https://www.academia.edu/95280361/The_Emergence_of_Adivasi_Political_Subjectivity_in_Late_Socialist_Kerala

In: Chandra & Tagioff (2016) Staking Claims: the politics of social movements in contemporary rural India, pp 200-224. New Delhi: Oxford University Press.

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Published in India by
Oxford University Press
YMCA Library Building, 1 Jai Singh Road, New Delhi 110 001, India

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First Edition published in 2016

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ISBN-13: 978-0-19-946777-8
ISBN-10: 0-19-946777-3

Typeset in Adobe Garamond Pro 11/13
by Tranistics Data Technologies, New Delhi 110 019
Printed in India by Replika Press Pvt. Ltd

Contents

List of Figures vii
List of Abbreviations ix

Introduction: Nature, Culture, and Knowledge in the Study of Social Movements in Rural India 1
Uday Chandra and Daniel Taghioff

SECTION I TRANSCENDING NATURE/CULTURE

1 Democratic Struggles in the Bhil Heartland: Historical Trajectories and Contemporary Scenarios 31
Alf Gunvald Nilsen

2 Into the Grid: Hydropower and Subaltern Politics in Northeast India 64
Bengt G. Karlsson

3 Everyday Forest Rights: Property, Community, and the State in Kalahandi District 84
Matthew Shutzer

Space for Social Action in the Politics of Nature 122
Commentary by *K. Sivaramakrishnan*

SECTION II STRUCTURES AND SUBJECTIVITIES

4 Manju Devi's Martyrdom: Marxist–Leninist Politics and the Rural Poor in Bihar 135
Nicolas Jaoul

Contemporary social activism in India manifests itself in disparate ways. While displacement of tribals in one location in India could trigger protest agitations in London, natives of a remote rural area may keep struggling for their rights without any support even from local non-governmental organizations (NGOs). Some movements succeed with significant global coverage while some fade away without any recognition from the institutions local to them. *Staking Claims* seeks to understand such heterogeneity in the structures of and support for movements in rural India in three complementary ways. First, the simultaneous material and cultural claims of dispossession the movements make in particular rural contexts. Second, the new forms of organization which shape contemporary claim-making practices as well as political subjectivities in rural India. Third, the way academia situates itself with respect to these movements, their organizations, activists, and participants.

By delving into these relatively new and pertinent questions, the contributors analyse the politics of subaltern agency, translocal activism, and academic knowledge production in different, albeit interlinked, locations. What makes this volume distinctive is its recognition that nature, culture, and knowledge crisscross and interpenetrate each other in social movements.

ing
ement
n
us
Rights Act 292
Limits and
ay 317
ler 338

Figures

1.1 Revenue Flows: Alirajpur State, 1908–40 43
1.2 State Revenue: Alirajpur, 1909–40 43

2.1 Church and Soccer Field in the Village Chadong 66

4.1 State Party Leaders Rameshwar Prasad and K.D. Yadav Inaugurate a Memorial Dedicated to 54 Martyred Villagers, Isse Bigha village, District Jehanabad, November 2005 151
4.2 Bust of Manju Devi, with Marble Plaque Damaged by Ranvir Sena Bullets, Karpi, District Arwal, March 2009 155

6

The Emergence of Adivasi Political Subjectivity in Late Socialist Kerala*

Luisa Steur

Approaching the Paniya 'ST (scheduled tribe) colony' of Kottamurade, a small, overpopulated, and visibly poverty-stricken rural ghetto on the outskirts of what used to be a booming cash-cropping village, it is tempting to see activist claims that the Kerala model of development has come at the expense of Adivasis, confirmed. Likewise it may seem logical that the inhabitants of this colony were amongst those who in early 2003 took up the little they owned and left to join the land occupation organized by the Adivasi Gothra Maha Sabha (AGMS), the major new Adivasi social movement that had emerged in Kerala at the time, to 're-claim' their 'Adivasi homeland'. Indeed, urban Malayalee friends who would accompany me sometimes during my fieldwork in 2006–7 at Kottamurade were surprised to hear from

* Different versions of this chapter have come out in 2014 in *Modern Asian Studies*, 48(5): 1334–57 and in 2015 in James Carrier and Don Kalb (eds), *Anthropologies of Class: Power, Practice and Inequality*, pp. 118–30. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

people there, that in comparison to the life their grandparents lived, theirs was 'much better'. They would soon learn that Kottamurade is not the place to go to hear stories of how much better life was in the olden days. Except if one would meet the few local leaders of the AGMS, even general questions about 'Adivasi' history would be met with scepticism: 'Adivasi? That's something the government calls us. We are just Paniya', I was told. Indeed, people at Kottamurade generally referred to themselves as being of a particular *jati* and did not consider they had anything particularly in common with other 'ST jatis' except when those happened to be agricultural workers like themselves.

And yet, while the older generations could talk about the strikes they participated in as agricultural workers to claim higher wages—the negotiations of which many recalled in fine detail—today the collective efforts of people at Kottamurade concentrated on gaining a piece of land, articulated as an 'Adivasi' right. Not all inhabitants of Kottamurade were equally involved in these efforts: Those who had been at the forefront of organizing the colony for the Muthanga land occupation and who had received 'political classes' from the movement leaders in preparation were still most enthusiastic about their Adivasi identity. On one of my return visits, in 2009, I noticed that one of the women leaders had even started decorating her mud-house with 'tribal' patterns I had never seen before in the colony. She had also started to mobilize people to unite their vote in local elections in order to build up an 'Adivasi' voice in village politics. There were also those at Kottamurade, however, who kept their distance from such 'Adivasi' politics and saw more chances in continuing to pursue the various avenues of emancipation associated with the Kerala model, notably proper education and a host of subsidies and insurances available through the local panchayat.

It is time the question gets posed why people like the inhabitants of Kottamurade have turned to a politics of indigenism as too often extremely essentialist assumptions continue to reign about those designated as 'Adivasi'. The opening of A. Aiyappan's ethnography on the Paniya still captures the dominant view of the Paniya as a 'happy people without any history' (1992: 1). In the media, they are steadfastly portrayed as 'innocent' and apolitical. And when the question does arise of how and why indigenism arose as a new form of

political articulation, it tends to be answered with the classic orientalist combination of calculative and culturalist arguments. The former posit that people perform their Adivasi identity—and their legal 'ST' status—as a simple calculative strategy of making claims on the state and non-governmental organizations (NGOs). Such arguments make a mockery of heartfelt expressions of political belonging: One can hardly imagine that Chimbren, one of the men from Kottamurade, was simply calculating the benefits of performing Adivasiness when one evening, he emotionally exclaimed while walking through the village, 'I am an Adivasi, who dares to play with me now!' Nor, in fact, was there a great deal to be gained from performing Adivasiness since neither the few NGOs in the area, nor the state, ever had any doubt that Paniyas were STs and hence Adivasis—and moreover among the 'poorest of the poor', deserving of welfare support.

This is usually where equally problematic culturalist arguments come in. Rather than being the 'dustbin category' (Bates 1995) into which everything was thrown that was difficult to classify religiously, the ST list is instead assumed to reflect a substantive 'tribal' history living on in people's subconscious. Beneath the (Western) NGO or postcolonial state discourse, an authentic Adivasiness is assumed to exist, forming these people's 'culture' and connecting them to the 'homeland' of their ancestors 'in the forest'. At times of crisis, this primordial identity will 'resurge' and guide people's political behaviour. In order to respect people's actions as more than instrumentally driven, the calculative argument relies on the contradictory notion of Adivasiness as a primordial, mystical given. The liberal–culturalist synthesis of such calculative and mystical arguments into commonsense (see Steur 2005), does not, however, make for the most satisfactory explanation of the Adivasi political subjectivity, certainly not in the case of Kottamurade.

Here we have a group of people whose oral history tells not of a golden 'tribal' era, but rather of ancestors who lived as slaves, and were traded from one *jenmi* (landlord) to another during the annual festival of Valliyoorkavu. Whereas local anthropologists take their curly hair and the fact that they used to dig up tubers in the forest to supplement the little they got from the jenmi as unmistakable markers of 'tribal' identity, people at Kottamurade were not used to seeing themselves as Adivasi. Moreover, their own historical experience

tells them that they could just as well claim benefits from the Kerala Government by asserting their rights as agricultural labourers.

The question of why people in Kottamurade colony turned to indigenism thus needs to be addressed outside the framework of liberal–culturalist common sense. What I propose instead is to look at the rise of indigenism amongst Kottamurade's inhabitants as a historical and relational class process. In so doing, I rely on an 'expanded' notion of class as 'rooted in the basic and never frictionless ties and interdependences between … people as arising from their efforts to survive and maintain themselves' (Kalb 1997: 2). As Kalb emphasizes, such relational dependencies happen at multiple levels, from the intimate and personal, to the meso- and macro-level. The process through which ordinary participants of the AGMS, in this case the Paniya of Kottamurade, began to see themselves as Adivasis is best understood through such a concept of class that relates the daily necessity of securing a living and the human need for orientation and meaning to the shifting multi-scalar regimes of production and appropriation in which such experiences take place. Class should not be added as just another 'factor' explaining the attraction of indigenism, alongside abstract notions of 'culture' or 'self-interest'. Rather, I want to shift the perspective altogether and use the synthetic power of the notion of class (Thompson 1965) to refuse a dis-embedding of people's consciousness and interests from the everyday conflictive reality of making a living and organizing a future within a particular evolving set of relationships.

A class perspective on the rise of indigenism envisions the process as specifically historically and spatially situated in the contemporary capitalist world system. It is striking that the rise of indigenism as the latest form of 'peoplehood' to be produced by the world system (Wallerstein 1987) has gained prominence as a means of combating the effects of capitalist expansion precisely when the largest ever proportion of the world's population has become proletarianized. Though all kinds of feudal social arrangements (notably that of caste) continue to be reproduced in India, and sometimes all the more intensely so in a 'modernizing' economy (see Heyer 2010), local regimes of production and reproduction are increasingly shaped by their integration into global capitalism. This is not to deny the determining role of regional histories, geographical location, or the

timing of a place's integration into the world system. For instance, the compromise between labour and capital that has been institutionalized in Kerala has, thanks to the influence of the Communist movement, been notably more favourable to the former than in the rest of India (Heller 2000). The 'late socialist' conjuncture in Kerala (see Mannathukkaren 2010) does not exhibit the same degree of accumulation by dispossession as other parts of India. Yet, class relations in Kerala are nevertheless affected by the pressures of global capital—according to Mannathukkaren (2010) Kerala is arguably as much 'late capitalist' as it is 'late socialist'.

Most studies of the rise of indigenism see the local and the global as connected through assemblages of meaning such as the travelling discourses of indigenism (for example, Tsing 2007) or concrete political actors like international NGOs (for example, Niezen 2003). Often, as in the case of Tsing (2004), such methods of connecting the local to the global set themselves up explicitly against theories of global capitalism, including Marxist theories, that are deemed 'universalist' and assumed to disregard local history and political possibility. An expanded class perspective would reject such strawmen and instead allow for a different way of connecting the local and the global, combining a dialectical 'inside/out' methodology with an always-evolving theory of the totality of capitalist relations, a real-world process characterized today by the hegemony of neoliberalization (see Peck 2010).

I would not deny that circulating indigenist discourse indeed provides the means of articulating certain aspirations and concerns. In Kerala, moreover, NGOs play a modest but important role in fostering a leadership that has access to indigenist discourse and 'translates' it locally. Yet the reasons why people are collectively inclined to follow along—and hence why such discourse and NGO activity become such a big deal—are related, as a class perspective will emphasize, to changes in people's everyday working lives. The latter, moreover, stem from much larger, totalizing dynamics of capitalism, which also encapsulate the political economy of NGOs in which maximum 'visibility' is necessarily directed towards the NGOs' own role in the spreading popularity of indigenist discourse.

An expanded class perspective is not, however, to be confused with the kind of 'class' perspective articulated 'emically' by the Communist

party in Kerala that is one of the two main electoral blocks in Kerala. In this context, the rise of indigenism is often depicted as a shift from 'class politics' (*varga rashtriyam*) to 'identity politics' (*swathwa rashtriyam*). Followers of the Communist Part of India (Marxist) [CPI(M)] like to insist that the appearance of identity politics has nothing to do with existing caste hierarchies within the party or the CPI(M)'s complicity as a ruling party with neo-liberal restructuring, and that instead it is either a Hindutva or a CIA conspiracy to fragment the working class. The more they insist, however, the more those asserting 'identity politics' reject 'class politics' altogether (see Steur 2011).

Class 'for itself' in Kerala has thus become disconnected from class formation 'in itself'—a clear case of the 'nested typologies' of class complicating 'our ability to apprehend the fluidity of class relations and experience' (Kasmir and Carbonella 2008: 6). While those in Kerala busy attracting foreign direct investment (FDI) and dealing with budget deficits continue to envision themselves as governing in name of 'the working class', those whose poverty has been exacerbated by the process reject the idea of class altogether. They see themselves rather as the indigenous people of Kerala, oppressed by 'mainstream' Malayalee society.

I should finally note that for people at Kottamurade, shifts in political subjectivity are more ambiguous and implicit than for political leaders and activists. Though the AGMS leadership, for instance, declared that the Muthanga land occupation was aimed at building up an autonomous Adivasi way of life on the land of their ancestors, for many participants the occupation was at the same time an extension of the historical struggle for land reform in Kerala—a struggle once carried by the Communist movement.

For the people of Kottamurade, the shift from 'class' to 'identity' is moreover a political process with a small 'p'. They were never explicitly engaged in the Communist Party's 'class' discourse. The shift from 'class' to 'identity' happened for them not so much at the level of political party affiliation or ideology but in the way they increasingly started to see their lives as no longer characterized by living under a state that 'doesn't care enough for us poor people' and by dependence on 'people with a lot of money', but by their oppression as 'Adivasis' by 'mainstream' groups who, along with the state, 'robbed us of our

autonomy'. Instead of engaging as workers in strikes for higher wages, people's main preoccupation at Kottamurade has become claiming land, not through the slogan of 'land to the tiller' but through the notion of Adivasi belonging.

Dispossession, Precariousness, and the Rise of Indigenism at Kottamurade Colony

Why did people in Kottamurade become inclined towards a politics of Adivasi belonging? From a class perspective we can begin by looking at the way aspirations of integration had started to fade as the possibilities of participating in Kerala society by earning a decent income and having access to crucial reproductive support started to decline under the pressures of neo-liberal restructuring. In fact, the idea of becoming a worker-citizen was not one that the residents of Kottamurade had long been able to cherish.

In the wake of the 1968 'Naxalbari revolt', they freed themselves from bondage. At the time, many poor, mostly Christian settlers from southern Kerala had come into Wayanad and started claiming land that was previously under the control of temples and large landowners. This upset the feudal balance of power and allowed Paniyas, for the first time, to claim plots of land to live on for themselves. A few of the settlers were moreover part of the militant Maoist periphery of the Communist Party and led attacks on some of the particularly 'cruel' landlords. It was as part of this Naxalite movement that many Paniyas were freed from bondage and, through strikes and in the context of a growing demand for their labour, managed to receive gradual increases in their wages. During the Emergency period of the mid-1970s, the Naxalite movement was repressed through violence, and also through the Central Government's populist *Garibi Hatao* ('Eradicate Poverty') campaign. Particularly significant for the Paniya were the campaign's renewed promises to abolish bonded labour, provide housing for the poor, and set up state-run cooperatives providing tribal employment.

For both those employed as day labourers and those employed in the plantation sector, the 1990s were a time of drastically decreasing demand for their labour. This resulted from the steady withdrawal of capital from Kerala's agricultural sector, which could hardly

compete with cheaper products produced elsewhere. Higher wages achieved as part of the labour and land reform movements of the 1960s had already led to a decreasing demand for labour in agriculture and agro-processing industries (Kannan 1999). Yet during the 1970s and 1980s, government mediation, attempts at employment provision, and a host of redistributive and social welfare policies—notably a government-subsidized pension scheme for agricultural labourers—had managed to keep alive the idea of progress for workers, especially peripheral workers like those at Kottamurade to whom these benefits had only become available during the 1970s. These were arguably merely 'poor-relief' programmes (Kannan 1999: 163), but they had a significant impact in lifting rural households out of poverty. By the 1990s, however, employment provision and welfare schemes were grinding to a halt through under-funding and mismanagement. There was thus even lesser demand for rural manual labour: Where in the late 1980s, about 40 per cent of Adivasi workers still had more than 200 days employment per year, in 2003, only 4 per cent of them fell into this category (Aerthayil 2008: 69ff.).

People at Kottamurade experienced these changes rather acutely. Everybody in the colony complained that the number of days of employment they could find locally was decreasing. They had, over the course of the 1980s, already been outstripped by their upwardly mobile neighbours profiting from a booming regional economy in rubber, pepper, and other cash crops that for a while even gave the area the reputation of being the 'Dubai of Kerala'. And they were in even more trouble when the price of cash crops slumped and the over-use of pesticides and other excesses of industrial agriculture peaked during the 1990s (see Muenster 2011). These processes turned agriculture in Wayanad into an increasingly 'speculative' business (Muenster 2011), where new cash crops (such as ginger) promise potentially large gains but also entail great risk and little sustainability. In the process, the village that Kottamurade belongs to even became Kerala's 'suicide capital'. Debt-ridden farmers were all the more unwilling to hire Paniya labour. And in the place of agriculture, the sector that is now visibly booming in Wayanad is that of tourism, actively promoted as a 'growth engine' to compensate for Kerala's failing agricultural and manufacturing sectors (Sreekumar and Parayil 2002). Nobody at Kottamurade, however, had any prospect of being

employed in tourism, though Adivasis loom large as a 'tourist attraction' on billboards and websites such as that of the 'Jungle Retreat' hotel, where one can read that 'spending time with these people of the forest is an enchanting and fascinating experience'.

In order to make a living, inhabitants of Kottamurade—like many Adivasis in India (Breman 1996; Mosse, Gupta, and Shah 2005)—were increasingly forced to migrate out of Kerala, particularly to Kodagu (formerly 'Coorg') in Karnataka. There they work on a temporary basis in privately owned ginger and banana plantations, often leased by Malayalee farmers and pensioned civil servants trying their luck in a context of heavily fluctuating agricultural commodity prices. People from Kottamurade are drawn to the work by advances of between 500 and 1000 rupees (USD 10–20) given them by labour contractors. However, the contractors later find ways of not paying them their full wages—for example, by selling them liquor and subtracting the money from their wages, or simply through false book keeping. In Kodagu, not only are minimum wages lower than in Kerala but there is also further downward pressure on wages because of the presence of migrant workers from elsewhere, and because native workers are cheaper since they do not need to be provided with breakfast, dinner, or accommodation. There are many stories circulating of sometimes fatal and often rather mysterious, unreported accidents in Kodagu, a district known for the high number of deaths caused by human–elephant conflict and tiger attacks (see also Neilson and Pritchard 2010: 1840). These stories not only emphasize the potentially extremely high cost of the work and the fact that employers can entirely evade responsibility for work-time accidents that happen in these places, but also give a glimpse of the menacing atmosphere facing workers. Whereas in some places, circular migration actually contributes to social mobility, the starting position of the inhabitants of Kottamurade and the conditions under which the migration is organized certainly tends more towards the perpetuation of poverty (cf. Pattenden 2012).

As people at Kottamurade told me, the practice of circular migration to Kodagu started in the early 1990s. Things have gradually grown worse as they were initially still able to find work locally in pepper cultivation in February and March. More recently, though, people had to move to Kodagu even in those months. Sometimes wages were negotiated before they mounted the jeeps taking them to Kodagu—other times, the negotiation happened only on the way. The migration experience was stressful not only because of the bad working and living conditions at the plantations but also because migration is highly stigmatized. Kodagu is generally known as a scary and 'immoral' place. The few perks there may be of migration for the youth—for instance, of escaping local social vigilance and accessing new circuits of consumption (see Shah 2010)—lead to stigmatizing gossip in Wayanad where one can hear the village middle-class comment that Adivasi workers go to Kodagu only to buy 'silly consumption items' such as *Fair and Lovely* (whitening) skin cream or jeans. Adivasi workers are moreover rumoured to practise 'lax morals' there, getting drunk, and having 'affairs'. Hence the circular migration excludes them literally and metaphorically from proper Malayalee citizenship. Inhabitants of Kottamurade would often tell me that they were evicted from the land occupation at Muthanga because 'people were afraid that if we got our own land, we would no longer come to work theirs'. In the changing economic context described above, this statement, which reflects older experiences, seemed, however, to morph into the effort to abate a new creeping reality that is perhaps even worse than being exploited: that of being made expendable and no longer part of local society altogether.

The structural processes again pushing the Paniya to the margins of Kerala society were replicated in miniature—and much closer to the skin—in the colony itself. Kottamurade's land is today registered in the name of Vasi, the son of the deceased *moopan*—the 'traditional' leader of a Paniya community, a position in fact 'traditionally' allocated by the landlord who 'owned' the labourers (Aiyyappan 1992: 80). Inhabitants of Kottamurade all pay rent to Vasi, who also profits from the cash crops grown on that part of the land, the moopan managed to keep uninhabited. On the one hand, people in the colony often emphasize their 'gratefulness' to the moopan for having 'allowed' them to live on the land. But in so doing, they also hint at the traditional obligations of the moopan to lead the community. Vasi, however, seems less interested in collective moral claims—and the ever more precarious prospects of brokering between the workers at Kottamurade and potential employers—and seems rather more individualistically interested in the land on which the houses stand.

Considering the rise in real estate prices in the wake of India's economic 'liberalization', the land could be used much more profitably: If it weren't for him having to house a group of largely unemployed kin on it, he could sell the land and use the money to invest more effectively in his own escape from poverty. Vasi has thus gradually been trying to get people to leave the colony, for instance, by evicting tenants who are overdue on their rent, by refusing permission for new huts to be built, or even old ones to be renovated with municipal subsidy. This in turn increases tensions within families in the colony and often, particularly in the context of alcoholism, sparks off fights. As this 'suffocation' increases, so do people's desires of owning a piece of land for themselves.

Education, an arena generally invested with high hopes for emancipation, is moreover increasingly becoming a field of class polarization (see Osella and Osella 2000). The inhabitants of Kottamurade were first introduced to reading and writing during Kerala's Literacy Campaigns in the 1980s. The literacy that a few of Kottamurade's adults then acquired made them eager to see their children go to school. Children I spoke to in Kottamurade would dream of becoming 'teachers', 'movie stars', or 'policemen'. Parents would say they at least hoped their children would become educated enough to know their rights, to no longer be treated as 'ignorants like us', and avoid having to do hard manual labour. Yet overcrowded living quarters and migrating parents do not favour children's education. Some parents struggled all the harder to educate their children—keeping the *anganwadi* (kindergarten) in the colony running, pressuring the municipality for a vehicle to bring the children to school, and making their children promise they won't skip classes. Yet the hope of emancipation that education once offered has all but dissolved. As the level of education needed for a proper job is constantly inflated and 'real schooling' happens only if you can afford private schools and after-school tuition, people at Kottamurade have grown cynical, saying school was now at best a place where their children could get a free lunch.

Changing class relations are experienced by the Paniya as their being made increasingly expendable as agricultural workers, being pushed off the land to which they could at least return in between long periods of seasonal migration, and having few prospects of their children integrating with others through proper education. This perspective offers a more concrete and relational understanding of the situation than the notions of calculating self-interest or cultural proclivity in helping explain why people at Kottamurade have begun to prioritize the acquisition of land of their own and dream of living there 'autonomously', apart from the rest of Kerala society. These class processes explain why people at Kottamurade increasingly see their difference to others in terms of their Adivasi identity and why they wish to 'reclaim' this identity and save it from its present 'suffocation'. These changes in people's everyday working lives, which in turn shape their outlook on the world, also explain why Kottamurade's inhabitants chose to gather up their few belongings and move to join the AGMS to occupy land at Muthanga in 2003. After their violent eviction from Muthanga, some people from Kottamurade, such as Manju,[1] became ever more convinced by the 'Adivasi interpretation' of their situation. Yet others, such as Akkathi, moved in the opposite direction. In the following paragraphs, I will follow the experiences of these two prominent Kottamurade women to study people's turn to indigenism at a more personal level. Here again, I suggest that it is not degrees of transcendental Adivasi belonging or simply compliance with dominant NGO and state discourses but people's everyday lived experiences of coping with changing political–economic relations that best explain their political trajectories.

The Structured Processes Behind Personal Trajectories of Indigenism

Their eviction from Muthanga was traumatic for most people in Kottamurade. They lost virtually everything they owned and barely escaped attacks by police and locals as they staggered back from Muthanga to Kottamurade. Some of them were injured so badly that they sustained lasting handicaps. Two men were tortured in jail and only came back weeks later, one in such bad health, he died soon after. Many of the local landlords had started hiring other (migrant) workers, while the people of Kottamurade were at Muthanga and

[1] Throughout the text I use pseudonyms for persons who are not public figures.

kept this up even after their return. Children, moreover, were turned away from school for 'skipping' too many classes. The aftermath of Muthanga was thus characterized by heavy loss. How this had come about and how to go on were topics on which opinions were, however, divided. Manju and Akkathi differed strongly on these questions. As I will argue, their difference of opinion should be seen in the context of their very personal and divergent relational trajectories of class.

Akkathi runs a tiny shop in the colony, selling rice, soap, and other basics, right beside the anganwadi where she works as a teaching assistant. This position provides her with a formal salary of just 500 rupees a month from the municipality. This is barely enough to cover (subsidized) food and rent, but is supplemented by the income her husband Lalu derives from *cooli panni* (day labour). Akkathi's is moreover a steady, secure job that, crucially, gives her access to wider neighbourhood networks, political connections, and government support programmes. In combination with her small income from running the shop, she has a more secure income than most people in the colony. Her work in the colony also allows her to pay more attention to preparing her two daughters for school every day. She has enrolled them in the new government savings project for female children,[2] which will endow them with a sum of money at the age of 18. In addition, she arranged government-subsidized health insurance for her family through the female 'self-help group' she chairs in the colony and has a formal bank account. Akkathi interacts a lot in her daily work with officials, farmers, and the village middle-class outside the colony and is particularly close to some of her Christian neighbours. This is partly due to her role as caretaker of the government kindergarten and her habit of attending church, but in fact dates back to her childhood as an orphan: Her parents both died of diseases (jaundice and TB) when she was still young and so she was raised by her brothers. Her brothers, partly out of necessity, developed relatively close relations with villagers outside of Kottamurade. Akkathi's brother even managed to acquire a job in

[2] Presented as an emancipatory policy to provide women with the necessary funds to pay for education, the policy is popularly known to help families save up for the rising costs of dowries, one of the main institutions undermining the modest progress made in class and gender emancipation by a previous generation (see Lindberg 2004).

a local shop and over time invested in a small plot of land of about 100 square metres outside the colony, where Akkathi started building a house for herself. Nevertheless Akkathi and Lalu decided to join the others at Muthanga as they hoped to own a plot of land of their own—they could not be sure of what would happen to their planned house on the land of Akkathi's brother once his children were fully grown.

Manju and her husband Dasen, on the other hand, have no less than five generations living under the roof of their equally small house, which does not even allow them all to sleep inside. They have three young children, the eldest of whom was of school age, yet who was mostly to be found roaming the paddy fields. In grama panchayat (village-level self-government) meetings—a regular feature of the Kerala landscape since the 'people's planning campaign' of the 1990s—Manju often is the first to speak up and is much less shy than Akkathi in voicing her opinions. Manju often cannot attend, however, since both she and Dasen have no other source of income than cooli panni and often have to spend weeks in Kodagu working on the ginger plantations there. Their circular migration diminishes their chances of maintaining close ties within the village and complicates the schooling of their children. Manju, moreover, is not eager to admit to their frequent temporary migration to Kodagu. When the issue comes up, she always immediately adds that men and women at Kodagu 'always have separate places to sleep … and if there aren't any separate places, then our men will make sure they sleep separately anyway'. Eager to leave their cramped and stigmatized situation behind and build themselves an alternative, 'Adivasi' life elsewhere on their own land, Manju and Dasen contacted C.K. Janu[3] through the organization that initially used to organize literacy campaigns in the colony and managed to become local leaders of the AGMS at Kottamurade.

Whereas Manju led the preparations for Muthanga and took on a leadership position during the occupation, Akkathi went to Muthanga somewhat hesitantly, worried about leaving behind her small shop, her steady job in the kindergarten, her good connections, and indeed

[3] C.K. Janu is the founding leader of the Adivasi Gothra Maha Sabha. Earlier she worked as a 'social worker' among adivasi communities in Wayanad and herself belongs to the Adiya Scheduled Tribe.

her children's school. Soon enough, tensions between Manju and Akkathi erupted. Akkathi could not understand why the leaders had decided to occupy a wildlife sanctuary, as the last thing she wanted was to live under constant threat from wild elephants and without running water or shops, let alone schools. Conflict soon broke out over the issue of Adivasi traditions. Akkathi described how one day she was told by the AGMS leaders that she had to stop attending church and should stick to her original Adivasi deities, upsetting her since she had 'no desire to go back to the old traditions' as she was now of 'many faiths'. Akkathi felt looked down on by the leaders and eventually claimed she preferred to live surrounded by Christian farmers than in an Adivasi community such as that of Muthanga. Tensions further intensified when some of the children at Muthanga fell ill and Akkathi wanted to leave the occupation to seek medical help but was told not to go.

The tensions between Manju and Akkathi were partly a matter of rivalry but were almost inevitable considering the AGMS leadership's difficult task of sustaining the Adivasi land occupation in the face of fierce opposition. Political parties and local power holders threatened by the rise of a new, assertive social movement started to organize en masse against the land occupation. And the way they organized intensified tensions between leaders and participants in the occupation, as opponents started raising the question of 'authenticity'. The 'Wayanad Environmental Protection Organization', led by local notables presenting themselves as 'friends of the Adivasis', claimed the activists were not 'real Adivasis' and published a 'spot investigation report' in which they 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'.[4] They also emphasized the threat to the biodiversity of the sanctuary[5] and circulated rumours that the

[4] I talked to some of these 'local tribal people', Paniyas living near Muthanga, and found they indeed felt threatened: not directly by the AGMS, but rather by how the policing of the AGMS might spill over and affect them.

[5] They ignored the fact that the occupation actually took place in an area that was far from 'biodiverse' to begin with, since it had been depleted by industrial paper production (see Bijoy and Raman 2003).

movement had been infiltrated by 'outsiders'. Understandably, under such circumstances, AGMS leaders felt pressure to enforce consensus, 'educate' participants in ways of conforming to the discourse of authentic indigenism, and to stay put to defend the occupied land in case of attack. As outside threats to the occupation increased, one can easily imagine the tensions within the land occupation coming to a climax when on 19 February 2003, after almost two months of living at Muthanga, a large police force was ordered to evict the occupation. The extreme hostility the Adivasi occupiers had faced was exemplified in the brutality of the eviction (see Bijoy and Raman 2003) that commentators like Arundhati Roy believed could only have been meted out against those at the bottom of the caste hierarchy.

The fact that the police brutality reflected certain attitudes amongst the general population could be seen in how there were many incidents in the days after Muthanga of locals identifying random 'Adivasis' and hauling them to the police station for their supposed complicity in the Muthanga struggle. In their defence, popular figures like Supreme Court Judge Krishna Iyer reverted to rehearsing the stereotypical romantic image of 'the artless, powerless Adivasis, native to this habitat ... terrorized by law out of their forest dwellings' (*The Hindu* 16–17 June 2003). There was, however, no compensation for the losses suffered and worse, the court cases against those arrested at Muthanga were left to drag on for years after, severely debilitating the movement as a whole.

Dasen—Manju's husband—was amongst those caught by propertied locals and handed over to the police, who tortured and held him—and his young daughter—in the central district jail in Kannur for over two months. Manju, on returning to Kottamurade, fell ill and was unable to work for a long time, leaving the household dependent on the income that Dasen's mother could contribute as household servant to one of the neighbouring families. This job, however, is particularly resented as even though less backbreaking than most agricultural work, it is extremely poorly paid and informal, and rather than working in groups, one works alone as the 'personal slave' of the household matriarch. Their precariousness and alienation from Kerala society—the process I described in the first part of this chapter—strengthened Manju's resolve to fight for a plot of land on which to live the kind of dignified autonomous life that she

had come to associate with Adivasi culture. One of the actions she undertook after the occupation was to stand as a candidate in local elections—not in the vain hope of actually winning but 'to make a point: that we Adivasis will only give our vote to parties that work for us, that we can withhold our vote if we wish to'. Manju did not see Muthanga only as a failure and looked forward to a new opportunity for claiming Adivasi land. She took pride in having participated in the struggle and saw the renewed attention that Kottamurade colony was getting from the municipality as a victory of the AGMS.

Akkathi, on the other hand, looked back on Muthanga with much more bitterness, even though she escaped the violence relatively unscathed, as her elder brother, having heard of the impending police assault, had come to take her family away from Muthanga just in time. The stark difference of Akkathi's outlook cannot, therefore, be attributed to the concrete losses suffered during the Muthanga incident. There is, moreover, no difference between Manju and Akkathi from a primordial 'cultural' perspective—both are kin and grew up in exactly the same local context. What helps to explain the difference in perspective is rather Akkathi's chance of escaping the spectre of absolute expediency haunting most of Kottamurade's inhabitants.

After Muthanga, the difference between Manju's experience of expediency and alienation and Akkathi's access to a class trajectory of emancipation through integration into Kerala society became all the more striking. A number of NGOs that had come to Kottamurade to hand out blankets and clothes also helped to restart the anganwadi, reinstating Akkathi in her former job. Through her contacts at the municipality, she also managed to speed up her application for a housing grant that would allow her to build a *pucca* house on her brother's land. When I visited Akkathi again in 2009, the house had been completed and she now lived outside the colony, though she still worked in the colony's shop and kindergarten. It struck me that whereas Manju had recently started decorating her walls with 'tribal' patterns, a poster of Jesus was prominently displayed on Akkathi's wall. Her daughters were diligently attending school and there was a strikingly different atmosphere in her two-child nuclear-family home than in Manju's overcrowded household in the colony. Unlike with Manju's hardening indigenist resolve, the experience of Muthanga

had provoked an anti-indigenist response in Akkathi, who no longer wanted anything to do with Adivasi politics. Her suspicions that all this talk of Adivasis was in fact a 'game' set up to 'exploit' them had been confirmed to her by the images of women in 'Adivasi dress' now plastered all over hotel billboards. Whereas Manju claimed this was part of the victory of the AGMS in redeeming Adivasi culture, Akkathi saw it as an attempt to portray them as 'animals of the forest' and wanted nothing to do with it.

Struggling to Live within—and against—Capitalist Transformation

The 'global precariat' (Standing 2011) is almost impossible to grasp in categorical class terms since it potentially includes both highly paid interim managers and the kind of low-paid migratory workers figuring in this chapter. An expanded class perspective, however, focuses not on linking people's political claim-making to their particular position in society but to changes in the way they make a living and in their possibilities of social reproduction that are both shaped by wider processes of capitalist restructuring.

For the people of Kottamurade, as for the precariat in general, these processes tend to turn companions and neighbours into enemies, leaving the more powerful actors promoting the political economy of neo-liberalism at a safe distance. It would, for instance, have been easy for people at Kottamurade to start blaming Vasi, the owner of their small piece of land, or their Christian neighbours, some of whom turned them in to the police, for their immiseration. If it weren't for the AGMS and indeed Kerala's history of intense progressive–secular civil society engagement, they would have been a logical target for the political forces of Hindutva to try and exercise their communal agenda on (see Thachil 2008).

It is hence all the more striking how the AGMS even managed to keep at bay the fierce, often (sub)caste-based, competition over welfare resources that, as Partha Chatterjee (2008) has argued, characterizes much of political struggle in India today. Despite the structural processes underlying its emergence, the AGMS was instead successful in launching an 'Adivasi' perspective that helped direct the frustration of people such as the inhabitants of Kottamurade towards

a more abstract—but more real—class enemy actualized in the direction of the path of development that Kerala was going down. Though not recognized as such in the wooden categories of class, from an expanded class perspective we can see the movement presents an attempt to move within and against a class process as difficult to resist as precariatization. The AGMS's main claim to land holds a balance between the desire for more autonomy and older promises of land reform that never materialized for groups such as the Paniya—though both visions run the risk of being co-opted by 'a neoliberal model of empowerment based … on property rights' (Rajagopalan 2004: 229f).

An expanded class perspective contributes to rescuing class analysis from its avoidance under the influence of orientalism in India (see for example, Chibber 2009) and from the wider cultural turn in anthropology as it impacted the study of India from the 1980s and 1990s (see for example, Brass 1994; Breman 1985). The celebration of an essentialist 'Adivasi' perspective has increasingly been deconstructed (see for example, Bates 1995; Guha 1999—or, for Adivasi studies in Kerala, Bindu 2009). Recent anthropological analyses have moreover paid attention to the 'dark side' of a romantic politics of Adivasi identity (Shah 2007). Essentialist identity politics and analysis has been shown to pose serious problems for 'Adivasis-as-proletarians' (Baviskar 2007).

And yet the absence of the assertion of an alternative perspective that can go beyond deconstruction and critique of Adivasi activists has logically led to a frustration amongst some (for example, Xaxa 1999). They complain of 'academic exercises' that merely seem to delegitimize the resistance of indigenous movements. I have hence attempted to break through the deadlock between essentialist versus deconstructionist analysis by indeed asserting a form of class analysis that can throw light on both the processes of capitalist restructuring and the way these influence political claim-making. Such analysis can answer a question that remains unaddressed both from a sceptical–utilitarian and a romantic–essentialist position, namely *why*, if we understand Adivasiness as being about political representation rather than cultural essence and see it as coming with a great deal of problematic baggage, indigenism has nevertheless caught on. When we look at the problem this way, it is immediately clear why class

analysis is pertinent. Not class analysis of the type practiced by many card-carrying Communists in Kerala, determined to use a rather wooden idea of class to dismiss the politics of indigenism, thereby making such analysis as a tool for political agency even less popular (Steur 2011). Rather, by building on a relational, multi-scalar, and dynamic—'expanded'—class perspective that starts from social reproduction, I have attempted to offer an answer to the question of why political trajectories espouse particular forms that start from people's struggle to make a living within—and against—the limited options available to them in a changing capitalist system.

At Kottamurade, people surely had a sense of collective identity; yet that this identity was about 'Adivasiness' or was tied to a wider 'Adivasi homeland' were ideas that had only recently caught on—they were more an outcome of political claim-making than its drivers. Their decision to partake in the AGMS' land occupation at Muthanga, moreover, was of course made with a view to the concrete benefit of getting land but was not a mere tactical, cleverly manipulative performance. Packing up everything they owned and leaving for Muthanga en masse was more like a leap of faith. Both culturalist and calculative explanations—and their romantic and deconstructionist adherents, respectively—hence are misleading and reproduce only the most apparent readings of how indigenist politics emerged in a place like Kerala. For a more robust explanation, an expanded class analysis can illuminate the deeper structural processes that enticed people to indigenist claim-making.

Such class analysis is all the more needed in Kerala where capitalist restructuring is not so bluntly obvious as, for instance, in a state like Odisha where 'accumulation by dispossession' as it affects Adivasi livelihoods is there for all to see in the ecological devastation brought by mining companies. In Kerala, dispossession is less visible and pockets of extreme poverty, like that of Kottamurade, simply look like remnants of an earlier and apparently failed model of development. What we find when we go beyond immediate appearances, however, is that accumulation by dispossession is in fact taking place in the form of communities being gradually stripped of social rights and securities and of the prospect of being able to claim more of these rights and securities in the future. This is happening partly due to the government neglecting its social schemes but in particular, also

due to the fact that these schemes are in no way keeping pace with the increased commodification of all domains of life, from the nature of employment, to housing, and education.

What was hence a generation ago regarded as a colony of pucca houses whose inhabitants felt they were on a progressive trajectory from slavery to citizenship, now looks like a dilapidated collection of huts far from any notion of progress. Though their turn to indigenism involves contingencies such as the fact that some of Kottamurade's inhabitants happened to come into contact with the NGO sponsoring C.K. Janu, the leader of the AGMS, people's willingness to turn to a political initiative prioritizing autonomy and land over integration and social security was shaped by this more structural process.

Within the general trend towards indigenist claim-making amongst the inhabitants of Kottamurade, I also discussed exceptions such as Akkathi, in whose dilemmas the kind of class relations and everyday processes underlying the shift to indigenism in fact become all the more clear. Though a categorical class reading would place her in exactly the same box as other inhabitants of Kottamurade, the kind of potential emancipatory class trajectories she has access to, in fact, are quite different from others'. Whereas almost all people at Kottamurade had lost earlier claims to employment and indeed were nobody's 'client' anymore—a kind of perverse liberation into absolute precariousness—Akkathi, for contingent reasons, still had access to a considerable network of patrons who not only secured her employment in the government-run anganwadi but also helped her in trying to keep up with the increasing financial demands of proper housing and education. Of course Akkathi could see the general trend of precariatization affecting Kottamurade and knew that if her daily maintenance of good relations with her Christian neighbours and other patrons would fail, she would also be rendered redundant to the local economy and society. A simple thing such as her brother's children growing up and laying claim to the home that she was hoping to build on her brother's land, could make her lose her foothold in the village. Hence, though Akkathi on the one hand was amongst those most sceptical of indigenist politics, she nevertheless also participated in Muthanga, knowing that her claim to an alternative to an 'Adivasi' livelihood was probably as fragile as the latter proved

to be. Akkathi's personal choices hence highlight both the contingencies of individual participation in indigenist claim-making and also the way they are embedded in more structural relational processes that limit the hope one can place in the kind of social integration and classical emancipatory politics that the Kerala model once stood for.

I have hence argued that Kottamurade colony's desire to fight for a space in which to build up an autonomous Adivasi way of life emerged out of the increasing disillusionment with an earlier, now hollowed-out class compromise regarding the economic integration of agricultural workers. They were experiencing the process, identified elsewhere by Breman (1996), of being turned into 'wage hunter-gatherers', forced to engage in constant circular migration (Breman 2007) and hence increasingly excluded, both physically and morally, from the possibility of emancipation within Kerala society. In the process, it is understandable that people began to envision their future apart from Kerala society and to interpret their past—their 'Adivasi' past—as having been just that. As I have demonstrated, both at the level of Kottamurade colony as a whole and at that of personal political trajectories, class analysis can offer insights beyond abstract self-interest or primordial belonging that help us grasp divergent relational pathways of political subjectivity. An expanded class analysis allows us to understand why certain precariatized working people begin to see their past and future in terms of Adivasi autonomy rather than workers' emancipation.

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Structures and Subjectivities

Commentary by *Subir Sinha*

Some Issues at Stake

For Esposito (2006), the task of theory is to 'keep pace with the events that involve and transform' it. In other words, a theory becomes obsolete when it can no longer satisfactorily explain the phenomena it is interested in. The explosion of new forms of political subjectivity of the poor in India constitute events that the two main theoretical frames to study such politics, namely canonical 'class analysis' and subaltern studies paradigms, have failed to keep pace with. Such new politics point to the need to explore the limits of these theoretical approaches, and to go beyond them. Intimations of such an impasse are not limited to India. A general impasse afflicts analyses of the relation between 'structure' and 'political subjectivity' in which dominant notions of the totality of 'power' that fully constitutes the subject leave little room to understand resistance, while accounts privileging autonomy, alterity, and exteriority from dominant structures of power in the formation of subjectivity are often empirically difficult to sustain (Blackman *et al.* 2008).

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