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## **Persistence of Poverty in an Indigenous Community in Southern India**

*Bringing Agrarian Environment  
to the Centre of Poverty Analysis*

*Sudheesh Ramapurath Chemmencheri  
University of Oxford  
United Kingdom*

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Occasional Paper 1

**Overcoming Inequalities in a Fractured World:  
Between Elite Power and Social Mobilization**

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UNRISD, Palais des Nations  
1211 Geneva 10, Switzerland  
Tel: +41 (0)22 9173020  
[info.unrisd@un.org](mailto:info.unrisd@un.org)  
[www.unrisd.org](http://www.unrisd.org)

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## Abstract

This paper draws attention to the need for centring the agrarian environment in poverty analysis and development policymaking. Through an ethnographic enquiry into the persistence of poverty among a landless indigenous community in the southern Indian state of Kerala, this paper tries to understand the community's negotiations with changes in the agrarian environment. The community is losing out on livelihood strategies and adaptation measures on multiple fronts simultaneously. The multi-directionality and simultaneity of the exclusions produced by changes in the agrarian environment warrant attention in poverty analysis, the paper argues. I follow members of this community in their quest to find alternative livelihoods in the wake of rapid deagrarianization in Kerala and show how they are systematically losing out on each of these livelihood pathways. I also follow them in sites of migration in the villages of the neighbouring state of Karnataka, where they are fast being replaced by cheaper labour. Fieldwork in sites of state-sponsored land distribution shows that receiving land does not necessarily work towards lifting them out of precarity. From these observations, the paper concludes that the stealthy ways in which changes in the agrarian environment further the exclusions of marginalized communities need to be paid greater attention.

## Keywords

Agrarian change, indigenous peoples, land, poverty, environment

## Author

Sudheesh Ramapurath Chemmencheri is a D.Phil. candidate at the Oxford Department of International Development, University of Oxford. His research explores the impacts of agrarian changes and land policies on landless indigenous communities in the southern Indian state of Kerala. His publications have appeared in the *Indian Journal of Human Development*, *Citizenship Studies* and *South Asia: Journal of South Asian Studies*.

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## Introduction

It has been argued that development efforts must be geared towards achieving environmental sustainability and social change simultaneously. This “eco-social turn” (UNRISD 2016) would involve analysing development issues not only from the perspective of economic growth, but also from those of ecology and social justice. This is especially significant in the case of issues pertaining to indigenous peoples, whose livelihoods and social organization are closely linked to the environment. In this case, the eco-social turn would mean recognizing and understanding how ecological and social justice goals themselves are interlinked.

This paper attempts to unpack these linkages by highlighting the ways in which complex changes in the agrarian environment impact an indigenous community living in poverty. These impacts and the power dynamics underlying them in the rural setup are key to understanding the persistence of poverty in the community, the paper argues. The term “rural” is used here taking into account its fluid nature. The paper focuses on the slow, incremental transformations brought about in rural agrarian society by economic, land-use and environmental changes. Precisely because of the inconspicuous nature of these changes, they are often missed in poverty eradication and land redistribution programmes. The evidence collected highlights the need to centre changes in the agrarian environment in poverty analysis.

The paper draws on initial observations from fieldwork conducted over nine months in the district of Wayanad in the southern Indian state of Kerala. The Paniyas, the focus of this paper, are officially classified as a Scheduled Tribe and form the largest indigenous community in the state. The term “Adivasi”, meaning first inhabitants, is commonly used by them to refer to themselves, especially as a political identity (Steur 2014). Despite the small population of Scheduled Tribes (1.5 percent) in Kerala and the state’s social development achievements, poverty and landlessness are rampant among many of these communities, including the Paniyas.

The Paniyas have been landless throughout recorded history (Kjosavik and Shanamugaratnam 2015). The property rights system in early Wayanad consisted of different communities living in a gradation of rights over land without absolute landlordism. In this arrangement, the Paniyas cultivated patches of land and accessed forest resources with permission from chiefly communities. By early fifteenth century, immigrant communities had assumed the role of landlords and incorporated the Paniyas into the agrarian system as slave labourers. Agrestic slavery continued during much of colonial rule and practically persisted until the 1970s (Kjosavik and Shanmugaratnam 2007). Land reforms implemented in the state in the 1970s failed to benefit the Paniyas, who were still largely agricultural labourers. The reforms focused more on abolishing rentier landlordism, and less on redistribution of surplus land above officially set limits on ownership or transfer of those plots to labourers on which their dwellings stood (Herring 1980, Radhakrishnan 1981). The Paniyas today live in ghettos, locally called “colonies”, which spatially represent the continuing social exclusion they face. Adivasi social movements have consistently demanded arable land from the state to correct this historical injustice (Bijoy and Ravi Raman 2003, Steur 2017).

The paper is organized into six sections. The next section elaborates the concept of agrarian environment that runs through the paper. This is followed by an explanation of the methods adopted. I elaborate the changes in agrarian environment underway in Kerala and the complex

ways in which they influence Paniya lives in the succeeding sections. The concluding section reiterates the need to consider the multi-directionality and simultaneity of livelihood expulsions produced by changes in agrarian environments in development thinking.

## Agrarian Environment

I draw the term “agrarian environment” from Agrawal and Sivaramakrishnan (2000), who stress the irreducibility of the rural setup into either agriculture or the forests or some other particular landscape. Agrarian environment thus refers to the mutually overlapping nature of the agrarian and the environmental realms. Further, the term draws attention to *changes* in the rural landscape and to the fact that the changes in the agrarian and the environmental domains are linked. The authors also stress that the term includes “social negotiations around the environment in predominantly agrarian contexts” (Agrawal and Sivaramakrishnan 2001,1). While the authors’ intent is to underline the need to pay attention to the environment in agrarian studies, I use the term more broadly to highlight the need to attend to the complex, inter-related changes in both domains in analyses of poverty. The framework of agrarian environments is especially useful for the analysis of poverty among indigenous communities, which are traditionally studied with reference to forests alone. The case of the Paniyas taken up here would show that a host of environmental, land-use and agrarian changes are crucially impacting the lives of these indigenous people and thus have a direct bearing on the poverty experienced by them.

Wayanad, the field location, represents an agrarian environment where livelihoods, and the changes therein, are intricately linked to the changes in its intermeshed landscape of agriculture and forests. Net sown area covers 53 percent of the district, while forests cover around 37 percent (GoK 2016). Of the district’s workers, 15.5 percent are cultivators and 30 percent agricultural labourers (Census 2011). Paddy, black pepper, banana, arecanut and ginger are the main crops grown. Traditionally agricultural labourers, the Paniyas have until recently depended on paddy farming for much of their livelihood. Although not conventionally regarded as a forest-dwelling community, the Paniyas have relied on the forests as a safety net for food, firewood and other forest products. Many Paniya colonies stand on the fringes of state-owned forests. Of late, some Paniya households have received titles to forest land under the Scheduled Tribes and Other Traditional Forest Dwellers (Recognition of Forest Rights) Act, passed by the Indian parliament in 2006. This backdrop indicates the possible impacts of changes in the agrarian environment on Paniya livelihoods. As indicated above, the term agrarian environment also signals the social negotiations occurring in the rural landscape. This warrants an analysis of the sociological position of the Paniyas in Wayanad and the changes underway therein. The past of agrestic slavery among the Paniyas have placed them at the lowest rung of society in Wayanad, spatially visible in the form of colonies interspersed between plots held by more affluent communities.

Agrarian change is a theme that has a long scholarly tradition, especially in India. This scholarship has meticulously tracked the transition from pre-capitalist to capitalist production relations in Indian agriculture, contemporary agrarian changes and the concomitant labour dynamics (Patnaik 1990, Mohanty 2016). In the current economic context of the country, shaped by liberalization of the economy in the 1990s, agriculture no longer contributes significantly to economic growth (Lerche 2013). This trend has particular relevance in the Kerala context, where agriculture contributes only around 10 percent of the state Gross

Domestic Product and the service sector has been progressively playing a dominant role. Rural households combine various sources of income – agricultural and non-agricultural – to earn their livelihoods. This brings up important questions regarding the impact of agrarian changes on rural labour, especially in a place like Wayanad, where 30 percent of the workers are agricultural labourers as mentioned above.

Exactly how the dynamics of labour have been unfolding in India is a question that has attracted much attention, though without consensus (see for instance, Byres, Kapadia and Lerche 1999). Regional analyses within the country have produced a diversity of trends, making generalizations difficult. However, the rising casualization of labour, pluriactivity, migration and increasing livelihood insecurity are aspects that can be seen across the country.<sup>1</sup> The case of the Paniyas presented here shows how a labouring community can face exclusion from every other alternative livelihood that they seek.

Capital is known to change the environment as much as it does agriculture. The changes in these interrelated domains can precipitate stark sociological changes. Gidwani (2008), for instance, analyzes the rise of the Patels as a newly consolidated caste group as a result of profound changes in the soil in the Matar district of Gujarat in India. As capitalist relations took over agriculture, changes occurred in soil conditions, creating a need to consolidate arable land holdings. This spurred landholding communities to mobilise and organise themselves, resulting in the formation of a new caste. In a different set up, Li (2014) analyses the changes that occurred in the indigenous Lauje community in Indonesia, following the planting of cocoa. The move led to enclosure of common lands on which the community earlier depended for food and livelihood, producing winners and losers among kin. In the case of the Paniyas, the intervening forces have been slower and more intangible, eroding livelihoods from multiple directions as they navigate the agrarian-environmental changes occurring around them.

## Methods

The fieldwork in Wayanad was done over nine months in 2017-18. Interviews were mostly conducted with ordinary Paniya men and women, roughly in equal numbers. Consent was taken orally from the participants, following an explanation of the research objectives. The methodology used was previously approved by the Central University Research Ethics Committee of the University of Oxford. The interviews were open-ended conversations in Malayalam and often involved moving around the colonies and their neighbourhoods with the respondents. Thus, walking was explored as a method to note down the changes in the agrarian environment. The colonies became a part of the fieldwork organically as I followed the main issues taken up for research. The interviews were complemented with interactions with social movement activists, bureaucrats and members of other communities, including those Adivasi communities that have traditionally owned some land. The fieldwork was anchored in the colonies of one *grama panchayat* (the lowest tier of local government) which had a substantial Paniya population. However, interviews often went beyond the *grama panchayat*. Life after receiving land was studied through fieldwork in Aralam, a land distribution site in the neighbouring district of Kannur, where many Paniya households from Wayanad had received land. The names of interlocutors referred to here have been changed to protect privacy.

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<sup>1</sup> Breman 1996; Lerche 2009; Guerin, Venkatasubramanian and Michiels 2018.

In addition, fieldwork was conducted in an *Oorukoottam* (the state-sponsored assembly of Scheduled Tribe members at the level of wards/subunits of grama panchayats) and in sites of land struggles and protests. Observing these processes and interacting with the participants at these platforms offered insights into the Paniyas' formal articulations of their livelihood struggles. The information received through these methods was corroborated with the emerging scholarly evidences on changes in the agrarian environment in Kerala.

## Changes in the Agrarian Environment in Kerala

The etymology of the name Wayanad is usually explained using its expanded form “*Vayalnadu*”, which signals the meaning “land of paddy fields”. The typical farm in Wayanad has paddy in the low-lying parts, vegetable gardens on the slope, and coffee, areca, pepper or coconut in the upland (Jose and Padmanabhan 2016). The most conspicuous form of change in the agrarian environment of Wayanad is in land-use, marked by the conversion of paddy fields into other uses (Fox et al. 2017). The conversion process in the paddy lands begins with the planting of ginger, banana and cassava that hardens the soil. In the next step, areca or coffee is planted, hardening the soil further. This prepares the ground for construction of houses (Jose and Padmanabhan 2016). In their study, Jose and Padmanabhan found that the most common reasons cited for exit from farming, paddy in particular, were population pressure on land, reduced viability and scarcity of labour. The study reports that the switch to pepper and vanilla occurred in the 1970s and the switch to banana, ginger and areca in the 1990s, when paddy was found extremely unviable. Paddy area in 2011-2012 fell to a third of what it was in 1982-1983, while the area under banana production increased three times between 1996-97 and 2012-2013 (Jose and Padmanabhan 2016). The trend of losses and indebtedness that have crept into the farming sector is often called a “crisis”. As Muenster (2012) notes, a large number of farmer suicides in Wayanad occurred as a result of the crisis precisely among those who switched to banana and ginger while seeking a way out of paddy.

The emerging picture of agrarian crisis in Wayanad mirrors that in the larger context of Kerala. While agriculture contributed 22 percent of the state's Gross Domestic Product in the year 2000, this figure fell to 10 percent in 2016 (Harilal and Eswaran 2017). In these sixteen years, the service sector swelled in size from 51 percent to 60 percent. In the past three decades, Kerala has lost paddy at the rate of 20,000 hectares every year (Harilal and Eswaran 2017). Harilal and Eswaran characterize the “dilution, scattering and desertion” of capital from agriculture as “deaccumulation”.

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