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Adivasi Mobilisation: 'Identity' versus 'Class' after the Kerala Model of Development?

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Abstract

In August 2001 there was widespread protest in Kerala, a state otherwise known for its remarkable achievements in 'human' development, at the starvation deaths that had occurred in a number of adivasi colonies. This prompted a continuing debate on the meaning of the Kerala 'model' of development for adivasis, in which a consensus seems to have risen that adivasis are the victims of Kerala's development experience and in which their current mobilisation is seen as the first time in history that their interests are being politically articulated. This article argues that such an interpretation is unwarranted and dangerous in that it ignores the present limitations of neo-liberalism on initiatives for the emancipation of subaltern groups and prevents them from using their historical political experience to dynamise their present political initiatives.

Introduction

Kerala is famous for its high levels of social development despite its relatively low Gross Domestic Product. With literacy over 90 per cent and life expectancy of 72 years it outperforms all other major Indian states (Heller 2005: 82). Indeed, the state's 'development experience' from the late 1950s till the late 1980s, which saw the most rapid decline in poverty anywhere in India (ibid.), has been coined the 'Kerala model' of successful 'human' development, relying on redistributive government interventions spurred by the 'public action' of politically informed citizens (Parayil 2000: 7). The Communist Party, around which earlier reform movements and peasant uprisings crystallised in the course of the 1940s

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and which first came to power in 1957 played a crucial role in setting the tone for Kerala's development experience. But so did its regular exclusion from power by its rival, the Congress Party, which resulted in 'competitive politics' to improve general welfare (Heller 2005: 80ff; Jeffrey 1992: 144).

In Kerala's post-liberalisation period, starting in 1991, however, the tensions inherent in an alternative model of development that forsakes capitalist accumulation and global competitiveness in favour of the redistribution of wealth through land reforms and the provision of general social security through social programmes and labour regulation have become ever more pronounced. The lack of industrialisation and mechanisation, high unemployment rates and fiscal deficit that Kerala faced in an increasingly liberalised market (Tharamangalam 2006: 9–15) strengthened the hands of those calling for 'investment-friendly reforms'. That gradual market-oriented reforms in this 'epitome of the welfare model of economy' would actually lead to starvation deaths by the turn of the century, however, was startling (K.S. Singh 2001: 2). It exposed the continued economic vulnerability of certain Keralites and prompted a profound re-evaluation of the Kerala model.

What propelled such rethinking were, however, not so much the starvation deaths themselves as their politicisation in a *jathra* (political procession) that crossed the entire state, organised by activists who had mobilised for the rights of Kerala's adivasi (tribal) population throughout the 1990s (Cheria et al. 1997: 65ff). That the starvation deaths occurred among particular tribal communities thereby became central. On its arrival in Kerala's capital of Thiruvananthapuram, the march developed into a widely supported 48-day *dharna* (sit-in strike) for the rights of adivasis, ending on 16 October 2001 with an agreement between the government and the newly formed Adivasi Gothra Maha Sabha (AGMS), a movement for adivasi rights lead by C.K. Janu, to redistribute land to landless adivasis by 2003. The AGMS was the first state-wide social movement in Kerala explicitly aimed at adivasi rights and it remained active subsequently, most notably in 2003 with the occupation of the Muthanga 'wildlife sanctuary' in protest at the lack of implementation of the 2001 agreement (Bijoj and Raman 2003).

Previously, 'tribal' communities had been noted as 'outliers' of the Kerala model's 'central tendency' (Kurien 2000: 194)—as exemplars of the 'harsh micro-realities' hiding beneath macro-level social indicators (Ramanathaiyer and MacPherson 2000: 196)—but a consensus now formed that the adivasis were in fact the victims of the model. The Communist Party had refused to organise along community lines, had insisted on issues of 'class' and emphasised the well-being of 'peasants' and 'workers'. What used to be seen as a cornerstone of the Kerala model (Heller 2000; Jeffrey 1992) was now perceived as having silenced the voices of marginal communities, particularly the tribals.

This analysis, if correct, has serious consequences for the lessons Kerala was thought to offer, and suggests that its general 'human development' came at the

expense of a particular minority of the population—a process in which the Communist Party seemingly played a perverse role. From this perspective we might be relieved that current reforms are finally allowing the 'autonomous voices' of this victimised minority to be heard. This would support a wider liberal-culturalist consensus (see Steur 2005) that sees the post-1945 heydays of international developmentalism as the root of indigenous people's suffering today and sees in globalisation a 'cunning of history' whereby the devastation of indigenous habitats and attack on their social rights goes together with unprecedented opportunities for political leverage (Turner 2007: 118). As Yashar (2005: 298) argues, the threats of 'neoliberal citizen regimes' drive indigenous movements to pose a new 'post-liberal challenge' to claims of 'ethnonational homogeneity' thereby allowing them to take a historical step towards their liberation.

Such arguments are, however, problematic. They feed into the positive/negative dichotomy characteristic of much work on globalisation, suggesting that there is 'good globalization' and 'bad globalization' (Speed 2008: 29). This obscures how many new forms of resistance and identities are also shaped by, and can partly become complicit with, neo-liberal models of governance. Concretely, in the case of Kerala the liberal-culturalist consensus has two dangers. First, a selectively pessimistic reading of Kerala's development history with regard to its tribal communities, discards the important lessons in human development that Kerala holds and ignores the negative impact of neo-liberal pressures on the possibilities for such development in the present. Second, a selectively optimistic reading of the present-day tribal movements disables the kind of criticism that is necessary for these movements to remain dynamic and avoid becoming complicit in the mechanisms of subordination that they try to resist.

This article, therefore, challenges four pillars of the liberal-culturalist consensus in Kerala, namely that: 1) tribal communities have become the victims of the Kerala model of development; 2) the dominance of political parties under the Kerala model has drowned the voice of 'civil society' and thus of tribal communities; 3) the new tribal movements in the state finally allow tribal people to speak autonomously and; 4) these movements offer better opportunities to realise social justice for tribal people than the Communist movement did.

Between August 2003 and August 2006, I carried out ethnographic fieldwork, including archival research, participant observation and interviews with activists of the AGMS, their constituency and other actors shaping the field of tribal politics in Kerala—activists of other movements, social workers, bureaucrats, journalists, political party members and politicians.[1] I do not claim to present a 'tribal voice' but rather give my own critical interpretation, alert to the danger that deconstructing the more essentialist, and thereby romantically appealing, aspects of tribal life might be taken out of context by opponents of 'indigenous movements' but also realising that the failure to create more realistic and complex understandings of 'indigenous'

activism can have serious political consequences in the form of supporting 'indigenous authenticity as racism ... in disguise' (Sissons 2005: 37) or 'maintaining a class system that further marginalises the poorest' (Shah 2007: 1825).

Theoretically, my argument takes inspiration from the radical critique of development as a 'hegemonic worldview' (Escobar 1995: 17) that often obscures the political struggles taking place around it. I endorse the emphasis on more complex and contradictory understandings of development policies, their rationale and their effects, as they intersect with other social processes (Li 2007). Such an exercise helps to 'expand the possibilities for thinking critically about what is and what might be' (ibid.: 2). More activist-inclined post-development quests for alternatives to development moreover emphasise the role of new social movements (Escobar 1995: 216) and argue that their processes of identity construction are 'more flexible, modest, and mobile' as they rely 'on tactical articulations arising out of the conditions and practices of daily life' (ibid.). Despite this caveat, post-development literature however often reinforces 'the necessity for pure categories and identities' (Robins 2003: 278), particularly when it comes to expectations of 'indigenous people' as the harbingers of alternatives.

I, therefore, also draw on the debate on the global rise of 'indigenism' (Niezen 2003) and the emphasis on 'culture and rights' in political struggle during the late twentieth century (Cowan 2006). An important issue in this debate is whether or not what passes for 'indigenous cultures' pre-exist the state structures charged with recognising them and whether the legal structures which recognise 'culture' have their own transformative effects, 'shaping and at times creating that which [they] purport ... merely to recognize' (Cowan 2006: 17–8). I see 'indigenous identity' not as a primordial given with an uncontested substantive meaning but rather a 'product ... of the later half of the twentieth century' (Niezen 2003: 25), constructed precisely in struggles over different visions of 'development'.

In the case of Kerala, the discourse of tribals as indigenous people only became explicitly politicised in the 1990s, partly under the influence of the international indigenous movement. The term *adivasi*, the equivalent to the colonial category of 'aboriginal' (Guha 1999: 6), enabled activists to connect to the global discourse on indigenous rights despite the Indian government's insistence that India—as a (melting pot of cultures)—has no indigenous people (Cheria et al. 1997: 22f). The word's interchangeable usage with tribal, 'originates, in fact, in nineteenth century racial theory, which argued that certain "races" were incapable of progressing beyond "tribal" organisations, unless forcibly integrated into societies dominated by "superior races"' (Guha 1999: 6). Even for those tribes living in Kerala's hilly northern region, who were particularly marginalised by the influx of settler farmers during the British-promoted post-World War II 'Grow more food' campaign (Cheria et al. 1997: 60), claiming 'indigenous' identity is a political act as they share their indigeneity locally with other social groups. Adivasi oral history in these areas goes back

only so far as when they were in bonded labour to the Chettys, an indigenous group paradoxically not considered adivasi (ibid. 55).

The common-sense designation of a community as tribal is more the product of political processes than depending on substantive notions of tribalism as 'a level of social organization that pre-dated stratified class society', characterised by 'the joint ownership of the natural resources' (Ratnagar 2004: 32). Instead, it relies heavily on the central government's listing of particular communities, for purposes of affirmative action, as Scheduled Tribes (STs) (1.10 per cent of the Keralese population in 1991; KIRTADS 2003). In everyday life, most tribal people however distinguish other tribal communities as being different castes, and perceive themselves as endogamous groups in a hierarchy infused with connotations of purity and pollution and a fixed division of labour. Many tribal communities in Kerala thus think of themselves as tribal only through being on the ST list—they do not share one language, religion or occupation. Further, in their relative powerlessness and distance from 'mainstream' Keralese society, many adivasis hardly distinguishable from the ex-untouchable communities are now identified as 'Dalit' (oppressed). It is only in organising to claim the 'tribal rights' inscribed in the Indian Constitution that different tribal communities have started to call themselves adivasi and have started to unite.

Though the political mobilisation of indigenous people *as* indigenous people has only really taken off since the 1980s, few people acknowledge that many 'indigenous people' were earlier identified as 'workers' or 'peasants'. However, some of these tribal communities have yet to internalise the new political framing of their struggles. Paradoxically, the communities leading the AGMS in Kerala are the *paniya*s (literally meaning workers, the most numerous tribe in Kerala) and *adiya*s (literally slaves) who often identify themselves more easily as landless agricultural workers than in the new language of 'indigenous identity' that they supposedly share with communities like the *kurichia*s, landowning farmers who treated them as untouchables.

Critical approaches to development and to the rise of 'indigenism' and 'culture and rights' activism thus provide the theoretical framework of this paper. I will start now by discussing the first element of the liberal-culturalist consensus in Kerala, the idea that adivasis are the 'worst hit victims of Kerala's "development"' (Sreekumar and Parayil 2006: 220).

The Kerala Model of Victimising Tribals?

It is common to criticise Kerala's development model for either excluding or further disadvantaging adivasis. According to Chathukulam and John, 'tribals have been largely left out of the gains of the vaunted Kerala model of development' (2006: 182). Alternatively, Sreekumar and Parayil argue: 'While state projects for the benefit of "larger" society did not cover Adivasis, often displacing and dispossessing them,

programmes intended exclusively for their benefit only marginalised and deprived them further' (2006: 231). As high court judge Krishna Iyer proclaims: They are 'victim[s] of social deprivation, dubious promises and dishonorable existence' who 'suffer as derelicts and driftwood' (*The Hindu*, 16 June 2003).

What such pronouncements do is precisely to ignore the political construction of adivasi identity and present it as synonymous with victimhood, thus denying those identifying as adivasis the status of political actors in their own right. J. Devika (n.d.) calls this 'rendering the oppressed passive' as victims' liberation is made dependent on the self-sacrificing efforts of more powerful others claiming the status of 'Reformer'. If we approach 'development' more critically however, and ask what it meant concretely for particular adivasi communities and what political opportunities were, perhaps unintentionally, opened up by Kerala's mode of development, we may better appreciate the relative merits of Kerala's 'human development' experience as compared to that of other states.

The quality of life indicators for Scheduled Tribes in Kerala are generally rather unreliable and inconsistent but nevertheless are significantly higher than those for STs elsewhere in India. In 1991, the literacy rates for male and female STs in Kerala was respectively 74 and 51 per cent, much higher than the 24 and 18 per cent for STs across India (Franke and Chasin 2000: 18). Scheduled Tribes in Kerala have clearly not simply been 'left out' of the development model. Even considering only tribal agricultural workers' communities, we see that their literacy rate is much higher in Kerala than elsewhere—the *paniya*s, among the poorest ST communities in Kerala today, for example, have a male literacy rate of around 40 per cent and a female rate above 25 per cent (KIRTADS 2003: 27). Moreover, though land shortage is a major problem for adivasi communities, most of this[2] cannot be attributed to the 1950–80s phase of Kerala's development experience but goes back centuries, particularly for those communities, such as the *paniya*, who used to work as slaves for upper-caste households. For them, arguably the first step towards emancipation came in 1961, a century after the official act abolishing slavery, 'when the Kerala government enacted a law by which house sites measuring 10 cents were allotted to landless families ... including ... the old slave castes' (Aiyappan 1992: 35). As Kjosavik (2004: 246) maintains, 'the reforms have had a positive impact on indigenous communities [STs], although the gains they made, especially in the case of traditional land-holding groups, were not significant in relation to the historical land alienation they suffered.' During the hey-day of Kerala's development model landlessness among Scheduled Tribes was brought down from almost 60 per cent in 1964–5 to 20 per cent in 1983–4 (Kjosavik 2004: 247). Beyond such macro-level statistics, however, the ways adivasis themselves engaged with 'development' are crucial.

In remembering their more recent past, there is little hint of glories that 'development' destroyed among the *paniya*. Akkathi, a young woman from a *paniya* colony and an active participant in different development projects there, for example, said

that rather than worry about having access to the forest to dig for tubers, she in fact was glad she could now buy her food: digging for tubers to eat is hard work, especially after working in the fields all day. Akkathi much preferred to earn wages and use her ration card to get food from the shop instead. This involves negotiating with the shop owner—in Akkathi's colony several new families had not yet received a ration card, and the shop owner responsible for the ration cards needed to be constantly pressured to provide the correct ration. This constant bargaining with local authorities to receive what they knew to be their entitlements did not, however, create nostalgia for a pre-development past.

Instead, Akkathi and her neighbours sometimes claimed their rights more publicly, for example at a Grama Sabha meeting I attended. Tedious official speeches spoke of the need to 'keep aside our political disagreements', and 'make sure the benefits of these plans go to the most deserving of the deserving' (field notes, 4 January 2006)—all this half-interestedly listened to by the *paniya* workers from the back of the hall. After the speeches, those present were divided into groups to discuss different topics (infrastructure, housing, agriculture, etc). Whereas others were given a say in general affairs, adivasi workers were assigned to the 'ST/SC corner', where a Panchayat member started writing down their 'needs'. As people started listing '50 cents of land', 'new houses', 'toilets', 'electricity', Manju, a young *paniya* woman from Akkathi's colony, lost her patience and confronted the Panchayat member asking why they did not know about the meeting more in advance, and why the present tribal promoter assigned to their colony was not doing his job. The previous one would visit fortnightly whereas the present one hardly ever came and could never be found when he was needed. Manju repeatedly demanded that they appoint another promoter who should come at least twice a month. A few weeks later, encouraged by AGMS leaders, Akkathi's colony nominated Manju in the Panchayat elections and 'gave' her all their votes (field notes, 15 February 2006). As they were a minority in the Panchayat, she did not win the elections, but they made a point: that they would only support other parties if these would work for them (field notes, 15 February 2006). Soon after, they finally succeeded in having the Panchayat pay for an auto-rickshaw to take their children to school every morning.

Without denying the constant negotiations and how social inequalities were reproduced in development planning (for example in the 'SC/ST corner'), *paniya*s have nevertheless clearly found ways of putting Kerala's development model to their advantage. Even the poorest adivasi communities, thus, are institutionalised into the defence of social rights in Kerala, both through policy routines but also through the taken-for-granted legitimacy of making redistributive demands on the state. In this the history of Kerala's land reforms, minimum wages legislation, public distribution system and Welfare Boards instituted in the 1970s through the assertion of 'worker's dignity', claiming welfare as 'people's right' (Devika n.d.), is clearly present. Kerala's rhetorical emphasis on 'pro-poor' development does

not automatically guarantee such development—certainly not in the present circumstances—but it allows people the chance to hold politicians to account. The argument that the Kerala model merely made victims out of adivasis thus ignores comparative statistics, unduly romanticises the pre-development past and obscures how adivasis have actively claimed the possibilities of the model.

Liberating Tribals through 'Civil Society'?

The liberal-culturalist consensus identifies the dominance of political parties over civil society as the crux of adivasi victimisation. As Sreekumar and Parayil argue 'mobilisational politics resulted in the strengthening of political parties and their affiliated organs at the expense of civil society' and this is why adivasi agricultural labour movements fail to attain their goals (2006: 216). Chathukulam and John likewise argue that the opposition by entrenched political parties toward the AGMS shows 'the failing of a mode of politics based on pressure and bargaining rather than principles' (2006: 198). The survival of the AGMS, they contend, depends on its ability to generate a broad emancipatory agenda 'outside the party framework' and 'with the active support of civil society' (ibid.). Such arguments echo a wider liberal consensus that eschews 'politics' in favour of a principled focus on human rights and that posits 'civil society' as the key to democratisation or social development. Closer analysis, however, complicates firstly, the refrain that adivasi workers' interests were never part of party agendas and secondly the idea that 'civil society' necessarily favours adivasi interests.

Partly due to ST/SC reservations, several Panchayat presidents, party members, strike leaders and top bureaucrats, including a Member of the Legislative Assembly, are from adivasi communities, though mostly 'upper-caste' ST groups such as the *kurichia*s. There are *adiya* and *paniya* politicians and party members too, however. A good example is the late P.K. Kalan, a senior Community Party of India (Marxist), (CPI(M)), the main Communist Party in Kerala, member from an *adiya* agricultural labourers' community and long-time block Panyachat president. He was particularly known for his *gadhika* performances—expressive *adiya* songs, whose text he 'adapted' to instil socialist awareness among his listeners. I interviewed him after a public ceremony that the CPI(M) organised in his honour (29 January 2006) and also asked him about his niece, C.K. Janu, now the leader of the AGMS. Kalan told me that when Janu was small, her father and he used to participate in strikes organised by the CPI(M). Later she came with them to the party and started working in it. She had no formal education but a talent for picking up on things and quickly became politically aware. In 1991 however she got 'caught' (Kalan's words) by Solidarity—a liberation-theology inspired NGO organising Freirian literacy campaigns—and left the party. Though Kalan criticised her for not having quite the correct 'consciousness' anymore, he supported her attempts to get land.

C.K. Janu herself (interviewed, 21 June 2006) explained that she left the CPI(M) because she had become dissatisfied with how often adivasis were simply rounded up by party leaders to participate in strikes and shout slogans that they hardly understood and that the party did not implement. She was also frustrated by the CPI(M)'s present attempts to co-opt autonomous tribal movements, though she added that the party had to make good on its promises to retain adivasi support. In that sense she considered every victory for adivasi land rights a victory of the AGMS, even if it was led by the CPI(M). She moreover acknowledged that the CPI(M) had in fact laid the basis for her political experience and awareness.

The Naxalites, the underground Maoist party that was active in the late 1960s in Kerala, also had a strong base among *adiya*s and *paniya*s (Aiyappan 1992: 59ff) who particularly recall Varghese, the Naxalite leader who took a genuine interested in their communities and was killed by the police in 1970 while fighting for their cause. Naxalite actions were often violent but adivasi workers talked most about their strikes of the late 1960s through which they managed to increase their daily wage and change the *valli* system of payment in rice into cash payment. Adivasi workers I interviewed uniformly recalled the rises in wages secured by every strike. To state that adivasi workers were never part of political parties and that 'the hegemonic class discourse espoused by the left adversely affected the interests of ... Adivasis' (Tharamangalam 2006: 8), thus, also means denying adivasi workers the historical agency they actually demonstrated.

Second, is civil society a realm where adivasis can play a respected role? Here use a Gramscian concept of civil society as a realm of struggle in which the ideological and social organisation of class hegemony takes place. Civil society and political parties in this sense are merely different reflections of the same contested set of material relations. In terms of their internal organisation then, we should not assume that mainstream 'civil society' is more interested than political parties in adivasi well-being, even if social workers, like party members, always declare their wholehearted sympathy for tribals.

It is well-documented that political parties, including the CPI(M), often opposed adivasi activists, for example in the all-party strike against the AGMS' land occupation at Muthanga (Bijoj and Raman 2003). But in many instances, mainstream 'civil society' also confronted adivasi workers' movements. Raman, an upper-caste intellectual and social worker for the Wayanad Environmental Protection Organisation, for example claimed to be a great 'friend of the adivasis'. The organisation he founded, however, voiced strong concern about the land occupation by C.K. Janu at Muthanga, claiming that the activists were not 'real adivasis'. In a 'spot investigation report', entitled *Invasion of Wayanad wildlife sanctuary: some disturbing truths*, Raman and his fellow activists claimed that 'It must be pointed out that Ms. C.K. Janu is not representing the real Adivasi cause now because she and her gang men threatened the local tribal people living in the periphery of the Sanctuary.'[3] They also emphasised the threat to the biodiversity of the sanctuary and circulated

these arguments in the media, thereby helping the government to legitimise the eviction of the occupation (see, for example, *The Hindu*, 16 February 2003). This would not be the first time that environmentalist 'civil society' organisations, by equating adivasi and environmental welfare, leave no role for 'adivasis-as-proletarians' (Baviskar 1997: 215) and end up mobilising against them.

Sebastian, also an upper-caste social activist and moreover a leader of Solidarity, the NGO that C.K. Janu had joined, provides another example. I asked him about a newspaper article from the 27 February 2003, days after the police attack on the adivasi activists at Muthanga, that read 'Solidarity denies link with AGMS' (interview, 28 March 2006). Earlier another Solidarity leader had told me that the police had raided their office and interrogated its members in connection with the AGMS (interview, 20 January 2006) so I could understand why they would deny links. Sebastian responded, however, by repeating the argument he made in the newspaper article, describing Solidarity's role as that of a 'parent' giving education but then letting the AGMS 'go their own way'. Later he described the AGMS as being very important in 'the collective process they started'. But, he added, that the AGMS still needed to prove itself because it had a very bad 'track record': after Muthanga the leaders did not stand with the people who participated in the land occupation—a comment that distracted from Solidarity's own obvious failings in this regard.

In sum, rather than civil society being oppressed by political society, the problem in Kerala is that in both realms well-educated upper-class/caste values dominate (see also Sariola in this volume) and marginalise the voices of adivasi workers.

An 'Authentic' Tribal Voice?

Echoing the post-developmentalist hopes of indigenous people as the vanguards of an alternative social order, the adivasi rights' movements that emerged in Kerala through the 1990s are often described as 'autonomous', 'organic' or 'authentic'. AGMS leaders C.K. Janu and M. Geethanandan talked of how 'the Paniya, the Adiya, the Bettakuruma, the Kaattunayaka, the Kurichia etc., belonging to all tribes of Wayanad, woke up their gods in unison' (Janu and Geethnandan 2003), thereby suggesting that these gods (and cultures) are indeed shared. Similarly, Sreekumar and Parayil argue that 'the legal and administrative homogenisation of adivasis as Scheduled Tribes provides a commonality for the state's initiatives and individual/group responses to them' (2006: 247), again implying that the natural unity of adivasis is merely supported, rather than shaped, by their inclusion in the ST list. However, if we look more critically at this adivasi voice, we see that it does not exist 'naturally' but arose, and is contested, in the context of negotiations with the state.

Indeed, an internally debated notion of adivasi-ness determines the AGMS' construction of adivasi identity less than do the state's decisions on the ST list. Geethanandan, an unofficial leader of the AGMS, for example, comes from a

community recently reclassified from ST to SC (Scheduled Caste). Obviously, the government and not the AGMS made this reclassification, but Geethanandan now says that 'not being an adivasi, I cannot take a leadership position in the AGMS' (interview, 20 September 2005). Indeed, 'adivasi identity' is often experienced simply as a government category. Where it is experienced more 'organically' people never seem to include all groups on the ST list. Amini, a young *paniya* woman and ordinary participant of the AGMS's struggle at Muthanga, reacted to my queries on what the word adivasi means:

> A: Nothing. The government…When we say adivasi, we mean the *paniya*.
>
> Q: But what does the word mean?
>
> A: It's not about the meaning of the word. That's only when we say *paniya*—then we mean *paniya*. It is the *government* who calls us adivasis. We are just *paniya*s.
>
> Q: Janu (the AGMS leader) also uses this word though; she always talks of adivasis … Why is that so?
>
> A: She is an *adiya*. She is also an adivasi.
>
> Q: But I never hear you talk about yourself as adivasi….
>
> A: That's because she (C.K. Janu) has a job, that's why she calls us adivasis. She's a professional, so she calls us adivasis… You see, we all have different songs. Their speech is different. Ours is different. The *Naykkan*s*, Urali, Adiya*, and us, all these have different languages.
>
> Q: I see—but what about the *Kurichia*s and *Kuruma*s (officially ST and included in the AGMS)? Are they also adivasis? Which all groups are included in this group of adivasis?
>
> A: *Paniya*s*, Naykkan*s*, Urali*, and *Adiya*. These four…
>
> Q: And these other two, the *Kurichia*s and *Kuruma*s?
>
> A: They are different.
>
> Q: Are they not adivasis?
>
> A: No.
>
> Q: Why so?
>
> A: Why… because they have a lot of money! Anyway, it is not we who give ourselves such names as adivasis. It's the government who gives such names. We are just *paniya*s.

Amini simultaneously rejected adivasiness as a meaningless official construct and reclaimed it by excluding *kurichia*s for being rich. Indeed many AGMS participants see adivasiness like this. In public meetings and press conferences, however, AGMS

leaders always talk of adivasiness as a natural identity to do with living in harmony with nature, being uncorrupted by modernity and sharing a special bond to a particular ancestral land. The AGMS leaders do the opposite of the *paniya* woman: rather than treat it merely as a legal category or political tool, they focus on its supposedly organic meaning. Whilst this 'substantive', 'authentic' concept of adivasi often makes little sense on the ground, leaders use it in media statements because mainstream Keralese political parties and civil society respond to this romantic notion of adivasiness, and it helps them negotiate with the state.

The most dramatic example of the contested concept of adivasiness, however, can be found in the occupation of land at Muthanga. AGMS leaders in press statements referred to 'thousands of refugees going to their ancestral lands… convers[ing] with the spirits of the mountains with ease, as though they got back their freedom that they lost centuries ago' (C.K. Janu and M. Geethanandan 2003). They stressed that they would heal the area's environment—spoilt by an industrial paper company (ibid.)—and played on the image of innocent, nature-loving adivasis. This, in turn, was further romanticised by supportive journalists and civil society groups. This notion of the 'innocent tribal' also however enabled the previously mentioned Environmental Protection Organisation to report that the people they found at Muthanga were not innocent, 'real' adivasis at all but consisted merely of 'Janu and her gangmen'. Indeed, 'real adivasis' would never be so militant. Rumours spread that the movement had been infiltrated by Tamil Tigers or the People's War Group (for example, *The Hindu,* 21 February 2003). After the land occupiers were violently evicted and traces of adivasi militancy were erased, the image of the 'authentic' peace-loving tribal was restored: Raman, the leader of the Environmental Protection Organisation, concluded that C.K. Janu was after all 'just an innocent girl' (*pawam kutti*).

Thus the 'authentic' tribal voice heard critiquing the Kerala model of development is a highly contested one, the product of a difficult and unequal political negotiation. Claims to 'authenticity' erase these complexities, restoring a dominant image of adivasiness far removed from adivasis' self-perceptions.

Adivasi Identity and the Promise of Emancipation

The celebration of the autonomous 'coming-out' of adivasis is often opposed to the 'imported', 'alien' Marxist politics of the past. Bhaskaran, C.K. Janu's biographer, for example claims 'her voice is pregnant with the silence of centuries' (2004: viii), creating the impression that adivasi interests are being articulated for the first time in history. Though this holds out the promise of adivasi emancipation it ignores the lessons of adivasis' earlier engagement in political movements, particularly on the need for internal democracy.

That adivasi identity, rather than being the first expression of adivasi interests, is better understood as a reaction against the hollowing out of the 'class' politics that

many adivasis used to engage in, is evident in the words of Soman, an elderly dalit activist in the Rashtriya Maha Sabha (RMS), the sister organisation of the AGMS, and before then a long-standing member of the CPI(M):

> In the beginning the members of the Communist Party were farmers and those working in the fields and plantations. … because in those times we were under the rule of the rich … When the party became powerful, however, the rich also wanted to enter into the party ... and when the rich entered into the party, its ruin started. There are many martyrs (who died struggling for the Communist Party) from our community (Dalits), but nobody acknowledges it. Their histories are excluded from the history of the party. And now people are just standing with the party hoping that if the party comes to power they will get this piece of land or their daughter will get that job. … They are not conscious of the party and its political ideology anymore.

And later:

> Soman: … around 1990 the middle class started to infiltrate into the party. And then we lost our voice. But we held on to the party believing in the ideology. And in fact with such a preposition the party was working against the SC and the ST. Because we were not supposed to spread communalism, we could not mobilise the *Paraya* and the *Pulaya* (SC/Dalit groups). And we followed those beliefs blindly. But at the same time the Ezhavas (a so-called 'Other Backward Caste') and the Nairs (upper-caste) inside the party started getting organised on their own in terms of caste. But if we would try to do that, the party would punish us. A Communist Ezhava could participate in the SNDP[4] (an Ezhava social reform organisation)—but we as Communist SC or ST were not allowed to get involved in any other public meetings.

Soman's Communist indictment of the rich and of ideological opportunism and his dalit/adivasi critique of upper-caste lobbying and hypocrisy suggest a dissolution of the party's initial commitment, solidarity and broader social vision. Rather than assuming that adivasi/dalit politics would be free of such problems, his analysis, in different registers, of the experience of subaltern groups in the Communist movement allowed Soman to remain critical of similar dynamics within the RMS.

Observing the activities of AGMS activists at Aralam farm, the largest occupation then organised by them, I could well see that their emphasis on caste and tribal identity rather than class did not prevent ordinary movement dynamics such as co-optation, a distancing between leaders and followers or the detachment of ideology from lived experience. Among the radical political initiatives of the AMGS were after-school classes where adivasi children were taught dalit/adivasi history

and traditions. Particularly active in this project was Krishna, a Cheruma (SC/dalit) AGMS activist and always respectfully referred to as Krishna *mashe* (teacher/master). During the day he spent many hours collecting and recording traditional songs from different headmen and women, particularly *paniya* and *adiya* ones, whom he considered 'most authentic'. In the late afternoon he would teach these songs and histories to children from different communities (*adiya*, *paniya*, Kurmbas, Malayan) visiting the study centre.

Local people appreciated the project: they sent their children to the after-school classes, they respected the authority of Krishna *mashe*, and showed an interest in what their children were learning. But during one session (field notes, 24 June 2006) the uneasy tension between the promotion of *paniya* 'culture' and its simultaneous formalisation and appropriation by the non-*paniya* teacher was particularly obvious. Krishna asked a headman watching the class about a traditional song. He retorted 'aren't you the one who knows best?' This was followed, to Krishna's disgust, by a drunken elderly *paniya* nonchalantly spitting tobacco on the floor of the school-cum-Hindu temple. The elder was subsequently escorted away by two young *paniya* men.

Such interactions, full of paradoxes—of valuing and at the same time formalising and purifying *paniya* 'culture'—attest to the active politics of the AGMS. It is not succumbing to a simple, static interpretation of what adivasi identity politics ought to be about. How adivasi identity discourse can end up opposing the interests of the most marginalised groups, such as the *paniya*, who are usually celebrated as the 'most authentic' adivasis, was however clear when Kunkan, a leader of the Kurichia Samithi (an organisation of *kurichias*, i.e., landed, upper-caste STs) at Aralam farm reacted to my question about the AGMS (interview, 28 June 2006):

> They are working for the tribes, Janu and Geethanandan (AGMS leaders). They are really struggling and taking pains for us adivasis. But Paniyas don't obey them or agree with them. For us (Kurichias), it is different. We agree with them and we try to understand them (Janu and Geethanandan). We think their activities are good.
>
> All that what happened at the time of the Muthanga struggle…. They (Janu and Geethanandan) were tortured by the police. But the Paniyas don't understand. They don't care about these things. … See, the Paniyas have no commitment. They think 'we got one acre of land, so now we can just sit back'. Because of their attitude, because of this mentality, we prefer not to stand with them. But in the case of getting our rights, we are ready to join them. We think there's nothing wrong with that. ... God knows, maybe some Paniyas can be changed.

Kunkan's perception of the AGMS leaders as morally and culturally 'uplifting' tribals is not un-common. Though worded in terms of tribal identity rather than class, such a mission necessarily places the upper-caste and/or upper-class values

at the core of the movement's mission—which strongly reminds of how upper-caste/class groups came to dominate the Communist movement—and cultivates a disempowering form of politics that puts 'self-sacrificing' elites, trying to 'uplift' the masses, in charge (see Devika n.d.). The promise of emancipation of adivasi identity politics thus will have to be actively fought for and appropriated, just as adivasi workers did with the Communist development discourse.

Human Development and 'Indigenous People': Lessons from Kerala

In attributing the marginalisation of adivasis to Kerala's development model, the neo-liberal requirement to prioritise competing in the global marketplace over ensuring the well-being of its citizens is taken for granted. This impact would not be so serious if it were indeed well compensated for in the case of indigenous people by their expanding political opportunities to organise and re-claim their rights. In fact many indigenous people were already organised, as 'workers' or 'peasants', and it will moreover be much more difficult for adivasi movements to democratise neo-liberal development than it was for lower-caste/class communities to influence the Kerala model.

Though there is often scope for creative social-democratic experiments that 'reconcile the needs of achieving growth through globalized markets with the extension of political, social and economic rights' (Sandbrook et al. 2007:3), there are clear limits to this under the present liberalised economic circumstances, in a global order in which protectionist policies and public expenditure are considered suspect and inequality is accepted as a natural result of market forces (Franke and Chasin 2000: 28). Sandbrook et al. (2007: 68) claim that even during Kerala's reform period 'social democratic gains have been preserved' but others, like Oommen (2008: 23), show that 'education, health and social security entitlements ... have suffered' and that poverty and inequality have increased. Kerala faces an alarming 'imbalance between social development and a low-growth, if not stagnant economy' (Tharamangalam 2006: 8).

Large companies have tended to punish Kerala for its high minimum wages by withholding investments but with the liberalisation of finances in the early 1990s, even much of the existing capital has relocated. This has increased the unemployment rate, now the highest in India at 35 per cent (Thomas 2006: 78), even though nearly 20 per cent of Kerala's population is settled outside the state (Tharamangalam 2006: 15). Kerala's economy has thus become thoroughly dependent on remittances (mostly from the Gulf), already twice the value-added produced by domestic manufacture (ibid.).

The People's Planning campaign was a creative response, a large-scale decentralisation project started in 1996 that devolved up to 35–40 per cent of planning

funds from the state to the Panchayat level (Heller 2005: 86; Mathew 2006: 321). It however failed to address the state's economic sluggishness (Mathew 2006: 324), and popular enthusiasm for the plan evaporated (Mathew 2006; Tharamangalam 2006), especially when it emerged that the politicians promoting the People's Plan were negotiating a US $315 million loan from the Asian Development Bank, putting their drive for 'decentralization' in quite another light (Menon and Nigam 2007: 106 ff). Realising the lack of room for alternative societal experiments to succeed against neo-liberal pressure, political strikes become more and more ritualised in Kerala. Though they often paralyse public offices, services are anyway increasingly provided, to those who can afford it, in the 'parallel' economy of private institutions (see Lukose 2005: 521; Oommen 2008: 23).

The second danger of ignoring the complexities of adivasi politics in Kerala, and elsewhere, is 'falling into the dangerous assumption that struggles for [indigenous] rights are automatically contestatory to state power' and 'invariably challenge neo-liberalism' (Speed 2008: 29). Many scholars continue to treat indigenous identity politics as by definition opposing the state's homogenising logic (see Niezen 2003; Yashar 2005). But indigenous identity politics can be just as much based on state discourse and susceptible to co-optation as other forms of subaltern organising. We must therefore develop a critical analysis of 'indigenous' identity to oppose the logic of 'oppressive authenticity' (Sissons 2005: 37) and give room to different adivasi groups to struggle 'within, and also against, their own histories and their own cultures and simultaneously within and against the histories and cultures that others try so intensively to impose on them' (Sider 2003: xiii).

A particularly damaging 'history' that others, notably the state, try to reinforce in Kerala is one that places adivasis totally apart from other oppressed groups who are presently starting to form a wider 'Dalit' movement that seems most likely to revive the promise of universal welfare and the abolishment of structural inequalities (Devika n.d.). There is a continued effort, by those opposed to dalit or adivasi movements' attempts to revamp Kerala's redistributive agenda, to silence adivasi demands in a language that explicitly re-works the stereotype of adivasis as hapless exotic creatures. The trope of the 'innocent tribal' remains powerful in this.

A successful plantation owner-turned-movie producer, who was busy commoditising the Muthanga violence for cinematic consumption, for instance told me 'The real problem is our involvement in their (adivasis) life. They can survive where we cannot survive, they can enjoy what we cannot enjoy. We are imposing our survival and enjoyment on them, that is the real problem' (field notes, 29 July 2006). This producer conveniently came up with a solution: the government should buy up some of his plantations that were anyway collapsing under international competition and give them to adivasis to live on. As Maran, an *adiya* AGMS activist, later commented 'All this talk of caring for adivasis … they hate us—they only

love our ancestors, those who were too afraid to come out of the forest' (interview, 8 March 2006). While adivasi and dalit activists want land as a source of economic security and self-esteem (Devika n.d.), they simultaneously contest the notion that adivasis only need land and that their needs are 'simple' because they lack the desires that middle-class people entertain. Against the over-emphasis on 'land rights' by the media and intellectuals in Kerala, many adivasi activists emphasise that they also need support in making their land productive as well as education and employment opportunities for their youth. 'Those who say adivasis have simple needs have rather simple brains', as C. K. Janu scathingly remarked (21 June 2006)—though in other political contexts, C.K. Janu has indeed, in order to gather political support, claimed adivasis to be more in tune with nature and less greedy than Kerala's middle-classes in order to gather political support.

There is often a thin line between tropes of tribal exoticism and innocence and their appropriation and reworking by adivasi activists in different political contexts. Without critical attention to the construction of an adivasi identity as a political basis from which to build larger alliances and claim social rights, it is therefore likely that the culturalist, oppressive trope of the 'innocent tribal' will be reinforced. In a time when organising for a more just and equitable form of development is even more of a challenge than it was half a century ago for the activists in Kerala's Communist movement, such reinforcement of oppressive forms of 'adivasi' identity at the cost of critical adivasi–dalit politics is the last thing Kerala needs to retain its status as a model in human development.

Notes

1. The quotes in this paper are from taped interviews conducted between 2003 and 2006, literally transcribed and translated, mostly by my two research assistants. I have edited the transcriptions slightly to recapture the spirit of the conversation. Except for public figures, I use aliases for people's names.
2. Some landowning tribes suffered directly from the land reforms: for example, settler farmers who had encroached their land successfully claimed they were the 'tenants' of adivasi 'landlords' and thus had the land 'redistributed' to them.
3. Some *paniya* workers living around Muthanga I interviewed in August 2005 might have said that they had been terrorised by the AGMS. Such distancing from the AGMS had more to do with fearing for their relationship with employers and authorities than fearing the AGMS itself (field notes August 2005).
4. The Sree Narayana Dharma Paripalana (a lower caste social reform organisation).

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