

Consuming the Forest in an Environment of Crisis: Nature Tourism, Forest Conservation and Neoliberal Agriculture in South India

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ABSTRACT

This article engages ethnographically with the neoliberalization of nature in the spheres of tourism, conservation and agriculture. Drawing on a case study of Wayanad district, Kerala, the article explores a number of themes. First, it shows how a boom in domestic nature tourism is currently transforming Wayanad into a landscape for tourist consumption. Second, it examines how tourism in Wayanad articulates with projects of neoliberalizing forest and wildlife conservation and with their contestations by subaltern groups. Third, it argues that the contemporary commodification of nature in tourism and conservation is intimately related to earlier processes of commodifying nature in agrarian capitalism. Since independence, forest land has been violently appropriated for intensive cash-cropping. Capitalist agrarian change has transformed land into a (fictitious) commodity and produced a fragile and contested frontier of agriculture and wildlife. When agrarian capitalism reached its ecological limits and entered a crisis of accumulation, farming became increasingly speculative, exploring new modes of accumulation in out-of-state ginger cultivation. In this scenario nature and wildlife tourism emerges as a new prospect for accumulation in a post-agrarian economy. The neoliberalization of nature in Wayanad, the authors argue, is a process driven less by new modes of regulation than by the agrarian crisis and new modes of speculative farming.

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INTRODUCTION

Throughout India, Kerala's Wayanad district conjures up two conflicting images: peaking in the year 2004, the region featured in the national press as a site of rural distress, agrarian crisis and farmers' suicides. Many commentators understood this crisis as related to ecological damage caused by chemicalized agriculture that poisoned the landscape and endangered people's health and the survival of many species. The second image of Wayanad appears when searching for the district's name on the internet: here it is depicted as a tropical paradise for tourists, a land where India's charismatic mega-fauna is conserved in the jungle of the wildlife sanctuary, and exotic tribes are waiting to demonstrate their traditional rituals and artistic use of bows and arrows.

In this contribution, we argue that these two images and the realities behind them are related. The neoliberalization of nature is manifest most visibly in the burgeoning flow of tourists to the region. Wayanad's landscape has been re-designed into an environment for tourist consumption (see West and Carrier, 2004). The boom in the tourism industry has obvious consequences for projects of wildlife and forest conservation in the region, and plays a pivotal role in promoting neoliberal conservation strategies. This transformation is happening at a time when the possibilities for accumulation in smallholder farming in Wayanad have reached their limits. Since independence, migrant¹ cash-crop farmers have established environmentally destructive capitalist farming processes, struggling against wildlife as well as Adivasi² and the Forest Department's claims to land. These farmers have now partly shifted to a post-agrarian economy that includes non-agrarian livelihoods and investment in tourism. The emerging nature tourism ironically values and commodifies the same 'forest', 'wildlife' and 'tribals' that had for many decades been seen by cash-crop farmers as obstacles to capitalist development. But the agrarian crisis must not only be understood as a straightforward process of 'depeasantization' (Araghi, 1995) or transition from 'land-based livelihoods to market-based ones' (Igoe, 2010). Rather, in the case of Wayanad, some farmers have shifted to neoliberal practices in agriculture itself, such as the out-of-state cultivation of ginger.

The recent commodification of nature in wildlife and nature tourism is thus connected to agriculture in two ways. First, the low productivity of degraded fields forces many smallholders in distress to sell their land, making it available for real estate investors. Secondly, recent neoliberal practices of

1. Throughout this paper the terms 'migrants', 'settlers' and 'migrant settlers' are used interchangeably to denote Malayalam-speaking immigrants, many of them Syrian Christians, from the formerly independent Travancore region of Kerala.
2. Adivasi is the Hindi word for 'original inhabitants'. In India's constitution Adivasis are classified as Scheduled Tribes (ST) and notified — together with ex-'untouchables', so-called Scheduled Castes (SC) — for purposes of reservation. The term Adivasi unifies groups that differ greatly in terms of language, culture and class.

speculative ginger cropping have brought new agrarian capital to Wayanad that is now invested in tourism. Our aim is to ethnographically ground the study of the commodification of nature by conceptualizing tourism, conservation and agriculture together. We argue that the current neoliberalization of nature in tourism and conservation has to be analysed in the context of the development of regional capitalism, which is predominantly an agrarian capitalism. We thus see the neoliberalization of nature in Wayanad as a process driven less by new modes of regulation than by the agrarian crisis and new modes of speculative farming.

The impact of tourism on conservation is clearly evident in Wayanad. Commodification of nature for and by domestic tourists is increasingly rendering forest conservation a project of 'green capitalism' (Goldman, 2005; Sullivan, 2009), making it — in theory — lucrative to conserve Wayanad's 'natural beauty'. The Kerala Forests and Wildlife Department now hails wildlife tourism and so-called eco-tourism³ as an 'alternative pathway to sustainable development' (Brockington and Duffy, 2010: 478; Duffy and Moore, 2010; Rutherford, 2011). According to proponents of market-based conservation within the Forest Department, tourism brings new economic possibilities for Adivasi communities formerly dependent on fragile forest resources. As a consequence, biodiversity conservation is subjected to neoliberal forms of regulation. This worldwide process is the object of growing concern in the interdisciplinary field of political ecology (Brockington and Duffy, 2011; Brockington et al., 2008; Büscher, 2010; Duffy, 2010; Igoe and Brockington, 2007; Sullivan, 2009). Neoliberalization of conservation points to ideologies and processes of involving markets in protection, in commodifying natural resources and in privatizing resource control, as well as to the 'decentralisation of resource governance to local authorities and non-state actors such as non-governmental organisations (NGOs)' (Fletcher, 2010: 172, see also Castree, 2008).

In the Indian context, however, such processes of neoliberalization are generally uneven, contested and embedded in regional political ecologies. Neoliberalization of nature, we argue, is an 'ongoing social project' (Moore, 2005), and is far from hegemonic in post-colonial India. We present a case study from the Wayanad district of Kerala which serves as an illustration for this unevenness of neoliberal capitalism and its concomitant projects of governance (see also Duffy and Moore, 2010; Miller and Rose, 2008; Peck and Adam, 2002). In the case study region, conscious efforts to promote wildlife tourism as beneficial for conservation and 'stakeholder

3. Eco-tourism has become an integral part of the Kerala Forest Department's policy, see: http://www.keralaforest.org/index.php?option=com_content&view=article&id=319:eco-development-and-tribal-welfare&catid=30:forest-hq-a-different-wings&Itemid=53 (accessed 20 May 2011). For the eco-tourism programme run by the Wayanad Wildlife Sanctuary, see <http://wayanadsanctuary.org/Pages/ecoTourism.aspx> (accessed 20 May 2011).

communities' are played out in a context of the state's ongoing monopoly over forest access — sovereign authority continues to be the main form of environmental governance (Sivaramakrishnan, 2003; Sundar, 2000). The bureaucratic management of forests and the importance of timber revenue create resistance within the Forests Department to the democratization and commercialization of conservation.

An ethnographic engagement with nature tourism and conservation brings long-standing political controversies to the surface. Much of Kerala's political process is shaped by the land question as part of the reformist agenda of its left-wing governments (Heller, 1999; Herring, 1989). Land reforms had little redistributive effect in Wayanad. Rather, they legalized large-scale land grabbing by settlers, and bypassed the claims of Wayanad's Adivasi population. Politicized Adivasis today assert their right to land and rights to the forest. Their political claims and ongoing struggle contest the smooth commodification of Wayanad's nature and culture for middle-class consumption. A case of Adivasi land squatting within the wildlife sanctuary is used here to illustrate the potential disruptive force of disenfranchised subaltern groups.

The article is based on several periods of ethnographic fieldwork since 2008. We present an ethnography and ethnographically informed environmental history of the forest frontier that was collected in the course of two separate but related field research projects in Wayanad. The study of tourism was not part of our original research designs, which focused on wildlife conservation and agrarian crisis respectively. In conversations during fieldwork, however, tourism was mentioned as both a panacea for Wayanad's political-ecological crisis and as a dystopian sell-out of its landscape and heritage. In everyday discussions about tourism, our Malayalee interlocutors continuously pointed to its relationship with the contemporary impasse in conservation and agriculture, and to much older political economic histories of settlement, land relations, Adivasi resistance and pioneer agriculture at the forest frontier. These oral histories and memories largely inform our understanding of the present predicament and contribute to a reading of neoliberal ruptures as a continuation of processes that go back much further in history.

The article begins by describing recent developments in domestic tourism and the commodification of nature and heritage. Next, tourism is discussed in relation to established forms of state forest conservation and new decentralized forms of environmental governance. Recounting the political and agrarian history of Wayanad, the following section then critically engages with both subaltern contestations of Wayanad's conservation regime and the development of agrarian capitalism. Finally, the article links the present ecological crisis in agriculture and the new modes of accumulation that result from it back to a discussion of tourism. We hope that this empirical study may contribute to a grounding of analyses of the ascendant neoliberalism (both as politics and accumulation) in India. Through the study of conservation,

tourism and agrarian accumulation on the border of a state-protected forest, the ‘mobile technology’ (Ong, 2007) of neoliberalism is better understood as a set of projects that are neither hegemonic nor uniform, but which are variously disfigured in their articulation with regional political economies and ecologies.

CONSUMING NATURE AND HERITAGE

When Wayanad’s environmentalists — a small group of middle class activists — speak about the forests of the region, they speak about degradation. They find a primary forest that has been converted by the Forest Department to teak, rosewood and eucalyptus plantations; they observe declining biodiversity and increasing drought in the teak woods; they notice invasive *Lantana* bushes choking rarer endemic plants. Equally, many farmers, when talking about the agrarian landscape, will speak of the sell-out of Wayanad’s paddy (wet rice) heritage in favour of chemical-intensive cash-cropping of banana, or point out bare trees on which thick bushes of pepper vines used to grow in the past. For many settler farmers of Wayanad, the forest is also a place of danger, of wild animals, inconvenience, and generally a space that had to be tamed in order to bring ‘development’ and ‘improvement’ to this cold, disease-ridden and inhospitable region. To others, ‘forest’ denotes simply the legal space governed by the Forest Department. This ‘native ontology’ of the forest stands in sharp contrast to the middle-class ‘tourist gaze’ (Urry, 1992) on the same landscape. Wayanad looks ‘green’ to the untrained eye, and teak monocultures provide great picnic spots because they are spacious and don’t have any undergrowth. Its scenic beauty is currently becoming Wayanad’s greatest asset and is aggressively promoted, mostly online, to domestic tourists.

Tourism in Wayanad is a celebration of India’s neoliberal capitalism. For those classes that emerged as the profiteers of India’s liberalization since the 1990s (Fernandes, 2006), conspicuous tourist consumption is a way to display their new wealth. Wayanad’s tourism is predominantly domestic, from emerging neoliberal clusters such as Bengaluru, Mysore or Kozhikode. In the years for which official data are available (2000–2004), the share of international visitors was marginal, ranging from a tiny 0.28 per cent in 2002 to a scarcely larger 0.4 per cent in 2004.⁴ These numbers are especially striking given that Kerala is a top destination for foreign tourists, hosting more than 10 per cent of all foreign tourist arrivals in India (Kerala State Planning Board, 2010). Domestic tourism has very little seasonal variation;

4. Calculated from the Statistics for Planning 2005: in absolute numbers the ratio of international to domestic tourists was 561 to 171,040 in 2000, 630 to 170,880 in 2001, 563 to 202,291 in 2002, 621 to 202,909 in 2003 and 749 to 187,701 in 2004 (Government of Kerala, 2005).

visitors come throughout the year, typically for weekend excursions, and rarely stay for extended holidays.

Wayanad's main attraction is its 'nature'. The forest with its mega-fauna and the agrarian landscape with its nostalgic colonial feel of a coffee or tea estate, are promoted as forms of pristine beauty on websites and in brochures. The official slogan of the District Tourism Promotion Council (DTPC) is 'The great adventure at Wayanad: where jungle meets country'.⁵ This is not far from the truth: the aggressive frontier of capitalist agriculture clashes with a forest frontier which is in a sorry state. But this is not what is meant: the 'adventurous nature' advertised here is flawless. Nature as a commodity doesn't have any defects, history or politics. Photographs of Wayanad show only peaceful images: grazing deer, elephant families crossing streets, and a landscape in which the colour green dominates.⁶

Wayanad's tourism may be characterized as 'drive-through tourism', in which a large part of the consumption of forested and agrarian landscape happens through the car windscreen. The most visible and numerous tourists hail from neighbouring Karnataka state. Typically they travel as nuclear families in their family cars or in larger groups, usually hiring a minibus with driver for the whole period of their visit. Another frequent sight is groups of youth travelling on motorcycles. Tourists spend their days driving between designated destinations. Thus, the must-see locations, such as caves, waterfalls and the Wayanad Wildlife Sanctuary, all feature huge parking lots, ticket counters,⁷ refreshments stalls, and 'eco-shops' selling spices, wild honey and handicrafts. On weekends there is a great rush to these places, whose 'natural' attractions hardly have the capacity to host all the visitors. As a consequence, the sites are visited only briefly, before the ride continues to the next attraction. Most visitors in private vehicles consider the long drive through the wildlife sanctuary to reach Wayanad to be an integral part of the holiday experience.

Wayanad's second great appeal to visitors is its heritage, increasingly its tribal heritage, illustrated in websites and brochures by colourful representations of Paniya⁸ women with their distinctive dress, ornaments and

5. The slogan appears on billboards at the entrance of DTPC managed locations.

6. See, for example, <http://www.dtpcwayanad.com/> and <http://www.banasura.com/tribal-tourism-kerala.html> (accessed 20 May 2011).

7. Some tourist attractions lie inside reserved forest and therefore within the area of responsibility of the Forest Department. In these cases ticket counters are staffed by local forest management committees (VSS) who receive a fixed salary from the Forest Department. Their main duty is to maintain the place, keep it clean and remove plastics from the site. Some critics argue that local participation — and local interest in the opportunities for income and jobs — is a major reason why regulations to control numbers of visitors or enforce protective closures of the sites have not been considered.

8. Paniya are, together with the structurally similar Adiya, the most numerous Adivasi group in Wayanad. They are former agrestic slaves; today they are mostly landless agrarian labourers and among the most destitute groups in Kerala.

hairstyles.⁹ In tourist representations there is no mention of the destitute position of Wayanad's Adivasis: their landlessness, exploitation, political struggle, alcoholism and rural slums are not depicted or addressed. Instead, these representations display a 'zooification' (West and Carrier, 2004: 485) and exoticization that verges on racism. The Tourist Department has recently started to implement a new policy initiative under the heading of 'responsible tourism'.¹⁰ The programme invites visitors to book tour packages, taking them into 'tribal colonies', in which they are able to visit a Paniya house, mingle with the 'natives', enjoy the authentic 'village life experience,' have the opportunity of 'interacting with village children', and taste 'real tribal food'. Speaking of this new programme, a young officer of the DTPC recounted that tourists are encouraged to donate a sum of at least 100 Rupees to the families they visit as a 'contribution to the village economy'.¹¹

This incumbent commodification of culture, however, is hardly a resource for group assertion or any other form of identity politics (Comaroff and Comaroff, 2009). What groups of tourists invading the Adivasi hamlets will most likely create are 'ethnic village zoos'. In these tourist encounters, designated individuals speak about their heritage and show ancient weapons to members of the urban middle class, while the rest of the Adivasis continue to work invisibly as landless labourers at the bottom of the regional hierarchy. Even from these pilot projects it may be inferred that neoliberal incursions into tribal life will not bring justice or respect, merely the preservation of an image of Adivasis on the same conceptual level as elephant encounters and other wildlife adventures.

In Wayanad, tourism does not counterbalance mainstream development initiatives (West and Carrier, 2004) by giving space to the display of Adivasi difference; instead it is part and parcel of a new enclosure by neoliberal capitalism. The state manages tourist sites such as Soochippara Waterfalls, Kuruva Island and Pookot Lake and derives substantial revenue from entrance fees. A closer look at these sites reveals a significant difference between locations run by the Forest Department and others run by the DTPC. The Forest Department receives a relatively small share of tourist revenue in its total budget, mostly from the Wayanad Wildlife Sanctuary. Thus, while officers of the DTPC never tire of praising the social benefits of tourists and the need to expand tourist infrastructure, forest officials are more ambivalent about tourism.

Despite the state's monopoly of site management, the greater part of the tourism sector is private. The major players in the field are organized in the Wayanad Tourism Organization (WTO). This tourism lobby represents

9. See <http://www.wayanad.com/tribes-in-wayanad.htm> (accessed 12 May 2011).

10. The material quoted in this section was obtained in soft copy from the District Tourism Promotion Council, Kalpetta, no dates: 'Village Life Experience' and 'Responsible Tourism Implementation in Wayanad District 2011'.

11. Interview (UM) with DTPC officer, Kalpetta, 15 April 2011.

the private owners of resorts, homestays and hotels. Among the political demands of the WTO is the lifting of the night traffic ban on National Highway 212 that connects Wayanad with Karnataka through the interstate wildlife reserve. The ban was imposed by the Karnataka Forest Department in order to prevent the killing of wildlife on the road at night. The WTO is concerned about the free flow of weekend tourists from Bengaluru and their need to arrive late on Fridays and leave late on Sundays. It also demands more development at the tourist destinations: larger parking lots, parking closer to the waterfalls, broader paths, more public toilets, etc.¹² Wildlife and nature are seen as commodities and marketable assets, with no need for protection from human interference.

In contrast to the private actors and the DTPC, who advocate tourism as the best way forward for Wayanad and its people, many officials of the Forest Department articulate their role as guardians of India's last human-free zones that are necessary for the survival of its endangered species. The tentative forays of the Forest Department into complying with neoliberal ideals of making tourism and 'stakeholder communities' an integral part of forest and wildlife conservation, are undermined by the magnitude of domestic tourism from urban centres. Mass tourism is becoming a challenge not only for Wayanad's infrastructure, but also for its biodiversity and wildlife. According to a forest official active in Wayanad's environmentalist group, 'All the tourist sites are already ecologically wasted'.¹³ Many forest officials speak of being 'deadly against tourism', as one officer put it; they see that nature at tourist sites is being destroyed by the 'plastic mindset of the city people'.¹⁴ The Forest Department is increasingly forced to protect wildlife from tourists who disturb animals with noise and litter, and who kill them in road accidents.

In these conservation efforts the Forest Department is closely allied with Wayanad's middle-class environmentalists. The latter understand domestic mass tourism as the greatest transformative force on the landscape and ecology since the violent settlement of the region after independence. Most of their members (retired foresters, veterinary doctors, biologists, activists) are loosely organized in Wayanad Prakriti Samrakshana Samithi¹⁵ (WPSS). However, the WPSS lacks popular support; it is seen as elitist and is notorious for its proximity to the Forest Department which it supports by reporting environmental offences, offering scientific input and initiating legal interventions. WPSS became the declared enemy of merchants and the tourist lobby when it openly supported the night traffic ban.

12. Interview (DM) with the former Head of the Wayanad District Tourism Council at the WTO convention in a Hill Club near Sultan Bathery, 12 May 2011.

13. Interview (UM) with a Deputy Range Officer, Sultan Bathery, 30 March 2010.

14. Interview (UM) with a Forest Ranger, North Wayanad Forest Division Office, 7 April 2009.

15. Literally 'Wayanad Nature Protection Committee'.

CONSERVING THE FOREST

The previous section already hinted at the immense importance of the Forest Department and more generally the nexus between tourism and conservation. In this section we focus more directly on the contested politics of wildlife conservation in the context of tourism. Conservation has particular relevance for Wayanad, because as Abraham, one of the founding members of WPSS, assured us: 'You can't find a better place for elephants anywhere in the world'.¹⁶ The hilly district of Wayanad is located in the mountain range of the Western Ghats. Its tropical dry forests and moist deciduous forests harbour a unique diversity of endemic and endangered flora and fauna. The region is recognized as the globally most significant conservation area for a number of threatened and charismatic animals,¹⁷ such as the Indian gaur (*Bos gaurus*), the leopard (*Panthera pardus*), the tiger (*Panthera tigris*) and, most importantly, the Asian elephant (*Elephas maximus*) — mammals that have gained 'totemic status' (Guha, 2003: 146) in India. Yet, Wayanad's forests are fragmented, dispersed into scattered islands of forest bordering on densely populated¹⁸ agrarian land. According to estimates by botanists working in Wayanad, less than 10 per cent of the pre-colonial forest cover (including private forest) of the region remains intact today.¹⁹

Kerala's Forest Department keeps the physical and legal forest boundaries under careful surveillance and subscribes to a 'custodian-paramilitary approach' (Peluso, 1992: 235) to preserve its iconic animals. The forest space is clearly demarcated: boundary markers and signs, as well as elephant trenches and electric fences identify and surround every patch of forest land. Entering the forest for any purpose is illegal for citizens, with the exception of Adivasis who have rights to 'minor forest produce'. The Forest Department's sovereign power has shaped local perceptions and ontologies of the forest: when the people of Wayanad speak of 'forest', they are usually referring to any land that is controlled by the Forest Department, not necessarily to the biophysical features of a forested landscape. Equally, the term 'forest *karan*'²⁰ identifies the men who 'own' the forest — Forest Department officials, uniformed and armed guards patrolling the forest.

Recently, the strict confines of the forest have become increasingly contested by market forces. The Forest Department is under growing pressure from the tourism lobby to adapt its wildlife management to the demands of urban visitors for access to the sanctuary. In April 2011, amidst protests by environmentalists, the Wildlife Warden reopened the Sanctuary's Tholpetty

16. Pseudonym; interview (UM), 27 April 2011.

17. See <http://whc.unesco.org/en/tentativelists/2103/> (accessed 10 May 2011).

18. Although in the context of Kerala state (which according to the 2001 Census has an average density of 819 persons per km²), Wayanad's population density of 366 is relatively low (Government of Kerala, 2005).

19. See <http://www.gbsanctuary.org/> (accessed 5 May 2011); see also Jacob (2006: 104).

20. *Karan* is the Malayalam word for 'man'.

range for jeep safaris after it had been closed for two years. 'Safari' is a misnomer here: every five minutes, a fully packed jeep enters a 15 km circuit through the wildlife sanctuary. Every jeep is accompanied by a 'tracker', usually an Adivasi from a nearby colony. The tracker's job is to point out peacocks, spotted deer and occasionally elephants in the thick lantana bushes. However, they are mostly occupied with making sure that tourists don't get off the vehicles, tease and scare the animals or stand on the bumper while driving. Almost cynically, the official website of the wildlife sanctuary calls the mass entry of jeeps into this small and ecologically fragile core area 'ecotourism'.²¹ The Forest Department is also building 'eco-huts' near the sanctuary's entrance, on a spot of natural grassland formerly used by deer herds for grazing at night.

Despite a small pro-tourism faction within the Forest Department, many environmentalists and forest officers claim that Wayanad's wildlife and ecology today are being 'saved' by a relatively strong state apparatus. 'If it wasn't for the Forest Department', stated a member of WPSS, 'there would be no tiger left, we would have cut all the trees and killed all the animals'.²² The forest bureaucracy has little interest in implementing neoliberal conservation policies and in allowing a touristic commodification of nature. The Forest Department has its own (much older and more lucrative) agenda of commoditizing forest as timber, which is its main source of revenue.

The authoritarian Forest Department is the most powerful potential opponent of development and capital incursions into protected areas. It is the only law enforcement agency in Wayanad which occasionally takes action against 'picnickers' (Mawdsley et al., 2009) and the vehicles they notoriously park inside the forest.²³ The Department is also a regular spoilsport when it comes to opening up the wildlife sanctuary at Tholpetty and Muthanga for drive-through safaris. The timing of the opening is a matter of debate and concern for the tourism lobby every year. The sanctuary usually remains closed during the dry season from January to April, when there is a high risk of forest fires. In most years, depending on the summer rains, the opening coincides with two important holidays, Easter and Vishu, both of which have the potential to attract large numbers of visitors. Hoteliers and jeep drivers wait anxiously, fearing economic losses if Wayanad's main attractions are not made accessible on time.

Despite the seeming bureaucratic indifference (Herzfeld, 1993) of the Forest Department towards the needs of commercial tourism, tourism is integrated into the department's decentralized management regime in communities which border on forests. This Joint Forest Management (JFM)

21. See: www.wayanadsanctuary.org (accessed 15 May 2011).

22. Interview (UM), 8 April 2009.

23. At weekends, urban tourists like to picnic inside the reserved forest, leaving plastic waste, paper plates and food leftovers. The wildlife sanctuary's vet lamented that remains of picnic waste are later found in elephants' stomachs; interview (UM) 11 April 2011.

programme was initiated with World Bank funding in the 1990s and established so-called Nature Protection Committees (VSS)²⁴ for reserved forests and Eco Development Committees (EDC) in wildlife sanctuaries and national parks all over India. The programme was premised on the neoliberal idea of ‘empowering’ (Sharma, 2008) forest-dwelling communities and democratizing forest governance. Despite a strong rhetoric of empowerment, there is little that is participatory in Wayanad’s VSS and EDCs today (see also Springate-Baginski and Blaikie, 2007; Sundar, 2000; Sundar et al., 2001). ‘We are just cheap labour for the forest [department]’,²⁵ as one VSS member put it. Or, as a high official expressed it bluntly: ‘There is nothing to participate [in]’.²⁶

The only two locations where local members, mainly poor and Adivasi, attest to some income from VSS participation are in popular tourist spots on forest land (Kuruva Island and Soochipara Waterfalls), two sites which are micro-managed by the VSS. Uniformed members collect entrance fees, confiscate plastic bottles, maintain pathways and remove waste. Even though they get some income out of their VSS work (200 Rupees a day), many claim to participate because there is currently no demand for their labour in agriculture. One member voiced his concern thus: ‘If the tourists cease to come, no one will be skilled in agriculture anymore. People will have no jobs in the near future’.²⁷ It would be far-fetched to interpret joint management of tourist sites by VSS as a beneficial change in the livelihoods of marginalized classes. Their members become dependent on the vagaries of tourist arrivals and face agrarian de-skilling. Moreover, there are very few projects which include an income-earning opportunity; the overwhelming majority of VSS members are described as labour reserve for manual forest work.

The showcases of successful community participation in site management may also distract from the violence and injustice on which such projects of neoliberalizing conservation are built. The grazing of cattle on forest land, for many marginal farmers an essential part of livelihood, is increasingly criminalized. A Kuruma elder expressed the irony of banning cattle and promoting tourism: ‘our cattle was moved out, now the two-legged animals are coming in’.²⁸

The violence of conservation becomes evident in the Forest Department’s grand plans to relocate forest dwelling communities, both indigenous (Adivasi) and small-scale settler farmers, from critical wildlife areas. By implementing a centrally funded ‘voluntary relocation scheme’ (Kerala Forest and Wildlife Department, 2003) under the Indian Tiger Conservation

24. Vana Samarakshana Samithis (Sanskrit), literally Nature Protection Committee .

25. Interview (UM), 6 April 2011.

26. Interview (UM) at the forest office Kalpetta, 19 April 2011.

27. Interview (UM), 6 April 2011.

28. Interview (UM), 6 April 2011.

Authority²⁹ and Project Elephant,³⁰ these policies aim at re-creating an assumed ‘undisturbed wilderness’.³¹ As many scholars have shown (see Cronon, 2003; Gadgil and Guha, 1997; Neumann, 1998), the idea of pristine wilderness disregards centuries of human interaction within these forests, and serves as a neo-Malthusian justification for exclusionary ‘fortress conservation’ (Agrarwal and Redford, 2009; Brockington et al., 2006; Peluso, 1992; Spence, 1999).

Fortress conservation is of course a well-established colonial model of natural resource appropriation. It seems that for nature to become a new fictitious commodity in the twenty-first century it still needs to be cleansed of unruly populations, subaltern livelihoods at its margins and, effectively, of history. In other words, the neoliberalization of nature, despite its political promises of empowerment and participation, runs smoothly in concert with authoritarian modes of environmental governance. From another perspective, the continuous strength of centralized forest management may be interpreted as contributing to the incomplete and uneven capitalist transformation of nature in the district. From yet another perspective, for those communities in everyday contact with the Forest Department, settlers and Adivasis, struggles over conservation form a continuum with struggles over agrarian land and forest access that have been going on for decades.

CONTESTING CONSERVATION

The neoliberalization of nature in India is an uneven process. Its contestations are embedded in regional political histories of capitalist enclosure and struggles over land. State conservation in Wayanad is reacting to the demands of tourism and hegemonic transnational conservation models. At the same time it is challenged by subaltern resistance that claims entitlements to land, invoking legacies of exclusion. Wayanad’s contemporary Adivasi movement³² increasingly builds on a strong sense of historical connection to the forest and on having been robbed of their entitlements by the Forest Department and migrant settlers. In 2003, Adivasis took their struggle to Muthanga, inside Wayanad’s flagship wildlife sanctuary. Under the leadership of the Adiya woman C.K. Janu, more than a thousand Adivasis (predominantly

29. Project Tiger, a central government scheme, was established by Indira Gandhi (often called India’s ‘Prime Minister of Nature’ (see *Frontline*, 2011) in the 1970s; see <http://projecttiger.nic.in/> (accessed 29 April 2011).

30. See <http://moef.nic.in/pe/pe.html>

31. Interview (UM) with Chief Wildlife Warden, Wayanad Wildlife Sanctuary, Sultan Bathery, 4 May 2011.

32. Wayanad is home to the largest number of Adivasis in Kerala. According to the 2001 Census of India, the Scheduled Tribes population of Wayanad is 17.43 per cent as compared to 1.14 per cent for Kerala overall. By contrast, only 4.27 per cent are classified as Scheduled Castes (9.81 per cent in Kerala) (Government of Kerala, 2003).

Adiya and Paniya) encroached on forest land inside the sanctuary. After forty-five days they were driven out with unprecedented brutality by police forces and armed Forest Department officials. Police atrocities, including torture, were inflicted not only on Adivasis but also on some of their 'civil society' supporters. This event, remembered as the 'Muthanga incident' in Wayanad, brought many hidden contradictions of local society to the surface (Bijoy and Raman, 2003; Steur, 2009) and at the same time moved forest land into the arena of Adivasi assertion.

This occupation of the forest cost the Adivasi movement the support of many middle-class environmentalists. They blame C.K. Janu for invading the ecologically fragile sanctum sanctorium of their iconic wildlife zone with 'rural proletarians' that did not fit the acceptable image of eco-tribes. Janu's movement challenges the emerging neoliberal image of the sanctuary as a marketable refuge of endangered wildlife. In an interview, Janu argued that the Adivasi had chosen this particular spot within the sanctuary precisely because it was *not* an untouched zone of pristine forest, but a eucalyptus plantation that had been planted by the Forest Department in 1977 after eleven communities had been relocated from the forest for that purpose.³³ According to Janu (2010: 150), Adivasis were reclaiming forest land from which they had been evicted and which had been converted into 'vast eucalyptus plantations that have been successfully passed off as "forest" by a shrewd state and forest department'. The extreme violence against the encroachers and the lack of solidarity even among activists and NGOs in the region may point towards a hegemonic mainstream conservation ideology that ignores the sanctuary's social history and seeks to erase its people and the hardships they endured from the picture (see Brockington and Igoe, 2006). Wayanad's tourism entrepreneurs and the resort owners near the sanctuary spoke of Janu as destroying 'nature capital' and jeopardizing the vision of neoliberal Wayanad as a marketable tourist place.

For Adivasi actors the recent commodification of wildlife forms part of a continuum of older histories of 'accumulation by dispossession' (Harvey, 2005). Soon after British authority had been extended to Wayanad in 1805, it was opened up to colonial venture capital — invested in tea plantations — for the enclosure of large areas of forest commons as 'reserved forests'. Pristine forest and newly established hardwood plantations were essential sources of revenue for the imperial state. Adivasi groups lost their customary community rights to the forest whenever these conflicted with the state's commercial interests. They became illegal occupants on their own land and sometimes were driven further into uninhabited and less accessible forest areas (Bijoy and Raman, 2003; Steur, 2009). From the 1950s to the 1970s, during the long process of Kerala's land reform, Adivasis were again juridically marginalized, this time in favour of migrant settlers. To counter this injustice the left-wing government started a policy initiative to

33. Interview (UM and DM), 20 March 2009.

nationalize private forest and redistribute the land to landless Adivasis.³⁴ But this initiative came too late, as almost all private forest land had been taken over by settlers.

Adivasis' memories of dispossession by the state and outsiders result in a strong cynicism towards more recent attempts at participatory forms of forest management. In a context in which conservation is intertwined with long histories of exclusion, the promise of neoliberal conservation to bring more democracy and participation to resource governance by 'dismantling restrictive state structures and practices' (Igoe and Brockington, 2007: 433) is unlikely to be fulfilled. Bureaucratic legacies of constructing the Adivasis as destroyers of the ecosystem to justify their dispossession are still manifest in the Forest Department's ongoing relocation programmes, resting on the same assumption that human interference will eventually result in the extinction of species and the collapse of India's remaining forest ecosystems. In the present political climate, there are thus clear limits to neoliberal conservation as a project and the promise of including local communities in the marketing and management of nature. The neoliberalization of conservation, in the sense of new modes of regulation that respond to demands for incorporating devolution of power and market logics, is played out within the narrow confines of an inert post-colonial forest bureaucracy that shows no inclination to share power or revenue. While transnational models of Nature™ Inc. are partly blocked in Wayanad by the inertia of post-colonial statecraft and the logics of democracy in Kerala, incursions of capital into human–nature relations are quite dynamic if agriculture is taken into account.

LAND RELATIONS AND AGRARIAN CAPITALISM

In order to appreciate the recent neoliberalization of agriculture, it is important to understand that Wayanad's current ecology and economy have been shaped by the historical introduction of agrarian capitalism in the region. Capitalist transition — in Polanyi's terms the creation of three fictitious commodities: land, labour and capital — was initiated by the introduction of new property rights during the colonial era. Prior to colonial conquest, land relations were characterized by a complex set-up of differential landholding rights by different agrarian classes. British revenue officers opted for a kind of *zamindari* revenue settlement with the old feudal rulers.³⁵ The customary overlordship of the landed aristocracy was acknowledged as full proprietary

34. The Left Democratic Front passed two landmark Acts in the 1970s: the Kerala Private Forests (Vesting and Assignment) Act, 1971, and the Kerala (Restriction of Transfer of Land and Restoration of Alienated Lands) Act, 1975. The former act nationalized (vested) all private forests and assigned one-third of these areas for redistribution to the landless poor (with a 50 per cent reservation for Adivasis).

35. *Zamindari* settlement involved collecting revenue from superior landholders (landlords) who thus fixed their property rights over large tracts of land cultivated by inferior holders

rights in order to simplify revenue collection. Even uncultivated forest land was recognized as the private property of landlords. The legal category of 'private forest' was thus created alongside the 'reserved forests' of the Forest Department. In particular, the land belonging to Hindu temples given as royal endowments (*devaswom*) was largely forested land. Wayanad's forest cover was thus divided among different legal spaces that made it differentially susceptible to deforestation, encroachment, protection and conservation. On the one hand, British rule opened up Wayanad for colonial cash-crops such as tea and, on the other hand, it created a forest frontier of uncultivated forest land that was not under the custody of the Forest Department (see Kjosavik and Shanmugaratnam, 2007; Kunhi Krishnan, 1993; Radhakrishnan, 1989; Varghese, 1970).

By the late 1930s the forests of Malabar had become the destination of a large-scale migration of progressively minded Syrian Christian³⁶ farmers looking for land on which to cultivate cash crops.³⁷ Between the 1930s and the 1970s, hundreds of thousands of farmer-settlers came to Wayanad in search of land. Some settlers bought or leased forest land; the majority, however, simply encroached on forest land. With the formation of Kerala State in 1956, the immigration intensified to an uncontrollable land rush, with more violent encroachments upon forest and Adivasi land. In the remote area of Pulpally, the temple trust (*devasom*), which had originally permitted the leasing out of 2,000 acres, lost as much as 14,000 acres of forest land to encroachers. The *devasom* responded by filing cases against the illegal occupants. What followed was a protracted struggle against eviction: as the settlers were well organized, not least through church institutions, they managed by and large to prevent any effective eviction.

The Communist Party of India, which formed the first government of Kerala State, was generally supportive of the settlers, whom they saw as poor peasants and tenants and part of their constituency. The land reforms of the 1960s — the celebrated project of Kerala's rural left (Kunhi Krishnan, 1993; Radhakrishnan, 1989; Varghese, 1970) — greatly benefited the settlers at the forest frontier in Wayanad. During land tribunals in the 1970s, most of the settlers received ownership titles for the land they occupied. These titles consolidated the commodification of land and set the foundation for the subsequent capitalisation of agriculture.

of rights. In South India, British settlement officers opted in most areas for *raiyatwari* settlement with the actual cultivators of land (Kumar, 1965: 23–33).

36. In Wayanad, Syro-Malabar Catholics are the majority among the Christians, followed (numerically) by Syro-Malankara Catholics, Jacobites and Orthodox Christians. Latin Catholics have a minor presence in Western Wayanad that predates the migration process.

37. This and the following sections present in a condensed form the results of Daniel Münster's oral history study of the migration process and the establishment of speculative farming; see also (Münster, 2011).

In 1971, the Government of Kerala passed the Kerala Private Forests (Vesting and Assignment) Act: however, given that many of the private forests had not been surveyed, that policing of the area was almost non-existent, and that landlords gave land to settlers on a lease basis, the act could not effectively prevent the opening of the ‘flood gates for the land-hungry destroyers of forest’ (Government of Kerala, 1974: 17). From an ecological point of view, the history of settlement in Wayanad is a history of forest clearing and an attack on biodiversity.

In the decades following the 1970s, the settlers transformed Wayanad’s agriculture into a market-oriented and speculative enterprise; the region became a hub for high-value cash crops such as pepper, ginger, coffee and rubber. As green-revolution technologies became available, cash-crop farming was intensified and chemicalized. Initially, the newly converted forest soil provided fantastic yields. In the case of pepper, yield and price were so high that even cultivators with modest landholdings reaped large profits. During most of the 1980s, pepper boomed in Wayanad, especially at the forest frontier. Seeing the profits of the pepper pioneers, most of Wayanad’s cultivators, not only migrants, shifted to the mono cropping of pepper at the expense of more balanced homestead farming. Lured by the prospect of fast accumulation, and ignorant of the dangers of chemical fertilizers and pesticides, many indiscriminately overused chemical inputs. As Varghese, a gold dealer in the pioneer town of Pulpally, put it: ‘In the years of pepper boom the use of chemicals was more in Pulpally, because we were in a frenzy about production. Farmers came to town with a jeep full of pepper and took one jeep full of chemicals back. They bought whatever was available in the market and applied it without thinking’.³⁸

By the end of the 1990s, the boom in Wayanad’s capitalist agriculture had come to a sudden halt, with the simultaneous crash in world market prices for hill produce and a sharp decline in productivity (due to diseases and micro-nutrient deficiency of the soil). In a desperate move to regain the riches lost, many settlers then further intensified the chemicalization of cash-crop production and began converting paddy wet lands (*vaiyal*) into dry lands (*kara*) for the cultivation of banana, ginger, areca nut and palm trees. This had detrimental ecological effects for the soil that was not only toxified but also desiccated as the paddy fields lost their capacity to retain water. Within a decade, settlers’ capitalist farming had transformed Wayanad from one of the most prosperous agrarian districts in India to a region of destitution and crisis. This is how Varghese describes the situation: ‘After 1995 everybody was constructing new houses. A competition for higher, better houses was going on. But the majority could not complete [them]. They lost all pepper. The houses stand now like skeletons without door or floor in the properties’. The high profits from agriculture had spurred the credit market. Small farmers anticipating continued profits from agriculture had accumulated debts. The

38. Pseudonym, interview (DM), 13 April 2011.

sudden decline in production and the price crashes of agrarian commodities around the turn of the millennium ruined many smallholders financially; since that time, farmers' suicides have become a troubling symptom of the agrarian crisis (Jeromi, 2007; Münster, 2012).

This brief historical account of agrarian capitalism is essential for understanding many of the current forays into neoliberalizing agriculture. The agrarian crisis at the beginning of the twenty-first century was not a crisis of peasant subsistence farming, but a crisis of a thoroughly capitalist agriculture, dependent on world market prices, capital flow and chemical input. Nature had thus been commoditized in Wayanad long before the emergence of nature tourism after 2000. The earlier capitalist transformation had, however, involved a commoditization 'against the forest', in a history of appropriation, whereas now the forest itself, as a host to wildlife, is becoming a commodity.

The historical experience of settlement and rapid transformation of agriculture has also created an investment climate among rural entrepreneurs that is open to new avenues for accumulation such as tourism. Settlers constantly seek new projects for investment as the boundary between agrarian and non-agrarian income has become increasingly fluent. In Wayanad's post-agrarian economy teachers invest in cultivation for a season, farmers become brokers for agrarian commodities or used cars. The turn towards brokering land or building accommodation for tourists constitutes no more than a gradual shift in the existing rural capitalism.

TOURISM IN THE POST-AGRARIAN ECONOMY

'Wayanad is now listed among the top fifty must-see destinations in the world', declared Joseph, the owner and founder of the company Blossom, with pride.³⁹ Blossom is typical of Wayanad's new economy. The company runs high-end resorts for upper class tourists, but also acts as a real estate agent and construction firm for holiday homes — 'villas in high class neighbourhoods' — for investors from the urban hubs of neoliberal India. Joseph is a successful self-made man and young entrepreneur; he radiates satisfaction with himself for having been one of the first to realize the tourism potential of Wayanad. 'After 2006 only', he continued, 'Wayanad came into the tourism picture. Ours was the seventh resort at the time. Now there are so many players that marketing has become a problem. But actually we get the first hit on Google' (ibid.). For Joseph, tourism is strictly business. His service to potential buyers is to provide legal certainty — guarantees that the housing plots are free from liabilities — in a land market in which transfers used to be a matter of trust relationships. Joseph profits from the agrarian crisis and the exodus from farming. He buys agrarian land, removes all

39. Interview (DM), 19 April 2011. 'Blossom' is a pseudonym.

vegetation and partitions the land into small plots for sale. Yet, he maintains, he is doing good to the farmers. After all, he claims, he is buying unproductive land and giving farmers in crisis a new opportunity. Of course, he is also in favour of the environment: among his housing models are eco-friendly 'tribal huts', and he runs an organic farm.

With the agrarian crisis in Wayanad, the second and third generation settlers have diversified their economic options. The most entrepreneurial farmers move on a seasonal basis to Karnataka and other states, for the cultivation of ginger on leased land. These are capital-intensive and highly speculative enterprises — cultivators know that ginger is a gamble — that may be called post-agrarian, because they involve new (flexible) relations to land, capital, labour and farming skills. This growing group of post-agrarian cultivators operate with investment sums of 3 million Rupees (approximately 400,000 Euro) per season that may yield a five-fold return on investment in good years. They often raise capital from non-agrarian classes (teachers are notorious for investing in ginger) who participate as 'shareholders'. Over the past ten years, ginger has created a new capitalist class of 'ginger kings' in Wayanad. Many ginger cultivators, as one of them put it, 'literally don't know what to do with their money'.⁴⁰ The accumulated capital is typically spent on gold or the education of their children, or invested in tourism, either as real estate speculation or in the construction of homestays.

Others respond to the agrarian crisis by opting out of agriculture. For the second and third generations of Syrian Christians in Wayanad, education is seen as the route to social mobility. Migration to Europe or the US (typically as nurses) is the goal for many of the younger generation. As agriculture declines, entrepreneurs have turned to domestic tourism as a new *el Dorado* for investments. Those who have some capital convert their homes into homestays; bigger players build resorts all over Wayanad. This has led to a hike in real estate prices since 2005, with agricultural land entering the regional real estate market. Prices for properties have skyrocketed, even in remote areas. The capital for investing in land is, according to local brokers, either 'Gulf money' from Kerala, 'ginger money' or the 'IT money' of Bangalore's salaried middle class.

This price hike has saved many farmers who, as a result of the crisis in agriculture and the ongoing wildlife raids and attacks, are ready to sell their land to investors. On the other hand, it has made any expansion of agriculture impossible as land is too expensive for farmers. In the new rural middle class, cultivation has shifted from being the centre of economic activity to being one among many sources of income, especially when looked at from the household perspective: mature children and wives are increasingly engaged in non-agricultural employment. Most Christian spice traders, car dealers, real estate agents, tourist guides, NGO workers etc. have also retained some agricultural land.

40. Interview (DM), 13 March 2011.

When successful players in the new economy such as Joseph speak of tourism, they claim it is about being 'intelligent' in liberalizing India, about seizing opportunities. For them tourism is not a panacea for solving the crisis of farming, Adivasis or wildlife. Tourism is not about development: it is about accumulation and personal success. Thus policy, planning and government play a minor role in the recent boom. The majority of capital for tourism development comes from private investors who expect Wayanad to take off as a tourist destination. Constructors compete with each other in bending the existing rules to build new resorts as close to the forest boundary as possible. Tourism is an almost unregulated industry in Wayanad and it displays an unchecked hunger for land and investment opportunities.

The neoliberalization of nature in and for tourism is thus the result of changes in capitalist agriculture that respond to interrelated crises in rural economics, ecology and, if we take the increasing raids by wildlife on fields into account, in wildlife conservation. Ginger cropping, originally a response to the exhaustion of Wayanad's soils, has provided much of the capital that is now used to think about post-agrarian futures in the region. Tourism seems a logical option among rural entrepreneurs who see the ever-increasing flows of visitors. There is some irony to the fact that the upwardly mobile second generation settlers are marketing the very nature of the agrarian landscape that has suffered so severely in the rise of this settler class. The violence and struggles at the forest frontier are still very much present in the consciousness of the settlers. The new value of nature in the context of tourism is purely the value of a commodity. The fetish character of iconic wildlife is the fetish of urban middle classes, not shared by the settlers of Wayanad.

CONCLUSION

Wayanad's regional capitalism has embraced nature, landscape and wildlife as marketable assets. In a larger south Indian context one could argue that Wayanad is being restructured as a service provider of nature and wildlife for the growing cities of post-liberalizing India. The fast pace of this transformation may partly be explained by the availability of agrarian venture capital and a business climate that is shaped by the collective experience of settlement and booming agrarian smallholder capitalism. In this article, we contribute to the study of the neoliberalization of nature by conceptualizing tourism, conservation and agriculture together. Bringing agriculture into the picture helps us understand the recent neoliberalization of Wayanad's countryside as a continuation of an earlier capitalist transformation. The ecological crisis of accumulation in chemicalized cash-crop farming produced the need for agrarian capital to expand its reach to alternative spheres of accumulation. The increase in domestic tourism was spurred by a massive investment of post-agrarian capital in tourism-related enterprises. Rising real

estate prices have encouraged many farmers in crisis to sell out their land and give up agriculture.

This process of neoliberalizing nature is remarkably disconnected from new modes of regulation, policy initiatives that aim at letting market principles (in this case, tourism) work for conservation, sustainable development and income generation for disenfranchised groups. In India, transnational development frameworks and policy innovations are channelled through a strong state. This case study confirms observations that the capacities of the Indian state are far from 'shrinking' under pressure from global capitalism and its transnational legal arrangements (Fuller and Harriss, 2001; Gupta and Sharma, 2006). In the field of nature conservation, the Indian Forest Department retains sovereign power over conservation projects, despite attempts to implement neoliberal forms of governance like the Joint Forest Management Programme or the Forest Rights Act (see Münster and Vishnudas, 2011). The promotion of tourism and other market principles is not high on the Department's agenda. The state is busy securing trenches and fences, resettling communities, managing wildlife and logging teak plantations. From the perspective of forest officials, wildlife and forest conservation is possible in spite of, but is not boosted by, tourism.

This article contributes to an empirical grounding of the political and theoretical status of neoliberalizing nature. Neoliberal conservation is not ubiquitously controlling the agendas of states and reconstructing landscapes according to its principles. We understand NatureTM Inc. as infected by historical contingency and ethnographic impurity. The contemporary neoliberalization of nature is not a new homogenizing process descending on the local, but is taking place in the context of long-established social structures of accumulation. Thus, the study of neoliberal change is as much the study of continuities as it is a study of rupture.

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