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Make live and let the land question die: surplus population and the welfare state

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ABSTRACT

Welfare programmes offer an essential lifeline to surplus populations struggling to survive under capitalist relations worldwide. However, such biopolitical inclusion can undermine demands for land. Through an ethnographic study of Adivasi land struggles in Kerala, India, this article explores how welfare regimes that 'make live' through social transfers can simultaneously 'let die' the land question. By prioritising welfare over land, the state effectively erases demands for land as the primary resolution for the crisis of reproduction. Consequently, groups that were dispossessed from land historically are now divorced from the land question discursively.

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Introduction

19 February 2024. I was at the annual commemoration of the 2003 Muthanga Adivasi land struggle of the Adivasis in Wayanad district, Kerala, India.[1] Activists of the social movement Adivasi Gothra Mahasabha (AGMS), Adivasis from across Wayanad, journalists, and onlookers gathered. I was looking for residents of Ariyur colony, who had participated in the struggle and endured police brutality.[2] I had gone there the previous night with the activists to invite them to the anniversary. That day, none of them came.

With around 30 houses in a small plot, Ariyur is one of the 5,000 cramped settlements of landless Adivasis in Kerala, which are locally called 'colonies', often with a pejorative connotation. Ariyur and the other colonies stand as symbols of the Adivasis' historical landlessness. The walls of these houses had been cracking, the roofs leaking. One unreliable well had provided the 150 residents with water; toilets had still not been built. When I visited in 2024, Ariyur was a different place. The old houses had been replaced by concrete houses under the Kerala government's LIFE Mission. Soman, a resident and a LIFE contractor, expressed doubts if land struggles like the ones that the AGMS led had any relevance anymore. As I distributed the invitation pamphlets, I sensed the shift. The next day confirmed it.

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[1] Adivasis, literally 'first inhabitants', are included in the official Scheduled Tribe category in Kerala. In the social movement space in India, they are often referred to as Indigenous peoples, although the Indian state has not recognised them as such. Kerala's Adivasis are not a homogenous category. I focus on the landless Adivasi communities and not on the few communities that have held some land historically.

[2] The names of settlements and people in this article are pseudonyms.

Ariyur opens up several questions regarding the land question of Adivasis in Kerala, who have been living in poverty and have intermittently faced starvation, despite the gains made by Kerala's welfare state in improving the living standards of the larger population. On a larger note, it brings to the fore the question of how states manage the section of labourers who are increasingly finding it difficult to secure gainful employment under capitalist relations. Based on an ethnographic study of Kerala's welfare experiments in Adivasi colonies, this article argues that an amplified extension of welfare, even as it commendably tries to 'make live' a population, can surreptitiously 'let die' the land question.[3] Biopolitical programmes like the LIFE Mission, which constructs housing for the landless, make willing participants out of the landless, attempting to wheedle them away from their land demands. The state thereby presents before the landless, who are facing the loss of multiple livelihood sources at the same time and, in the case of Kerala's Adivasis, stigmatisation and violence in a caste-ridden society, a choice between endless land struggles and a concrete rooftop.

This study responds to recent calls in critical agrarian studies to understand the localised nature of 'surplus populations' (Bernards and Soederberg 2021; Brennan 2024; Cowan, Campbell, and Kalb 2023) as well as the interlinkages between agrarian changes, crises of reproduction, and biopolitics (Li 2017; Du Toit 2017, 2018). The management of people struggling to make ends meet brings up the need for new forms of biopolitics, especially when they demand the solid, multidimensional entity of land, wherein land is understood not just as a productive resource but also as history, memory, identity, sacrality, and territory.[4] When the violent suppression of these demands, such as that used in Muthanga, becomes less favourable in democratic politics, and the precariousness produced by agrarian changes stares back, states are confronted with the need to find newer modes of quelling protests and managing the people involved. Welfare programmes come up as a crucial aid. Undoubtedly, a form of biopolitical inclusion that 'makes live' is desirable. However, taking a critical stance, this article calls for a pause and a re-examination of the implications of make-live strategies that are geared towards erasing the land question. Adivasis are dispossessed twice over: first from their lands historically and then from the very land question discursively.

Although Kerala's social transfers are formally available to the Adivasis, these have not substantially reduced the inequality they face for several reasons. Crucially, they did not benefit from the land reform of the 1970s. Landlessness continues to form the basis of the poverty, starvation, and lack of dignity they face. Thus, there is a subtle difference between formal access to welfare programmes and their political consequences, which this article seeks to highlight. Further, I do not argue that the Adivasis are abandoning the land question *en masse*. I capture my interlocutors' voices at a moment when they are trying to make sense of the choice between a sturdy dwelling and protracted land struggles. Following Abrams (1988) and Mitchell (1991) on the difficulty of studying the state, it is in these 'state effects' that I read state attempts to let the land question die rather than in any officially declared strategy. Also, following Abu-Lughod's (2000) suggestion to not erase the contradictions in people's voices for the sake of neat

[3]The terms 'make live' and 'let die' are drawn from Foucault (2003) and Li (2009), whose conceptualisations I explain below. I use welfare to mean state-sponsored social transfers and not the larger idea of 'well-being'.
[4]On the multiple meanings of land, see Li (2014), Hall (2013), and Sud (2019).

ethnographic writing, my effort is to record the conflicts and the indecisiveness people go through as they weigh the options available.

The article is based on ongoing ethnographic fieldwork that began in 2017 and includes several methods such as participant observation, archival research, filing Right to Information applications, and interviews with Adivasi residents, state officials, activists, and journalists. Fieldwork was done all over the state of Kerala as well as in the neighbouring state of Karnataka, where Adivasis worked in ginger farms. Wayanad, the district with the largest Adivasi population in the state and Kannur, the district where the Aralam resettlement site is situated, were two of the main sites. The Paniya, Ravula, and Kattunaika communities constituted most of the respondents in Wayanad. Field visits to Attappady block in Palakkad district provided further insights. This article additionally relies on the critical reading of welfare policy documents and statements made by the government in the Kerala Legislative Assembly on the LIFE Mission from 2016 (the year of inception of the programme) to 2025. Since 2018, I have been associated as an external volunteer with Adishakthi Summer School, a student network led by Adivasi students under the aegis of the AGMS. Visiting the colonies with AGMS and Adishakthi members provided additional insights.

The article begins with a description of the LIFE Mission and an examination of the emerging literature at the intersection of critical agrarian studies and biopolitics. Locating this article in these discussions, the following section surveys how Adivasis have seen biopolitical inclusion. The article next examines the LIFE Mission to tease out its work towards addressing the Adivasi land question.

The LIFE Mission

'LIFE Mission' stands for the Livelihood Inclusion and Financial Empowerment Mission and was launched in 2016 when a new Left government came to power. The mission had the objective of giving a house to those who did not own a house *as well as* those who did not own any land. Despite its name, there is no livelihood or financial empowerment component; it is a housing scheme. The beneficiaries are drawn from the Socio-Economic and Caste Census, conducted by the central government in 2008. The mission was put together by combining existing housing schemes. In a typical case of 'rendering technical', to draw on Li (2007), the scheme is implemented in a 'mission' mode – to wipe out the lack of a house in 10 years by 2026. By 30 September 2024, the Kerala government had spent 180.73 billion rupees (roughly USD 2.09 billion) on the mission; 517,199 families had received a house and 100,521 further houses were under construction (KLA 2024a).

Although any family without land and/or a house can apply for the scheme, Adivasis have been the foremost targets, identified through the elaborate bureaucracy of the Scheduled Tribe Development Department, spread between a directorate in the state capital and Tribal Extension Offices close to the colonies. Around 51,334 Adivasi households have been chosen as beneficiaries so far, which is roughly half of all Adivasi households in the state (KLA 2024b). This list is constantly updated based on data collected by 'tribal promoters', the field-level agents of the department. In the financial year 2022–2023, 14 million rupees (roughly USD 167,000) was sent from the department budget to the LIFE Mission (KLA 2023). When the LIFE Mission was found struggling to complete construction in time, a new scheme called Safe Accommodation and Facility

Enhancement (SAFE) was initiated in 2023, spending an additional 250,000 rupees (roughly USD 3,000) per Adivasi household (ibid).

Agrarian changes and biopolitics

Landless Adivasis in Kerala are struggling to find a stable livelihood. When I visited Ariyur in 2021, I met Rajani, Soman's neighbour, who was getting ready to go to work, under the National Rural Employment Guarantee Scheme (NREGS).[5] She did not get along well with Soman. The lack of space between the houses in the cramped colony led to frequent fights between neighbours, who were also relatives. On the day I met her, Rajani was drawing water from the well to get ready for work. 'Krishiyilonnum ippo pani illa; rationari kittiyaal aayi' (there is no work available in the paddies; we survive on rice from the ration shop), Rajani said, when I asked her how she got by. Paddy labour was the Paniyas' main source of livelihood for centuries. In today's times, with capital and preferences of Kerala's landed households moving out of paddy farming (Harilal and Eswaran 2016), the landless Adivasis face a deep livelihood crisis. Until a few years ago, Rajani had walked freely around this part of Wayanad to collect *chappu* (leaves) that would make their way into a *thoran* (a dry side dish) to go with rice. With the settler families erecting compound walls around their private plots, she could not do that anymore. Earlier, as a backup, Rajani's family had depended on food from the forests and fish from the water bodies therein. *Noora* (a rare type of tuber) and *noonji* (a kind of snail) were available in plenty, Rajani told me, besides the crabs in the wet paddies. However, tight restrictions by the forest department, implemented through 'forest watchers' recruited by the state from among the Adivasis, have made sneaking into the forest a risky endeavour. The crabs disappeared when the paddies gave way to cash crops like areca nut and banana and eventually to real estate.

Although her face beamed with a smile that morning, Rajani shared her concerns about NREGS, like many other Paniya women I had met. She rarely got a hundred days of work a year. While taking leave from me, she carried a tote bag with her and said, 'Enthenkilum vazhikkunnu kittiyaalo!' (what if I get something/edible leaves from the path). Her precariousness was becoming clearer. When I sat down with her on the following visit, she characterised her position thus: 'Annu adima pani, innu coolie pani' (slave labour then, wage labour now). When NREGS work was not available, landless Adivasi men and women constantly looked for any wage work available. When it became exceedingly difficult, several people from Ariyur and other colonies went to the ginger farms across the state border in Karnataka, where upper-caste capitalist farmers from Wayanad planted the crop and speculated on a boom. 'Many men I know who went there are dead now', Rajani remarked. In my examination of these farms (Sudheesh 2023a), I found that when the Adivasis protested against the exacting working conditions, they were replaced with local labourers. Few Adivasis find work in these farms now.

Under NREGS, Rajani was going to clear weeds in the 'wasteland' from which her ancestors used to draw food. The gradual restriction faced by Adivasis in accessing the

[5]The Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Scheme, backed by a legislation, guarantees 100 days of public work a year to rural households. The work usually includes clearing hedges, cleaning ponds, reinforcing the walls of canals, and similar manual work. It is set to be repealed in 2026 by the right-wing central government, ending the right to work, and replaced with a weakened scheme.

commons dates back to the fifteenth century when the settlement of upper-caste and more affluent communities along the Western Ghats began (Kjosavik and Shanmugaratnam 2015). Paniyas and Ravulas were made agricultural slave labourers and treated as saleable property under precapitalist land relations that were introduced by the settlers (Saradamoni 1973). The British colonial expansion of the timber trade and the establishment of plantations further curtailed their access to land. In the twentieth century, they were brought under wage labour in the paddy farms, mostly as a result of a new wave of settlement by capitalist Syrian Christian farmers from the southern parts of the region (Saradamoni 1973).

As Rajani's experience shows, Paniyas and other landless Adivasis are unable to find a secure livelihood on multiple fronts. 'Innu paniyilla' (there is no work today) is a mundane, yet telling, line one hears in the colonies. When it was areca nut or coffee season, which lasted only a couple of weeks, Ariyur and other colonies livened up, as I witnessed in the months of January and February year after year. For the rest of the year, there was a long wait for work. Wage labour, typically in the construction sector or wall painting, gave them some recourse. However, they were fast getting replaced by cheaper migrant labourers from eastern India. Further, their marginalisation in Kerala society is rooted in the intersecting caste-tribe hierarchies – as residents of settlements interspersed between upper-caste properties, they experience the humiliation, stigma, and violence associated with caste intimately. This is reflected in their inability to find work in the new service-based sector such as the burgeoning tourism industry, mobile service shops, information technology units, and supermarkets. To give an instance, in 2021, I came to Ariyur with another volunteer from Adishakthi Summer School to enquire about students who had dropped out of a vocational training course that they had willingly enrolled in in Kochi city. After a long discussion late in the evening, when all the colony residents gathered around us, it emerged that the students had gone through a stigmatising experience in the city, pushing them to drop out. Further, in public institutions of education and employment, the reserved seats for Scheduled Tribes are occupied by a couple of landed Adivasi communities, their economic and social capital facilitating entry into these positions.

Landless Adivasis are a part of millions around the developing world who are struggling to piece together stable livelihoods. Some scholars call them 'classes of labour' that face variegated levels of precariousness (Bernstein 2006; Pattenden 2018). Other scholars use the lens of the 'surplus population', renewing interest in Marx's original conceptualisation of the relative surplus population – the section of the working class that is rendered superfluous to the requirements of capital (Benanav 2014; Arn 1996; Azeri 2019; Rajaram 2018). It is not the case that they are all left to perish as some accounts portray (Davis 2006); this calls for what has been characterised as a 'nuanced and place-specific mapping of formations of labour and the different ways in which capital takes hold' (Watts 2009, cited in Li 2009, 70). In Kerala, it is intriguing to see that Soman, Rajani, and other landless Adivasis nominally command high wages, thanks to decades of unionisation of labour under the Communists. However, as Prasad-Aleyamma (2017) shows, wages are a culturally-coded category. While the Adivasis are losing access to work, the history of unionisation does not allow them to work for lower wages easily. Thus, people are turned into surplus populations through locally particular modes, inflected

by specific historical-cultural trajectories (see also Bernards and Soederberg 2021; Bernstein 2023).

The presence of welfare programmes has partially ensured that the Paniyas and other landless Adivasis in Kerala are not turned into 'wage hunters and gatherers' that Breman (1994) describes in the case of Adivasis from Western India taking up migrant labour across the country. Further, through rent, credit, and multiple indirect relations of exploitation, they are still embedded in the capitalist circuits of accumulation. Thus, against characterisations of the surplus populations as literally surplus to capitalism (Li 2009; Ferguson 2006; Sanyal 2014; Bhattacharya, Kesar, and Mehra 2023), Kerala's Adivasis approximate recent theorisations that hold the surplus population as 'adversely incorporated' but still enmeshed in wider capitalist circuits (Bernstein 2023; Cowan, Campbell, and Kalb 2023). Landless Adivasis are caught in what Brennan (2024, 11) calls the 'different forms of ″hustle″ people do to survive conditions of superfluity, temporary or otherwise, starting from immediate questions of social reproduction'.

How states manage these sections of the population, especially when they demand land (and not more social transfers) to address the crisis of reproduction, becomes a particularly pertinent question in light of the shift of focus proposed in critical agrarian studies from the classic 'agrarian questions of capital' to the newer 'agrarian questions of labour' (Bernstein 2006).[6] India and Kerala are no exceptions to this 'bypassed' agrarian question (Lerche 2013). Land struggles are one of the significant manifestations of the agrarian questions of labour, if not their only form (Bernstein 2006). Land struggles currently underway around the world indicate that at odds with the caricature of these struggles as attempts to return to a romanticised peasant past, land has endured as a crucial demand in addressing crises of reproduction (Ploeg 2008; Wolford 2010; Moyo 2011). Land struggles often become a nuisance for states; states give away land much more reluctantly than they allocate more funds for a school here or a hospital there, a pension programme here or a housing scheme there.

Bringing insights from Foucault's biopolitics into critical agrarian studies becomes useful at this juncture (Du Toit 2017). Foucault (2003) traced the shift from a direct application of sovereign power through 'kill or let live' measures to the use of biopower that governed the population by exploiting its statistical characteristics and focused on 'making live' or 'letting die'. Li (2009; 2017) examines the biopolitical inclusion/exclusion of surplus populations in regimes around the world and notes that both make-live and let-die strategies are very much here in today's world. However, as several scholars have shown, 'make live' programmes can end up perpetuating 'structural violence' and do not neatly percolate down to the people through the 'legal-rational' bureaucracies (Gupta 2012; see also Mathur 2016). Li briefly mentions the example of Kerala – a place that has achieved high social development indicators despite not having remarkable economic growth levels – and emphasises that making live is not just a counterfactual. Li indicates that Kerala's achievements are not fully available to everyone. I take it from here and scrutinise what the sections that fall on this story's flipside tell us about capitalist growth paths and welfare states.

[6]By crisis of reproduction, I mean the breakdown of the material and social conditions through which labourers sustain themselves and renew labour power for the next day's work. Labourers thus face precariousness even as labour continues to be extracted for capitalist accumulation. In Kerala, landlessness, combined with unsustainable livelihood options, have pushed the Adivasis into a crisis of reproduction.

The tension between land and welfare has been found elsewhere as well. In Brazil, for example, Hall (2012) examines the *Bolsa Familia*, a conditional cash transfer programme that has created a vast safety net through monthly transfers to households to reduce poverty. Although the study focuses on the impacts of the programme, Hall notes in passing that it competed with the Landless Workers Movement (MST), which has a long history of land occupations, by taking away participants. My work tries to understand what this competition means for the land question in Kerala as well as how participants consider the choices before them. Indubitably, there is no one prescription for a pathway out of poverty: people make culturally contingent decisions based on the constraints placed before them. Yet, the tension between land and welfare warrants scrutiny of why one wins over the other as the desired means of addressing crises of reproduction. As against Chatterjee's (2008) suggestion that the land question has become irrelevant in neoliberal India and that the 'political society' forges its relationship with the state through welfare programmes only, the case of Kerala's landless Adivasis shows that the land question is still simmering and that welfare efforts cannot be seen outside of how capitalism is unfolding.[7] Chatterjee uses the term political society to refer to the section that cannot seek state benefits through rule-of-law channels, unlike the middle and upper-class 'civil society'. In contrast with this binary, the Adivasis have depended on organised movements to seek land and formal channels to access state schemes. The story that I examine also diverges from Sanyal's (2014) argument that surplus populations constitute a separate sphere outside channels of capitalist accumulation, managed by the state through welfare programmes. Landless Adivasis, in their hustle to get by, are firmly embedded in capitalist relations as noted before. The LIFE house presents before them the *apparent* possibility of future market entry, as it can be sold or used as collateral for loans after 12 years of reception.

The extension of governmental power is about the 'right disposition of things to a convenient end', as Foucault (2006) pointed out. With the shift from brute force to the conduct of conduct, the state now focuses on arranging people's lives in ways that make them willing subscribers to state power. This is the 'right disposition' that serves the convenient end of affirming state power. 'Things' here include the relationship of people with each other, material entities as well as their environment. The biopolitical regime allows space for choice by individuals and works through enticement rather than coercion. The LIFE Mission does a similar work by calibrating people's lives around housing provided by the state, away from a life dependent on land. It induces citizens to become voluntary subjects of state power. Adivasi lives are disposed of in a way that continues their status as wage labourers, away from any dependence on land and forests. Although every welfare programme is always already biopolitical, this article stresses the importance of considering the specific implications for the land question. Through its extended welfare machinery that spans from the state capital to the remotest villages, the state of Kerala has gathered copious data on Adivasi households. This is realised through the vast network of tribal promoters, several of whom I interacted with. Through such data, the state knows that fatigue is setting in amongst Adivasis after several rounds of unsuccessful land struggles. There is also the real insecurity of living in fragile structures; a sturdy house (*adachurapulla veedu*) is a refrain in the development

[7]See the insightful criticisms of Chatterjee's ideas by Steur (2015b) and Gudavarthy (2012).

discourse in Kerala. The LIFE Mission creates its affective constituency by playing into this desire.

In this sense, the LIFE Mission would seem to stand in contrast to several 'improvement' programmes that have been shown to have failed around the developing world, often because they reduce the complex politics of social stratifications and inequalities and cultural contexts into technical essentials and thereby depoliticise the issue (Ferguson 1990; Li 2007; Carney 1998). However, an improvement programme can ostensibly be a success and yet produce results that raise uncomfortable questions, as this article highlights.

The LIFE Mission could be compared with the urban resettlement experiences in India more broadly. Across the country, there has been a growing movement toward resettlement. Though premised on eviction, such initiatives are often framed as welfare measures, thereby transforming displaced populations into new subjects of state governance (Chakravarty and Negi 2016). As Ramakrishnan (2014) notes, people actively renegotiate patronage and brokerage relationships as vital strategies for engaging with an apathetic state – an aspect evident in the LIFE mission as well. Yet, important differences exist. For instance, it is crucial to distinguish between the 'right to the city' that underpins urban struggles and the historical, identity-based rights over land central to Adivasi movements.

These processes are often interpreted in the scholarship as forms of accumulation through dispossession. However, as Doshi (2013) notes, dispossession does not occur uniformly; rather, it produces differentiated subjectivities shaped by class, caste, gender, and ethnicity. Doshi's concept of 'accumulation by differentiated displacement' captures this complexity, revealing how not all displacements are experienced – or resisted – in the same way. Though firmly located in a rural context, a parallel can be drawn with the LIFE Mission, which has produced new Adivasi subjects of the state, some of whom seek to benefit from the housing scheme in the role of contractors.

Meanwhile, Liza Weinstein's (2009) work on Dharavi demonstrates that the state sometimes engages more directly with citizen demands in urban resettlement – though such responsiveness remains uneven. The LIFE Mission, with its mission mode, too, creates a semblance of active state engagement with citizens. However, its larger effect, namely the dissipation of land struggles, is not easily visible. The LIFE Mission can alternatively be read as an improvement scheme that directs Adivasis to live a life that the state envisions for them. As Malini Ranganathan (2018) observes in the case of urban India, improvement efforts often aim to enhance the value of space and infrastructure by promoting 'corrective' forms of property and propriety. In the case of LIFE, this correction can be seen in its determination of how the Adivasis must live – out of the forests, in concrete homes. The old ways of living – in land, growing food, dependent on forests as a safety net – become improper. As Ranganathan observes, contemporary improvement efforts thereby reek of colonial efforts in teaching subjects how to live.

Adivasis, agrarian transition, and the welfare regime

Understanding the biopolitical inclusion of the Adivasis in Kerala requires examining its history of agrarian transition. The state of Kerala was formed in 1956, ushering in the first major democratically elected Communist government anywhere in the world the following year. This government inaugurated land reform to end precapitalist land relations,

establishing private property. However, this effort paved the way for its forced dissolution by the centre within two years, spurred by protests from upper-caste groups (Dasgupta 2017). A diluted version of the land reform was implemented in 1970 when the Communists came back to power. The reform had three elements: the redistribution of ceiling-surplus land, the conferral of ownership rights to tenants, and the transfer of dwelling grounds to landless agricultural labourers (Herring 1983; 1980). Only the second element was successfully implemented, bringing about significant changes in the lives of tenant castes (Radhakrishnan 1981; Scaria 2010). The third element that promised 10 cents (0.01 acre) of land to agricultural labourers could have included the landless Adivasis, but a vast majority of them never got covered. Those few who got land found the dwelling grounds crowded after a couple of generations.

Indeed, the experiments in land reform, the unionisation of labour, and investments in public health, education, and social security measures raised the overall social development indicators of Kerala. These experiments together came to be called 'the Kerala model'. Several scholars have lauded it as proof that economic growth was not a precondition for social development (Franke and Chasin 1992; UNDESA 1975; Veron 2001; Sen 1992; Drèze and Sen 1989). My archival research shows that the state in Kerala has been using 'Adivasi' as a governmental category at least since the 1960s. Kerala today boasts of spending more than two percent of its annual budget on a population that is less than 1.5 percent of the state's population.

A few explanations could be attempted for why this apparent 'inclusion' into the welfare model did not result in any structural transformation of the inequality faced by Adivasis. As several authors have pointed out, the Communists have struggled to incorporate into their politics caste and the specific experiences of the Adivasis, in which the multiple meanings they hold in land are crucial (Kjosavik 2010; Steur 2015a; Bijoy and Raman 2003). Land ownership in India is intricately linked to caste position. When the land reform chose to trifurcate its components and take a class approach, it ignored the caste positions of the Adivasis (and the Dalits, plantation labourers, and fishers). Eventually, the upper and middle caste beneficiaries (who span all three religious communities – Hindus, Muslims, and Christians) became the chief patrons and followers of the Left and the Congress-led alliances. Although a Communist government sought to restore all land that Adivasis lost to settlers through legislation in 1975, led by a bold chief minister, this law was never implemented and was eventually replaced with a new law in 1999 by another Communist government under settler pressure (Parmar 2018). Since 1999, the state of Kerala has shifted its approach to parcelling out one to five acres of land to an Adivasi household in any available location, moving away from the idea of the restoration of historically accessed lands (Bijoy and Raman 2003). When the Adivasis saw that the state was still reluctant to distribute land, the 2002 Kudilketti land struggle, in which the AGMS was born, broke out. The then Congress government set up the Tribal Resettlement and Development Mission as a compromise, promising an acre of land to each landless Adivasi household. At the end of the year-long mission, few plots were distributed, sparking the Muthanga struggle of February 2003. The stance of the Communists (and the Congress), who treat Adivasis as a 'frozen class' (Kjosavik and Shanmugaratnam 2015), i.e. a class stuck in time without evolving precariousness and caste features, has resulted in disillusionment among the Adivasis. Thus, despite 'make

live' policies, in the Adivasi areas, life expectancy remains low, morbidity remains high, and school dropout rates are significantly higher than those of other students in the state.

Several land struggles have erupted in response to the marginalisation, underscoring the deep importance of land to Adivasis. A brief overview is instructive, though these are only a few of the many such struggles across the Western Ghats. Most fade within weeks, as participants cannot afford to forgo work, and receive little public attention. One of the earliest movements occurred in 1967–1968, led by Maoist rebels who exposed the bonded labour of Adivasis. Another Maoist-led struggle in 1970 freed Adivasi labourers from 140 acres of an upper-caste landlord's estate, leading to the occupation of the land by the workers themselves (Bijuraj 2018). Throughout the 1970s and 1980s, Adivasis organised under several short-lived forums. In 1994, the Adivasi Samyuktha Samithi (Adivasi United Forum) protested delays in implementing the 1975 Act. That same year, in Ambukuthy, Wayanad, C.K. Janu led 220 Adivasis to occupy forest land slated for redistribution under the Kerala Private Forest (Vesting and Assignment) Act, 1974. They demanded five acres for each landless household. The police evicted the protesters, prompting Janu's hunger strike, which led to a compromise granting land to many families (Bijuraj 2018).

The following year, the South Zone Adivasi Forum organised the Cheengeri struggle in Wayanad, where 249 households occupied 100 acres of farmland; they too met with police violence. A similar occupation in Panavally in 1995, involving 76 households, also faced repression. Between 1996 and 2000, several such struggles continued, culminating in the Kundala movement led by C.K. Janu and M. Geethanandan, in which Adivasis reclaimed 61.21 acres of land originally belonging to them but later encroached upon by the state. The government eventually withdrew.

The momentum carried into the 2001 Kudilketti Samaram in Thiruvananthapuram, followed by the Aralam land struggle in 2002, both of which demanded distribution of land. The 2003 Muthanga struggle soon followed. Poor progress in land distribution later sparked the Chengara struggle in 2007, involving 7,500 households, including Dalits (Keraleeyam 2017). The Nilpusamaram, or the 'stand up protest', began in 2014, reviving the demands of 2001, including the granting of autonomous administration to Adivasi settlements. Land struggles persisted in the following years, culminating in the Thovarimala movement of 2019, which was once again crushed by police action.

The Kerala story has to be read along with the political and economic changes underway at the national level. Though the Kerala model originally won its accolade as an exception to the growth-obsessed path followed by the rest of the country, since the liberalisation of the economy in 1991, Kerala has found it increasingly difficult to sustain its welfare transfers and has also eased restrictions on investment. It is now vying with the other states for domestic and foreign investment. At the root of this neoliberal shift is land – it is common for the state in Kerala to offer prime land spanning hectares to attract investors (see, e.g. The Hindu 2025), even as the state cites scarcity of land when Adivasis demand it. Since around the 1980s, Kerala's development has been financed by remittances flowing in from Persian Gulf countries. However, these migrations, enabled by caste and religion-based networks of social and cultural capital, have been unavailable to the Adivasis.

Although the Communists have traditionally claimed the credit for the Kerala model, careful historical studies have revealed that the path was laid by the anti-caste

movements of the late nineteenth and early twentieth century, together called the Navothanam (literally, renaissance), that forced the princely states to provide land grants to the Dalits (Desai 2005; King 2015; Mohan 2015). The princely states and missionaries in the pre-independence period also invested in public health and education (Desai 2005; King 2015; Mohan 2015). The northern region, where most landless Adivasis lived, was under direct British control and did not see these movements spreading. 'Feudal' and caste-based oppression continued until independence.

Letting the land question die

The biopolitical inclusion of landless Adivasis in Kerala, as seen in the massive LIFE Mission, presents three aspects of how a surplus population can be managed. First, it addresses the crisis of reproduction partially without addressing the livelihood crisis. Second, the LIFE Mission competes with other biopolitical regimes to win over the Adivasis. Third, the state's biopolitical inclusion of the Adivasis in the LIFE mission can be seen to result in the discursive divorcing of a population from the land question. These points are taken up for further discussion below.

Addressing the crisis of reproduction

Soman, whom we met in the beginning, the two activists from the AGMS, and I sat down in the front room of his house to talk. After updates on the continuing court cases that had been imposed on the Muthanga protesters by the state, the discussion turned to the very relevance of land struggles. Slowly, expressing his irritation, Soman said, 'Don't mind me saying this, what has the AGMS been able to achieve finally? How long can we go on asking for land?' The discussion turned to the possibility of surviving in the colonies with a new house as against a future in resettlement sites. Soman observed, 'Look at those who got land in Paalaadi. What land did the government give them? At least here in the colony, I have my connections. Who do I know there?' One of the AGMS activists replied, 'But Sometta, this has been your struggle. Paalaadi can be improved (*nannaakkaam*) if all the allottees move there.' Soman replied sternly: 'There is no guarantee with land struggles'.

Soman's reference is to the Paalaadi resettlement site where about a third of the Muthanga participant households had been allotted an acre of land each under the 'Muthanga Package', following persistent pressure from social movements. In my visits to Paalaadi, I could see what Soman was trying to convey. The land was cut off from the nearest paved road, accessible only with a truck that could tread a rocky path. Most allottees had not taken up their land. As I track elsewhere (Sudheesh 2023b), the state has responded to constant demands for land by granting land in remote places where Adivasis find it hard to build a life, causing them to stick to the colonies.

Meanwhile, Rajani had not made it to the list of beneficiaries for resettlement in Paalaadi and it was, therefore, quite clear why she was absent from the commemoration day in 2024. Until recently, the obvious response would have been to sit in further land struggles. This is why the commemoration held powerful symbolic value – as a site of regrouping. Rajani was conflicted. She had seen land struggles from her childhood and had passionately participated in many. However, the LIFE house gave her a reason to

hope for a better future. Rajani did not participate in the anniversary the following year (2025) either. I also noticed her absence from the 'Adivasi Parliament' that the AGMS had organised on the same day to discuss land rights and make a plan for the months ahead.

The biopolitical inclusion of the surplus population creates a *semblance* of the crisis of reproduction being addressed democratically. In the Kerala context, this is key from the perspective of electoral politics despite the Adivasis being a minuscule minority. Time and again, news stories of hunger, morbidity, and starvation-related deaths in the colonies have raised controversies, pointing fingers at the welfare state. Currently, as the Communist-led government is heading towards the completion of a decade in power, shoring up this picture has become all the more important.

Although a universal scheme, the alacrity shown by the state in implementing the LIFE Mission in the case of the Adivasis is striking. It is being treated as the answer to all the questions pertaining to Adivasis, based on the assumption that a concrete house readily leads to a livelihood and a path out of poverty. While households from the other communities are granted 400,000 rupees (approximately USD 4,700) each to build a house, expecting them to bear the rest of the cost, Adivasi households are given 600,000 rupees (approximately USD 7,100) each. As noted before, roughly half of all the Adivasi families have been covered by the mission so far.

Two issues deserve to be highlighted here. First, despite its name, no other livelihood support is given. Thus, livelihood precariousness persists. In cases where the Adivasi households are moved to LIFE apartment complexes in sites identified by the state, many are extricated from the forests, which serve as one of the sources of livelihood and a safety net in times of crises. Second, the readiness shown in extending the scheme to the Adivasis exists side-by-side with the extreme reluctance to distribute cultivable lands as per the demands of the Adivasi movements. It is in this parallel trend of 'no land but a ready house' that we see germs of the state's efforts in letting the land question die. Once extricated from the colonies, it is difficult for the Adivasis to sustain the land demands, especially if they have been segregated.

The land question has been such an annoyance for the two ruling coalitions that have come to power in Kerala – the Left Democratic Front (LDF) and the Congress-led United Democratic Front (UDF) – that they have tried many half-hearted land policies. This included the UDF's Aashikkum Bhoomi Adivasikku ('the land that the Adivasi desires will be theirs') and the LDF's land bank scheme. The former was a market-based approach that matched a willing Adivasi buyer of land with a willing seller; the onus was on the landless Adivasis to find a willing seller (Suprabhatham 2018). Meanwhile, the land bank identified a pool of state-owned land that could be distributed, i.e. land that the state was willing to give away (Bhavitha 2022). Both were extremely unsuccessful in resolving landlessness. In the former, the Adivasis could not negotiate prices because of caste hierarchies. The grant from the government was limited, well below what a resort might give to a seller. In the latter, the collectors, the top civil servants, were given the charge of identifying state-owned land that could be distributed. When it was realised that Adivasis did not accept just any unfertile piece of rocky land, the land bank hit a roadblock.

The LIFE Mission stepped into this scene as a solution to finally resolve the Adivasi land question. In this sense, the mission aids the 'right disposition of things', as Foucault had noted, by preserving the state's power through a welfare programme that sought to

govern the Adivasis' relationship with each other and the natural and built environment. The political issues of social hierarchies and historical dispossession that lie at the root of the Adivasi land question are thus neatly brushed aside.

A slew of recent schemes have aimed at the beautifying the colonies. Many of these contracts were given to the Nirmiti Kendra, the public works arm of the state. However, corruption crept in, and many of these houses have been leaking ever since. The leaky house does not neatly lead to a demand for land; instead, people now get occupied with finding the funds to repair the leaks, tying them further to the house.

Though it is too early to speculate what these interventions in the colonies might lead to in the future, it is worthwhile considering insights from urban studies on the implications of urban welfare on land markets. In addition, as studies on urban renewal have shown, state power might be furthered through welfare. For instance, as Ghertner (2015) shows for Delhi, efforts in the 'renewal' of informal settlements can be driven by aesthetic concerns, rather than addressing structural inequalities, reinforcing state control. The rapid urbanisation of Wayanad – with resorts, homestays, and malls coming up all over – is increasing the pressure on land. With a newly planned tunnel highway connecting the district with the rest of Kerala, the long-winding and choked Thamarassery pass will be bypassed, bringing in a new rush of capital and settlers (Joseph 2024). There is also immense pressure on the central and state governments to keep the forested highway to the metropolitan cities of Mysore and Bangalore open through the night, to ensure seamless movement of capital (Philip 2019). Given that the majority of colonies do not have clear land titles, and many stand on the land of former upper-caste landlords, the market pressure on land could spur dispossession.

Competing biopolitical options

In 2017, when I first went to Ariyur, I was walking with a tribal promoter who was bringing state benefits to people. Back then, when I saw that one of the residents was living in a dilapidated house, I had naïvely asked her, 'Why don't you too apply for a LIFE house?' Such was the allure of the programme. It is not just states that are part of the improvement project; civil society and social movement organisations can offer competing visions of a better life. In Ariyur, the residents' lack of enthusiasm for the annual commemoration may indicate that they were considering alternatives to the land vision extended by the AGMS. Jithin from the Karoor colony, a postgraduate who accompanied me on some of the field visits for six months to learn research methods, was reluctant to move to Paalaadi, the resettlement site. 'Why not build a homestay and capitalise on the remoteness?', I once asked Jithin unthinkingly during one of our bus rides. He just replied, 'In the colony, we are together. I am right now occupied with finishing the bathroom (of the LIFE house in the colony)'. Jithin had been unemployed when I met him, like most graduates in the colonies. This moment was illuminating. While the earnings from the research assistance went into completing the work in the new house, I realised that his family would not be formally accepting the land received by his parents, who were participants in the Muthanga struggle, anytime soon.

In the Aralam resettlement site, where landless Adivasis were given an acre each, residents have abandoned their plots, demanding more fertile land and complementary livelihood support (Sudheesh 2023b). Reminiscent of Foucault's insight, the land

abandonment shows that biopolitical regimes may allow space for resistance, which may not always take the form of organised opposition. However, the state has continued its efforts in building LIFE houses on the site, adamant about bringing the residents back. The tribal promoters are doing their best to entice them, and the authorities are now issuing threats to make it work, as I tracked in several Malayalam newspaper reports. When I saw houses being constructed on plots without residents, I asked the tribal promoters what was going on. They said that the authorities were just rebuilding the abandoned houses through the LIFE Mission, as the efforts to bring people back were in full swing.

On various visits to Ariyur, I noticed that extreme precariousness was dividing the families of the colony into multiple groups, each promising their unique welfare benefits. Jayan, who had been an AGMS loyalist, came from a colony less than a kilometre away from Ariyur. He had converted to Pentecostalism a decade ago. While the reasons why marginalised sections convert to the new churches are a complex phenomenon and not reducible to merely poverty (see Roberts 2016; Mohan 2005; Viswanath 2014), the Church has provided many welfare services to the converts. Jayan has now become a LIFE contractor, just like Ariyur's Soman. When I met him in 2021, he was struggling to pay back the loans he had taken to expand his LIFE house and buy a car. In 2024, he was still in debt. His move to LIFE contracts made more sense then. The contractors are infamous for eating into the funds, resulting in leaky homes. The contract is given by the panchayat in rural areas or by the municipality in urban areas. So far, the contractors have been non-Adivasis. Jayan's entry into Pentecostalism and LIFE contracts can be seen as his attempt to find, or rather to combine, alternative avenues of stability.

Meanwhile, Jayan's choice was creating rifts in the community. In Karoor colony, where almost all elders had participated in several land struggles, Ratheeshan had entrusted Jayan with the construction of his LIFE house. Ratheeshan and Jayan, as residents of nearby Paniya colonies, had known each other for a long time. I went over to meet Ratheeshan and his wife the day after the house under construction was burgled. The doors had yet to be installed. They had given Jayan a good chunk of the LIFE funds. Jayan was missing ever since and had apparently used the funds to pay off some of his debts. Ratheeshan and his wife spoke at length about what the house meant for them and how they made a mistake by trusting Jayan. I visibly noticed Jayan's absence in any of AGMS activities, clearly demonstrating he had changed tracks to LIFE.

Meanwhile, Ratheeshan and his wife had received land in Paalaadi under the Muthanga Package, but they refused to go over there or sit in land struggles for alternative land. 'This house is our dream', they had said when I visited them. While Ratheeshan continued to participate in the AGMS meetings, I could see him drifting apart. In my visits with AGMS activists to enquire after victims of a landslide that had shaken Wayanad in June 2024, Ratheeshan told me privately that it was he who first tried to help them out. He would never have considered himself as separate from the AGMS earlier. This drifting apart meant that they could not be called on readily to do the on-the-ground work of organising land struggles.

Besides autonomous social movements, several other actors can be seen making their offers to the colonies. The Communist Party of India (Marxist) and the Indian National Congress set up the Adivasi Kshema Samiti ('Adivasi welfare forum') and the Adivasi Congress respectively in the early 2000s. New converts have been found by the Rashtriya

Swayamsevak Sangh (RSS). I had spoken to Rajeevan in Ariyur in 2018 about his turn to the RSS. Rajeevan mentioned that the two main power groups in the state – the Congress and the Communists – had not done enough to address the precariousness of Adivasi lives. The RSS has been able to make inroads through several of its wings such as the SC-ST Morcha, the Vanavasi Kalyan Samithi, and the Seva Bharathi. I was also increasingly noticing the presence of Hindu gods in rituals at Paniya homes. When one of the AGMS leaders allied with the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP), closely linked to the RSS, several cadre members of the AGMS were lost to the RSS and the BJP. The local government unit/ward in which Ariyur was located had a large Adivasi population and had not been electing a Communist member for a while. The vote share of the BJP had been increasing in Kerala elections, all of it making the CPI(M) worried and scrambling to win back loyalties. The image of 'Prabuddha Keralam' (Enlightened Kerala) often cited by them, bordering on highlighting a regionalist identity, was also receiving criticisms, with increasing discrimination against Adivasis and Dalits. The LIFE Mission came to Ariyur as a token of acceptance, showing that the Communists cared, after years of neglect.

Discursive divorcing from the land question

In February 2025, when I visited one of the Tribal Extension Offices in Wayanad for the details of a colony, one of the officials asked, 'Which '*nagar*' do you want information on?' This was bizarre as I had never heard officers using the term. *Nagar* literally means a town and is used in Kerala to refer to an affluent neighbourhood. Referring to a colony as a *nagar* was so out of place that it took me a while to remember that the Government of Kerala had brought out a new order saying that the terms 'colony', 'sanketham', and 'ooru' that were used to refer to Adivasi settlements should be changed to 'nagar', 'unnathi', or 'prakrithi' (GoK 2024). *Unnathi* means 'peak' and 'prakrithi' means 'Nature'; terms that do not remotely signal an Adivasi settlement. Colony and *sanketham* have carried pejorative tones, but they have also kept the history of landlessness and caste-based marginalisation simmering. Meanwhile, '*ooru*' is a Dravidian term that is asserted by many Adivasi communities to refer to their habitations. The Kerala government has found an ingenious way to wipe out these historical markers of landlessness and Adivasi assertion – building new houses in the same spots (with almost the same floor size) and changing the very terms used to refer to the settlements.

Note that the LIFE Mission provides a house to those who have land but no house; those who have land and a house, but the house needs repair; *as well as* those who do not have land. There is no effort to provide new land. In case land is acquired for housing complexes, it is held under the ownership of the local government. This has given rise to widespread concern that the landless Adivasis are going to be shifted to housing complexes far away from the land. C.K. Janu, the fiery leader of the Adivasis, notes in her autobiography that Adivasis have an 'umbilical cord connection' with the land; their lives will disintegrate if they are extricated from the land. Janu alleges that the housing complexes will not give them the space to practise their rituals, which are integral to their lives (Janu 2024). Land is not only a productive resource, as was pointed out earlier. As Mini, a resident of the Aralam resettlement site and a participant in land struggles in Wayanad who got land there, told me in 2018, the land is, above all,

aatmasvishwasam (confidence). Thus, the demands raised by the land struggles are not for a romantic paddy-peasant past, but for a practical idea of a stable life.

The zeal shown in targeting the Adivasis in the LIFE Mission must be situated in the wider political context. Adivasis in Nilambur in Malappuram district were among the first beneficiaries chosen. The landless Kattunaikas, who were also facing multiple livelihood expulsions like the Paniyas, were given dwelling units in a housing complex. As widely reported in the media, these Adivasis soon found out that they did not have ownership of the houses (Dhanya 2019). The houses were tiny. They realised that they had been moved out of the forests, which had implications for the demands they would raise for rights over forest land, both under the Kerala Restriction on Transfer by and Restoration of Lands to Scheduled Tribes Act 1999 and the Forest Rights Act (FRA) 2006. Note here that the FRA grants not only individual rights but also community rights over forest resources in a much wider territory; moving out of the forests makes claim-making almost impossible. Activists note that the LIFE Mission housing complexes are the *aadhunika colonykal* ('modern colonies') that replace the old colonies—just vertical.

At the crux of these initiatives is the lesson that the biopolitical inclusion of the landless Adivasis effectively converts the agrarian question of labour, i.e. how these surplus populations survive, from the land question to a housing question. By reducing the number of subscribers to the land question, the LIFE Mission divorces the surplus population, originally divorced historically from the land, from the very discourse of land demands. To emphasise a crucial point, the suggestion is not that people have no agency, but that the option of a sturdy house is provided to them in a context of extreme precariousness and the exhaustion that sets in after repeated land struggles. There are no plans to combine the LIFE Mission with a land redistribution programme. O.R. Kelu, the minister for scheduled tribe development, recently observed that the LIFE Mission aims to create permanent addresses for all Adivasi populations. This statement, located in the context of the colonies not having sturdy dwellings, is also directed at permanently placing the Adivasis in the colonies (where in-site construction is adopted) or relocating them to housing complexes, thereby moving them away from the discourse of the land question. Thus, programmes like the LIFE Mission that are specifically calibrated to the exact forms of the precariousness of a surplus population can yield dividends in successfully managing the population.

Conclusion

The need to manage surplus populations has brought up before states the necessity to devise ways of biopolitical inclusion that can create a semblance of democratic engagement. When placed against the backdrop of land demands, these strategies can reveal particular patterns of addressing the crisis of reproduction at the same time as trying to move the people away from land demands. The tension between welfare programmes and land comes to the surface here. While welfare programmes may aid the reproduction of labour power from one day to another by ensuring bare survival, they may not provide the solid foundation that land provides.

Welfare programmes like the LIFE Mission were shown to achieve this purpose through the 'right disposition of things', by carefully understanding the precariousness of the Adivasis and lavishly extending welfare transfers that would have the effect of erasing their

land demands. This disposition may not always succeed as was indicated in the case of resettlement sites like Aralam. The push to include Adivasis in this programme continues even in such cases. Two parallel tensions emerge here. For the Adivasis, there is a dilemma between choosing endless land struggles and choosing a state-sponsored house. For the state, its long-standing commitments to welfare encounter the pressure to facilitate economic growth; provision of land becomes undesirable in contrast with provision of dwellings in this scenario.

In the case of the landless Adivasis of Kerala, programmes like the LIFE Mission were shown to imply divorcing the surplus population from the very discourse of the land question; this is a population that was historically dispossessed from the land through centuries of settlement by upper-caste groups, with the landlessness symbolised by the colonies. Although a minority, the Adivasis had firmly constructed a discourse of the historical injustice meted out to them and placed cultivable land as a main demand before the state. Through these insights, the article showed how local ways of production and management of surplus populations need attention as the implications of the state's engagement can take peculiar forms that could weaken the foundations of the organisational capacity of these populations.

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