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Desperate For Work, Impoverished Adivasis From Prosperous Kerala Toil & Die In India's Coffee Heartland

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15 min read



'I wish that my son gets justice.' A portrait of Santhosh, an Adivasi worker who travelled to the coffee plantations of Kodagu in Karnataka and never returned, hangs in his father Raju's house in Wayanad's Vellamunda town/
ALENJITH K JOHNY

The tribes of lush Wayanad in Kerala live on the margins of one of India's most prosperous states. Most are daily wage labourers, but since there isn't enough work for them, hundreds travel across the

border to work in the coffee and ginger plantations of Kodagu, where they, often, work nine hours or more without a break. With no security and government oversight, many die or disappear, leaving behind families struggling for years to find out how they died.

Wayanad (Kerala): It was a cool winter's day in February 2023 when a middle-aged daily wage labourer called Sreedharan told his sister-in-law that he was leaving the home that the two families shared here in Kerala's lush highlands to buy a bar of soap to wash clothes.

Sreedharan, 49, never returned.

“We never saw him after that,” said his wife Vasantha, 30, a soft-spoken woman dressed in a nightie, her voice trembling as she spoke.



'He was a gentleman.' Sreedharan's wife Vasantha and sister-in-law Mini at their home in Vellamunda, Wayanad/ ALENJITH K JOHNY

At the family home in Velaramkunnu colony, a collection of more than 15 hilltop homes about 5 km from a town called Vellamunda, a Wayanad *gram panchayat*, Vasatha explained how they found out a day later from someone in town that he had travelled two hours by bus 54 km to the southeast to Kodagu in the neighbouring state of Karnataka.

Sreedharan, an illiterate father of six, who earned between Rs 15,000 and Rs 20,000 per month labouring in arecanut fields and coffee plantations, had not told the family where he was headed.

They learnt from two men who left with him that he intended to return for a temple festival in March 2023.

Daily wage labour in these parts of Kerala pays about Rs 1,000 per day, which is about double of Kodagu.

But work is hard to find in Kerala, and so thousands of Adivasis seek work in Karnataka, as Sreedharan apparently did in Kodagu, where more than a third of India's coffee is grown, as it has for 170 years since British colonialists first found the red soil and cool weather perfect.

Today, Sreedharan's youngest son, eight-year-old Preejesh, often asks his mother about his father's sudden disappearance.

"He asks, 'Why am I not seeing our father?'" said Vasantha.

In Prosperous Kerala, A Poor Tribe

On 18 April 2023, after reporting to the Vellamunda police station that Sreedharan was missing, the family was told that he had died two months earlier.

His brother Anil accompanied Kerala police officers to Kodagu, where they shared Sreedharan's photo with their counterparts.

The Kodagu police told Anil and the Kerala police that the body of a man matching Sreedharan's description was found in a fish pond. A preliminary investigation

concluded the cause of death was drowning.

Since no one from the family arrived in time, the police cremated his body in February. The police now await a forensic report.

The Kodagu police handed over a piece of cloth that they found on Sreedharan. On the cloth was a hair, which in April 2023 the family used to perform funeral rites, since it was the only physical representation of him left.

*Sreedharan was one of 14 Adivasis from Wayanad who lost their lives in Kodagu plantations between 2019-2023, their deaths revealing precarious lives in what is one of India's most prosperous states. In interviews with **Article 14**, many families spoke of their despair, many after years, and their scepticism of the police.*

The majority come from the Paniya tribe, Kerala's largest group of scheduled tribes, a people who largely

follow animistic beliefs and have some of the lowest development parameters in otherwise prosperous Kerala, among the [10 richest states](#) in India by per capita income. No more than 63% of the Paniyas are [literate](#), compared to 94% for all of Kerala.

Pani means work, and the Paniyas largely work in the fields of landed farmers as daily wage labourers, according to this 2019 [ethnographic study](#), with the men earning about Rs 600 per day and women Rs 350, compared to Kerala's average daily income of Rs 989.

The deaths of Kerala's impoverished Adivasis in the coffee estates of Kodagu and neighbouring districts in Karnataka of Mysuru, Kushalnagar, and Hassan are not new.

What is a cause for disquiet, said experts and social workers, is that they continue to die 16 years after such disappearances first came to public attention, with no corrective measures by the Communist Party of India (Marxist) government of chief minister Pinarayi Vijayan.

99 Adivasi Migrants Die In 18 Years

In 2008, a [report](#) by a Wayanad nonprofit organisation called [Neethi Vedhi](#) revealed the exploitation, torture, disappearances and deaths of Adivasi workers in

plantations, predominantly in Kodagu, but also tribals who traveled to Mysuru, Kushalnagar, and Hassan districts.

Neethi Vedhi contacted 122 Adivasi families in Wayanad, but many more remained uncontacted due to limited resources.

The 122 cases over 18 years to 2008 were presented at a people's tribunal in the town of Kalpetta in November 2008, with cases of death, missing people or exploitation peaking between 2005-2008 at 57, according to data that Neethi Veedhi researchers obtained during field visits.

Efforts were made to address the issue, including a 2012 meeting chaired by the Wayanad district collector. That meeting recommended a series of measures, such as maintaining data on Adivasi workers, providing compensation to affected families, and cracking down on unauthorised labour agents.

About 12 years later, most of those recommendations

have not been implemented, with only a temporary check-post at the Karnataka-Kerala border collecting data on labourers leaving the state.

On 1 March 2024, **Article 14** sought comment over email and phone from Wayanad district collector Renu Raj about past recommendations for the welfare and safety of Adivasis and generating local employment had not been implemented. There was no response. We will update this story if there is.

The deaths continue.

"After 2008, through information from different sources, we found five missing [Adivasis] and 34 deaths till 2023," said Flaisy Jose, director of Neethi Vedhi.

"We have a legal team looking after other issues in tribal regions," said Jose. "With our limited resources, it's not easy for us to collect data, go to another state, have legal counsel, and fight these cases. It's high time for the State to act."

The State response has been limited, as a right-to-information (RTI) response to a query filed by Shanto Lal of the Left-leaning Porattam group revealed on 21 August 2023.

"People who died in plantations (sic) of Kodagu, while going for work is not (sic) collected meticulously and recorded in this office," said the RTI response from the Wayanad Integrated Tribal Development Project (ITDP), which is meant to develop Adivasi areas. "As per the data we received, between 2019-2023, 10 people have died in the plantations of Kodagu district."

Reji N J, the ITDP assistant project officer said there was no system of compensation in Wayanad for those who died in Kodagu. "Similarly, it's not viable to check every person, as many people even travel by bus," he said. "It's hard to monitor people; only through information we get from families do we find out."

The [Inter-State Migrant Workers Act](#) of 1979 requires governments to maintain records of individuals who migrate to work in states other than their own.

"I'm surprised by the reply I got from the district

authority,” said Lal. “When asked about postmortem details of the tribal victims, they said 'It's not available in this office.' This reply, he said, revealed how “unconcerned” the State was for Adivasi rights.”

On 3 October 2023, *Kaumudi Online*, a Kerala news website, [reported](#) that four more tribals from Wayanad had died “mysteriously” on the Kodagu plantations since February 2023.

Inter-State Hurdles



The Kerala-Karnataka border near Kutta, a major route for Adivasi workers from Wayanad to travel to Kodagu/ ALENJITH K JOHNY

In Velaramkunnu colony, Mini, Sreedharan’s 23-year-old sister-in-law, narrated how he disappeared from their lives and how inter-state jurisdictions delayed news of his death.

"He was supposed to come for a festival in a nearby temple, but we waited, and he didn't show up even after his fellow workers returned," said Mini (23), Sreedharan's sister in law, previously quoted.

It was only after they complained that Sreedharan was missing in April 2023 that his brother Anil discovered, as we said earlier, that his soft-spoken sibling had died two months earlier.

The police said Sreedharan's demise was "an unnatural death".

"We found alcohol in the body," said a police officer at the Srimangala police station in Kodagu, speaking on condition of anonymity. "The case is not yet disposed of, but we didn't find any foul play."

He said a plantation owner had reported finding an unknown body in a fish pond. That turned out to be Sreedharan.

"We kept the body in a freezer for five days and performed the postmortem on the fifth day," said the officer. "We waited for the family to arrive, but since we

didn't get any response, we cremated the body.”

The police said once they received a chemical analysis report from the hospital, they would “proceed with further investigation”.

A police source from the special mobile squad, a unit that probes cases that come under the [Scheduled Castes and the Scheduled Tribes \(Prevention of Atrocities\) Act, 1989](#), in Wayanad’s Mananthavady municipality, said, “As cases come under the Karnataka police jurisdiction, we have our limitations in investigations. To even find out the cause of death in some cases is hard.”

These assertions did not give Sreedharan’s family comfort.

Families Doubt Police Accounts Of Death

The families of Sreedharan and another Adivasi migrant from Wayanad were not willing to accept police claims that they both drowned in a pond.

*“They only showed us a photo,”
said Vasantha, Sreedharan’s wife.*

*“They didn't show us where the
body was cremated. We identified*

his shirt, and a part of his hair was given, through which we performed the [last rites] at home."

How, the family asked, could Sreedharan have drowned in a small, shallow pond of water? "We have seen the photographs of the body, and we doubt the police findings," said Mini. "He drank alcohol but never lost his senses."

Like Sreedharan, 27-year-old Santhosh, another migrant Adivasi from Koythupara Kattunaikka tribal settlement in Wayanad (his parents live in Vellamunda, where Sreedharan's family lives), also drowned in a pond on a plantation near the town of Gonikoppa in Kodagu in July 2023, according to police.

Santhosh's father, Raju, 56, said his son had just begun working on the coffee estates of Kodagu in 2023, having previously worked on ginger plantations in Kodagu.

"He was cutting overgrown grass in an estate when we were told he jumped into a pond and drowned," Raju recalled. "It was just two weeks since he went there; we heard about the incident in the third week."

On 17 July, a day after his son died, Raju filed a

complaint at the Gonikoppa police station in Kodagu, narrating how Santhosh's body was found in the mud, submerged in water. But the case was closed on 1 September, with police calling it an "unnatural death" by drowning.

Raju argued there was no water found in Santhosh's body, and it was not bloated. Raju's brother, who visited Santhosh a day before his death, claimed to have heard sounds of a fight near the pond where Santhosh allegedly drowned.

In response to media reports, the Kerala State Human Rights Commission in August 2023 [ordered](#) a probe into Santhosh's death. According to an officer of the special mobile squad, which investigated the case, Sathosh drowned.

"He was swimming in a pond in the estate where he drowned midway," said the officer from Wayanad's special mobile squad, previously quoted. "Later, the fire force was brought to retrieve the body. The inquest report also states the reason to be drowning."

The family remained sceptical. “We hardly have the money to keep an advocate for the case or put pressure for investigation,” said Raju. “I wish is that my son gets justice.”



Santhosh's father Raju and his wife Shantha at their home in Vellamunda Colony, Wayanad, Kerala. Shantha was Santhosh's stepmother, and the two shared a good relationship. "I would tell him, there is better work here, come back," said Shantha. "He told me he would return in a week."/>

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Sreedharan's family vowed to keep seeking answers.

“It’s almost a year since he died and the police still haven't completed their investigation,” said Mini.

“Nobody knows what happens in the plantations where they work. We haven’t received any help from the government. We haven’t even got the death certificate. How will we find out the truth?”

Why Adivasis Migrate To Kodagu

Even though the remuneration for plantation labour is far higher in Wayanad than in Kodagu, as we said, Adivasis migrate because there is much more work to be had in Kodagu.

In Wayanad, said Narayanan, a Keralite who leased an estate in Kodagu, a person has an average of 4-5 acres of land, but in Kodagu the average is 50-100 acres.

“So, the labour required is much higher,” said Narayanan, who uses one name.



Worker accommodation near Siddapura village, Kodagu. Locals refer to these accommodations, built inside or near the plantations, as line buildings for workers/ ALENJITH K JOHNY

Work on Kodagu's coffee plantations includes plucking the coffee harvest, adding fertilisers, watering and cutting bushes, which may begin around November and continue until March. After that, workers may find work in pepper and ginger plantations.

Kodagu's coffee plantations hire over 200,000 workers, who contribute to an annual coffee [production](#) of 110,730 metric tonnes, about 35% of India's coffee output. Yet, the plantations are, often, short of labour.

The labour migration is well organised and offers incentives to travel, as it did to Sreedharan, who travelled to Kodagu with his friend Chaman, 50, and his son.

"I have been going to Kodagu because they cover travel expenses," said Chaman. There is usually a local contact who offers work and drivers who ferry Adivasis from Wayanad to Kodagu.

Chaman said neither he nor his son had returned after Sreedharan died. "We waited for him, but when the bus came, we left for Wayanad," he said.

Chaman said there was little work at home. He earned Rs 500 a day plucking arecanuts or fertilising plantain trees in Wayanad, decent money, but only when he got it, which wasn't often.

A Long, Trail Of Anguish & Loss

The trail of anguish in Wayanad stretches back years.

"Where will we go to find him without knowing the place?"

Chandran, who uses one name, is the brother-in-law of Narayanan, a 35-year-old divorcee who disappeared in 2006 while on a work trip to Hasan, Karnataka.

From Sulthan Bathery's Thelambatta region near the Karnataka border, he went missing after 22 days on Hasan's ginger plantation. He had gone with six others from his neighbourhood. They returned. He did not.

Chandran's family filed a police complaint in Hassan but lacked the resources and language to pursue the case across state borders.

"His friends who travelled with him speculated that he may have taken the wrong bus," said Chandran.

"They brought back his belongings. We tried to follow up in Hasan and locally in Sultan Bathery but couldn't find him."

Over a decade later, their sorrow persisted. Narayanan's father died five years after his son's disappearance, grieving. The family said they still hoped for answers, some day.

Like Narayanan's family, the fate of Thurumban has left a void in his family's life, 16 years after he disappeared. His daughter, Usha, now 38, was 22 when her father went missing on 30 March 2008, after travelling to Kushalnagar in Kodagu to work at the plantations.



The home of Usha and her son in the town of Mananthavady in Kerala's lush Wayanad area, home to thousands of impoverished Adivasis. She cannot forget her father, Thurumban, 16 years after he disappeared/
ALENJITH K JOHNY

"I get Rs 311 rupees a day, which isn't sufficient for a family," said Usha, a single mother who has struggled to provide for her child since her father's disappearance. Usha labours in plantations or at work sites run under the [Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Act 2005](#), the national make-work programme.

As her financial situation deteriorated, she said her son, once a "promising student", lost interest in studies. She could not afford to buy him new shirts or slippers. "He works in the fields for his pocket money, but he is just 19."

Usha's voice trembled as she recounted the void left by

her father's absence. "When our father was there, he used to buy daily necessities, such as soap and food," she said. "Now, without his support, things have become hard." Delays in MNREGA payments, a [nationwide issue](#), forced the family to buy groceries on credit, exacerbating their struggles.

After Kurumban went missing, Usha's mother fell ill and required hospitalisation, ultimately passing away.

On 18 April 2008, Usha filed a missing-person's report in Manathavady police station, Wayanad, nearly three weeks after her father disappeared.

400 Workers, 40 Jeeps Every Day



A jeep full of Adivasi workers from Wayanad at the Kutta border crossing stop for breakfast on their way to the plantations of Kodagu in Karnataka. This photo was taken during our visit in February/ ALENJITH K JOHNY

In Kutta, a small town on the Kerala-Karnataka border we met jeep drivers who ferried tribal workers from Wayanad. The largest number come from the *panchayat* of Thirunelly, 20 km from the coffee estates in Kodagu.

At least 40 jeeps transport nearly 400 Adivasis every day between 7 am and 7 pm for work in Kodagu's plantations. More take the bus.

There is no record of this movement of people, as experts have been suggesting for years.

“We are asked by senior officials to record if there is an underage child going for work,” said an excise official at the Kutta border, speaking on condition of anonymity.

“Other than that, there are no records kept of daily commuters.”

Jeep driver K* said most workers from Thirunelly *panchayat* were paid per kg of coffee: some paid Rs 6, some lesser. “We negotiate our travel expenses and tell the estate owner our rate per kg. Then we transport workers.”

Another driver R* said most preferred commuting daily rather than staying at the estates. “If they stay, the

landowner makes them work 8 am to 6 pm without a break,” R. “Those who commute have breakfast at the border around 8 am, then work from 9 am to 4:30-5 pm.”

Article 14 met and spoke with four Kerala men who had leased estates, one of whom was Narayanan, quoted earlier. Estate owners refused to comment on allegations that workers were overworked and underpaid.

Unregulated Work, Lack Of Oversight

Adivasi workers in Kodagu's coffee estates told us of their harsh working conditions, especially during peak harvest seasons.

"I get Rs 3.50-4; some people even get Rs 5-6 per kg for coffee," said Subbu, 50, who said he worked nine hours every day. "Now it's coffee season, so we get 300-500 rupees daily, depending on the coffee plucked."



Women work in heat above 35 deg C at a coffee estate in Wayanad, Kerala/ ALENJITH K JOHNY

Gauri, 38, a Wayanad Adivasi, said work conditions were too gruelling for her. "I stopped going there after seeing the conditions," she said. "I have seen girls being molested at work, but where do we go to complain?"

Hari P G, a member of the 2008 People's Tribunal, told **Article 14** that nothing had been done to address the problems of the Adivasis of Wayanad over the years.

"Whatever happens to the Adivasis in Wayanad is brushed aside as just their issue," he said. "There has

been no strong political pressure on this matter compared to other issues. Even the recommendation for data collection on tribal crossings at checkpoints remained for a short time."

Subbu alleged that some estate owners provided alcohol, deducting it from wages, to make them work longer hours. "Most of the workers are highly addicted to it," he said. "Some owners are good in nature, some are really aggressive."

The lack of regulation and oversight exacerbates the vulnerabilities of the migrant workers.

Harshavardhan S L, labour officer of the Kodagu subdivision, acknowledged the problems. "There is a system where one state is the home state, and another is the host state," he said. "When more than 5 interstate migrant workers come for employment, the home state must authorise their travel and inform the host state that they are sending workers."

Harshavardhan said plantation workers usually fall under the unorganised sector, and did not typically follow this process. "So, we lack a proper system of

communication between the home and host states, which is a major problem,” he said.

Back in Velaramkunnu colony, Sreedharan’s family said they were struggling to cope with the economic and personal fallout of his death.

They had not received a death certificate or government compensation, and a government dole of 30 kg of rice per month was insufficient for their family of seven, said Vasantha, recalling her husband’s gentle nature.

“He would bring back treats for the children whenever he came home from work,” she said. “He never beat me or them. He was such a gentleman.”

**Denotes identities hidden on request.*

(Alenjith K Johny is a freelance journalist based in Delhi.)

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