginger farms. My interviews with these local labourers revealed that they belonged to Dalit communities that were either landless or owned arid, unproductive lands in the hinterlands. They worked under “contract”, a term used to refer to the practice of taking up work as a group. Wages are given for the work, regardless of the number of labourers; wage are

then divided among the group members by a representative who is more often than not from the same community. The payment received by an individual comes to almost one-fourth of the wages that the Paniyas used to receive. The changes faced by the local labourers in their arid native places could be linked to their becoming a cheap source of labour supply, in turn replacing the Paniyas. From the perspective of the Paniyas, an insecure, but desperately sought-after source of livelihood has now become closed to them.

### Urbanization

Ginger farming is transforming not only Karnataka's villages, where landowning households have suddenly found a new pathway of income through their land through leasing out, but also Wayanad. Capital accumulated has been invested in real estate. Tourism has brought additional investment. The impact was most visible in Sulthan Bathery, a town next to the grama panchayat that I was anchored in. In December 2017, Sulthan Bathery was elevated from the status of a grama panchayat to a municipality, marking the transition from a rural area to an urban area. This means that the administration could apply for additional funds meant for the development of urban amenities. The fallout of this process was felt in the Paniya colonies. The NREGS ceased to function as the scheme was meant for rural areas. This left many a Paniya household in absolute desperation. The consequences of the agrarian environmental changes underway in Wayanad come out starkly in this instance.

### Nature Tourism

As noted, nature tourism is growing fast in Wayanad as a new source of income. With respect to the Paniyas, nature tourism is marked by the presence of resorts right next to Paniya colonies with the simultaneous and complete absence of the Paniyas in jobs therein. Resorts cater to an upper middle-class clientele and require staff with specific skills. Resorts stand as walled bubbles in the areas with large colonies—as typical enclaves of plenty next to ghettos of immiseration.

### Land Distribution

The Paniyas have expressed their anguish over these insecurities through demands for cultivable land. Aralam Farm is a government project in the neighbouring district of Kannur where Paniya households who participated in various land struggles were granted an acre of land each (Sreerekha 2010). In a bureaucratic sleight of hand, the project seemed to replicate the colonies in Wayanad by providing one cent (one-hundredth of an acre) of land on which to build a house to each household that came from Wayanad, so that the households are next to each other. The remaining 99 cents were given further away, often in interior forests. This has resulted in considerable human-wildlife conflict in the 99 cents wherever the Paniyas try to farm. Many families received lands that were rocky and completely unproductive. Quite a few families that I spoke to have given up hopes of farming completely and are back to their old colonies, moving from one casual job to another. A horticultural company under government control operates here, but it has failed to provide employment to resettled households. Paniya households are thus back to poverty. This case proves that lopsided efforts at land distribution end up continuing the precarity faced by the landless even after receiving land.

### Class Differentiation

In all the social negotiations underway in the midst of the agrarian-environmental changes, the gap between those Adivasi communities that own land and those that do not is growing. The landed Adivasi communities are able to convert land ownership into other entitlements such as

education and then public employment through reserved seats. They are also better equipped to take bank loans, a crucial resource for upward mobility, through their social networks that provide the required references. As a landless Adivasi community, the Paniyas are missing out on this front as well. As indigenous lands are usually not accepted as collateral by lending institutions, landed Adivasi households instead present a government employee to stand as surety. The Paniyas do not have such networks and are therefore excluded from this route of adapting to changes in the agrarian environment.

## Conclusion

The everyday negotiations that the Paniyas make with the agrarian environment to mitigate their insecurity, when taken together, present a sobering picture. The Paniyas are not only losing out on livelihood, but also on adaptation strategies. I have not considered here the dismal state of the tribal development department's work in order to keep my focus on the agrarian environment. The work done by this department has been widely criticised, especially for its poor implementation of welfare programmes meant for the Adivasis (see, for example, Sreerekha 2010).

The multi-directionality of the exclusions faced by the Paniyas explored in the previous section shows that the impact of agrarian-environmental changes often goes beyond the tangible, and can play out in the form of social tussles at the micro-level, in which power dynamics ensure that the Paniyas tend to lose. Further, the increasing fungibility of the Paniyas in the labour markets in ginger farms of Karnataka and the construction sector in Wayanad showed that agrarian-environmental changes in different locales can be interconnected. The case of Aralam showed that land distribution does not necessarily result in poverty eradication if done in a slapdash manner.

These findings clearly point to the importance of centring the agrarian environment in poverty analyses and wider development agendas, as it often has far-reaching impacts on the lives and livelihoods of the poor. As shown in this paper, the impacts of changes in the agrarian environment often tend to be multi-directional and simultaneous, reproducing the social exclusions faced by marginalised communities.

## References

- Agrawal, Arun, and K. Sivaramakrishnan. 2000. "Introduction." In *Agrarian Environments: Resources, Representation and Rule in India*, edited by Arun Agrawal and K. Sivaramakrishnan, 1-22. Durham: Duke University Press.
- Balakrishnan, Pulapre. 2001. "Land Reforms and the Question of Food in Kerala." In *Land, Labour and Rights: Ten Daniel Thorner Memorial Lectures*, edited by Alice Thorner, 202-232. New Delhi: Tulika Books.
- Bijoy, C.R., and K. Ravi Raman. 2003. "Muthanga: The Real Story: Adivasi movement to recover land." *Economic and Political Weekly* 38(20):1975-1982.
- Breman, Jan. 1996. *Footloose Labour: Working in India's Informal Economy*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Byres, T.J., Karen Kapadia, and Jens Lerche. 1999. *Rural Labour Relations in India*. London: Frank Cass.
- Census. 2011. *District Census Handbook Wayanad*. Thiruvananthapuram: Directorate of Census Operations.
- Deininger, Klaus, and Yanyan Liu. 2013. *Welfare and Poverty Impacts of India's National Rural Employment Guarantee Scheme: Evidence from Andhra Pradesh*. World Bank: Policy Research Working Papers 6543. Washington D.C.
- Fox, Thomas A., Jeanine M. Rhemtulla, Navin Ramankutty, Corey Lesk, Theraesa Coyle, and T.K. Kunhamu. 2017. "Agricultural Land-use Change in Kerala: Perspectives from Above and Below the Canopy." *Agriculture, Ecosystems and Environment* 245:1-10.
- Gidwani, Vinay. 2008. *Capital Interrupted: Agrarian Development and the Politics of Work in India*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, pp. 216-247.
- GoK (Government of Kerala). 2016. *Agricultural Statistics 2015-16*. Thiruvananthapuram: Department of Agriculture, Government of Kerala.
- Guerin, Isabelle, G. Venkatasubramanian, and Sebastien Michiels. 2018. "Labour in Contemporary South India." In *Indian Capitalism in Development*, edited by Barbara Harriss-White and Judith Heyer, 118-135. London and New York: Routledge.
- Harilal, K.N., and K.K. Eswaran. 2017. "Agrarian Question and Democratic Decentralisation in Kerala." *Agrarian South: Journal of Political Economy*, 5(2-3):1-33..
- Herring, Ronald. 1980. "Abolition of Landlordism in Kerala: A Redistribution of Privilege." *Economic and Political Weekly* 15(26):A59-A69.

- Jose, Monish, and Martina Padmanabhan. 2016. "Dynamics of Agricultural Land-use Change in Kerala: A Policy and Social-Ecological Perspective." *International Journal of Agricultural Sustainability*, 14(3): 307-324.
- Kalathingal, Divya. 2018. "Adivasi Kudiyirakkalaayi Maarunna Swayamsannaddha Punaradhivasa Paddhathi" (Malayalam: Voluntary Relocation Schemes Turn into Eviction of Adivasis). *Keraleeyam*, January Issue: 34-39.
- Kannan, K.P. 2011. "Agricultural Development in an Emerging Non-Agrarian Regional Economy: Kerala's Challenges." *Economic and Political Weekly* 46(9):64-70.
- Kjosavik, Darley Jose, and Natarajah Shanamugaratnam. 2015. *Political Economy of Development in India: Indigeneity in Transition in the State of Kerala*. London: Routledge
- Kjosavik, Darley Jose, and Natarajah Shanamugaratnam. 2007. "Property Rights Dynamics and Indigenous Communities in Highland Kerala, South India: An Institutional-Historical Perspective." *Modern Asian Studies*, 41(6):1183-1260.
- Lerche, Jens. 2009. "From 'Rural Labour' to 'Classes of Labour': Class Fragmentation, Caste and Class Struggle at the Bottom of the Indian Labour Hierarchy." In *The Comparative Political Economy of Development: Africa and South Asia*, edited by Barbara Harriss-White and Judith Heyer, 64-86. Abingdon and New York: Routledge.
- Lerche, Jens. 2013. "The Agrarian Question in Neoliberal India: Agrarian Transition Bypassed?" *Journal of Agrarian Change*, 13(3):383-404..
- Li, Tania Murray. 2014. *Land's End: Capitalist Relations on an Indigenous Frontier*. Durham: Duke University Press.
- Mohanty, B.B., ed. 2016. *Critical Perspectives on Agrarian Transition: India in the Global Decade*. Abingdon and New York: Routledge.
- Muenster, Daniel. 2012. "Farmers' Suicides and the State in India: Conceptual and Ethnographic Notes from Wayanad, Kerala." *Contributions to Indian Sociology*, 46(1-2):181-208.
- Muenster, Daniel. 2015. "'Ginger is a Gamble': Crop Booms, Rural Uncertainty, and the Neoliberalisation of Agriculture in South India." *Focaal*, 71:100-113.
- Muenster, Daniel, and Ursula Muenster. 2012. "Consuming the Forest in an Environmental Crisis: Nature Tourism, Forest Conservation and Neoliberal Agriculture in South India." *Development and Change* 43(1):205-227.
- Patnaik, Utsa. 1990. *Agrarian Relations and Accumulation: The Mode of Production Debate in India*. Mumbai: Oxford University Press.
- Radhakrishnan, P. 1981. "Land Reforms in Theory and Practice: The Kerala Experience." *Economic and Political Weekly* 16(52):A129-A137.



- Raj, Jayaseelan. 2018. "Tea Belts of Western Ghats, Kerala." In *Ground Down by Growth: Tribe, Caste, Class and Inequality in Twenty-first Century India*, by Alpa Shah, Jens Lerche, Richard Axelby, Dalel Benbabaali, Brendan Donegan, Jayaseelan Raj and Vikramaditya Thakur, 49-81. London: Pluto Press.
- Sreerekha, M.S. 2010. "Challenges before Kerala's Landless: The Story of Aralam Farm." *Economic and Political Weekly*, 45(21):55-62.
- Steur, Luisa. 2014. "An 'Expanded' Class Perspective: Bringing Capitalism Down to Earth in the Changing Political Lives of Adivasi Workers in Kerala." *Modern Asian Studies*, 48 (5):1334-1357.
- Steur, Luisa. 2017. *Indigenist Mobilisation: Confronting Electoral Communism and Precarious Livelihoods in Post-reforms Kerala*. Oxford: Berghahn Books.
- Sudheesh, R.C. 2017. "Fifteen Years since Muthanga, Promise of Land to Kerala's Adivasis Remains Unfulfilled." *The Wire*, 19 February. Accessed 2 August 2019. <https://thewire.in/rights/fifteen-years-since-muthanga-incident-promise-land-keralas-adivasis-remains-unfulfilled>
- UNRISD (United Research Institute for Social Development). 2016. *Policy Innovations for Transformative Change: Implementing the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development*. Geneva: United Nations Research Institute for Social Development.