Adivasi Migrant Labour and Agrarian Capitalism in Southern India

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ABSTRACT

This paper looks at a case of rural-to-rural movement of agrarian capital in southern India and the ways in which capital-labour relations are reworked to maintain oppressive forms of exploitation. Faced with an agrarian crisis, capitalist farmers from affluent communities of Wayanad, Kerala, take large tracts of land for lease in the neighbouring state of Karnataka and grow ginger based on price speculation. Landless Adivasis from Wayanad have served as labourers on these ginger farmlands for the past three decades. Recently, farmers have shifted to employing labourers from a Scheduled Caste (SC) from Karnataka. The change happened not just because of the lower wages the SC labourers were willing to work for, but also because of the farmers' inclination to move away from Adivasis who have been resisting the poor working conditions on the farm. The story resonates with broader dynamics of agrarian-labour relations amidst capitalist expansion and highlights the centrality of socio-political factors at play.

Keywords: labour, capital, Adivasis, caste, agrarian change, migration

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1. INTRODUCTION

This article focuses on the changing labour relations in a capitalist farming sector in southern India and delves into the moments through which Adivasi labourers were replaced by more pliant labourers in the sector.[2] It argues that the Adivasis' resistance against the poor working conditions on the farm was key to this shift. This shift was more recent at the case study location, where the Adivasis had been employed at high wages for three decades. By highlighting the importance of socio-political dynamics in this shift, in addition to wage differentials, the article contributes to the scholarship on changing capital-labour relations in agrarian India.

The capitalist ginger farming sector developed in the early 1990s in the wake of the agrarian crisis in the state of Kerala. Capitalist farmers from the district of Wayanad leased large tracts of land in the villages of the neighbouring state of Karnataka to grow ginger based on price speculation (Münster, 2015). Most of these farmers belonged to the Syrian Christian community, which is considered an upper caste in Kerala. Until recently, landless Adivasi labourers, mostly from the Paniya community, were taken along to work in these farms, but they are now being replaced with local labourers from the Scheduled Caste of Wadda in Karnataka.[3] Both communities have been recruited by the extension of advance payments and the postponement of wage payments till the end of the season – a phenomenon that has been widely noted in India (Acharya, 2021; Breman & Guerin, 2009; Picherit, 2016). The paper captures the recent processes through which the replacement of the Paniyas occurred and shows that it was not just a product of the lower wages demanded by the Waddas. The capitalist farmers felt the need to leave the baggage of their historical links with the Paniyas when resistance from the latter to their oppression and poor working conditions threatened the position of the former. While the Paniyas have always earned more than the local labourers of Karnataka, their fungibility is a rather recent phenomenon, linked to their rising resistance. While preference for cheaper and more pliant labour is common in India (Heyer, 2010; Kaur et al., 2011; Pattenden, 2016; Raj, 2013), the effort here is to more closely understand how resistance by labourers and counter-resistance by employers play an additional role in shaping this predilection. Further, the paper, by examining the different modes

[2] Adivasi is a term used by many communities in India to assert their 'first inhabitant' status in their respective location. Many of them fall under the official Scheduled Tribes category.

[3] Scheduled Caste refers to the administrative category that includes castes that were formerly considered untouchable. The Waddas' history of untouchability is contested by the other caste in this category.

through which advance payments are made in the recruitment of labourers, explores how debt sparks as well as constrains resistance.

Bernstein's (2006) argument that agrarian questions of labour deserve closer attention against the backdrop of the agrarian questions of capital becoming bypassed in many developing-country contexts provides the point of departure for this article.[4] In this scenario, "classes of labour", facing a crisis of reproduction of labour in the absence of decent wages, are piecing together fragmented sources of livelihood. This is true of the Paniyas and the Waddas. As my fieldwork revealed, the Paniyas, who form the focus of this article, face multiple livelihood expulsions in their home state of Kerala. They are unable to find agricultural work in which their traditional skills lie; they are being pushed out of forests in the name of conservation, and they face exclusion from reserved seats in higher education and public employment.[5] While their wages have been higher than what casual labourers in the rest of the country earn, the Paniyas have not been able to cope with these livelihood expulsions. The welfare programmes that Kerala has been known for (Chathukulam & Tharamangalam, 2020; Desai, 2007; Franke & Chasin, 1992; Jeffrey, 1992) have not been fully realised in their case, making starvation a real threat. At the same time, the nominal presence of these welfare programmes and the Adivasi mobilisation by social movements for land have saved them from becoming "footloose labour" that Breman (1996) has documented in the rest of the country. The Adivasis' struggles for survival have manifested in the form of numerous major and minor land struggles. As Bernstein (2006) argues, land struggles could be seen as one, if not the only, expression of agrarian questions of labour. Apart from the livelihood expulsions mentioned above, the ginger farming sector was yet another avenue of income from which the Paniyas are being pushed out. This trend has provided a fillip to their land struggles. This article attempts to reconstruct the story of the Paniyas' expulsion from the ginger sector and thereby understand how agrarian questions of labour unfold in a speculative, capitalist farming sector.

[4] Bernstein argues that in the wake of globalization and liberalization of economies, firstly, capitalist relations have taken over the countryside almost all over the world, and secondly, agriculture is no longer expected to generate the surplus required for industrialization. In other words, the classic agrarian questions of capital have been bypassed. What remain relevant, though, are the questions of rural people stitching together their livelihoods from fragmented sources.

[5] Reservation refers to India's affirmative action programme for its marginalized communities.

The article is organised into four further sections. Section 2 examines the way labour and resistance are playing out in agrarian India by exploring the Paniyas' story along with insights from the scholarship. In Section 3, I give an overview of the ginger farming sector, tracking the various actors and their reasons for getting into this sector. Section 4 goes into the resistance by the Paniyas and the counteractions by the ginger farmers. This article is based on ethnographic fieldwork conducted for a larger project over nine continuous months in 2017-18 and additional legs of fieldwork in 2018, 2019 and 2022. The project enquired into the livelihood expulsions faced by the Paniyas and their culmination in land struggles. Conversations with the Paniyas took place in their Wayanad "colonies", which are cramped settlements that mark their landlessness. Conversations with the ginger farmers were conducted in their homes and ginger trading shops, at an annual meeting of the Ginger Farmers Collective in Wayanad as well as their farms in Karnataka. The farms I visited were in two villages of the Mysore district, which were selected because of the onset of fresh farming at the time. Interactions with the Waddas, who migrated from the nearby district of Hassan, occurred in two towns of the Mysore district where they had put up tents and waited to be summoned to work. I also interviewed landowners from the Mysore villages who had given their land on lease. This article's primary focus, though, is on the Paniyas and the ginger farmers. Interactions with Adivasi social movements across Kerala helped me understand their views on the Paniyas' migration to the ginger farms. Additional valuable information was also procured from the local horticulture and groundwater offices next to the fieldwork villages in Mysore and the archives of the Malayalam newspaper *Mathrubhumi* in Kozhikode. Respondent names have been changed in this article. The article uses Indian rupees (Rs) throughout (a dollar was equivalent to Rs 67 at the time of fieldwork).

2. LABOUR AND RESISTANCE

India is a typical example of a context where the agrarian questions of capital have been bypassed and "classes of labour" are trying to put together fragmented pieces of work, often involving migration (Lerche, 2013). There is substantial rural-to-rural migration involved in this, and not just the oft-discussed rural-to-urban migration (see, for instance, Breman, 2019; Kaur et al., 2011; Lerche, 2009; Rogaly et al., 2002). The ginger sector that I discuss here forms an example. The movement of agrarian capital from rural Wayanad through the ginger farmers to rural Karnataka in the 1990s required a cadre of labourers that was already familiar with ginger. The landless and

starving Adivasis of Wayanad, mostly the Paniyas, were already familiar to the farmers from generations of attachment to farmer households. The Adivasis thus provided a ready source of labour. In this sense, they form that part of India's exploited labour force of Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes that gets adversely incorporated into the labour market precisely because of their oppressed position in the social hierarchy (Shah & Lerche, 2018).

Unlike their recruitment for farm labour in Wayanad, which was based on daily wage payment, the Paniyas were taken to the ginger farms of Karnataka by extending an advance payment. Breman and Guerin (2009) examine these forms of labour relations by noting that the relationships of dependence here are often short and do not linger on to the next generation, unlike earlier forms of bondage. Typical of these arrangements, the wages are settled at the end of the contract. The advance payment and the postponed payment of wages take away any room for negotiation by the workers. This applies to the case of the Paniyas where debt bondage became a reason to return to the ginger farms. At the same time, thanks to the history of labour union mobilisation in Kerala, the Paniyas were expected to be paid a wage that was higher than that of the rest of the country. During the fieldwork period, their wages stood at around Rs 500 for men and Rs 300 for women. The ginger farmers considered the Paniyas trustworthy workers because of their decades-old familiarity with the latter. Thus, for at least three decades in the ginger farms, the relationship was not merely economic but had elements of the old hierarchical relations. This relationship recently turned sour, and the farmers moved to a purely economic relationship with labour by switching to the Waddas.

Debt has been an important source of conflict between the Paniyas and the farmers. Social movements supporting the labour rights of the Paniyas often highlight this aspect of the ginger work. As Lerche (2007) argues, bondage should be seen as a continuum and not just as the presence or absence of it. The Paniyas' bondage to the farmers in Wayanad has a long history, characterised by slavery that persisted till the early 1970s, but, in the ginger farms, the bondage did not persist from generation to generation. After 30 years, their everyday resistance and intervention from a social movement brought their "neo-bondage" based on debt and exploitation to the limelight. The land struggles of the Paniyas back home in Kerala that have been underway since the 1990s (Kjosavik, 2010; Steur, 2014, 2015) had placed the crisis of reproduction as the most important aspect of their politics; their politicisation under these land struggles helped them call out the

bondage involved in debt payments. Meanwhile, the Waddas do not have the same kind of social networks or mobilisation and are relatively more prone to fall into "chains of dependence" (Guérin, 2013), wherein labourers move from one round of debt to another. As I found during my fieldwork, the Waddas' dependence was also driven by the desire to purchase consumer goods, spend in village festivals and marry off their daughters. This observation corroborates what other scholars have observed regarding consumption driving debt among labourers and constraining their resistance (see, for instance, Kapadia, 1995). The Waddas' present condition can be characterised as an instance of what scholars describe as hesitance of workers to terminate their relationship of bondage with the employer in the absence of any alternative employment (Breman, 2007; Srivastava, 2009).

Recruitment methods also constrain the ability of the workers to protest (Guerin et al., 2009; Picherit, 2009; Raj & Axelby, 2019). The Paniyas are recruited by the farmers directly from their neighbourhoods. As Mathai, a Syrian Christian ginger farmer, said, "We just call the Adivasis in our neighbourhoods. They come and tell the others that Mathai *chettan* (brother) is a nice person. The others follow."[6] The generations of bonded labour (before 1970s) that the Paniyas provided aided this ready preference for the Adivasis when the sector opened up. The Waddas, on the other hand, are recruited through jobbers, locally called *maistries*, who most often belong to the same community. The jobbers are themselves seeking to grow their networks among the farmers; they identify the trouble-making workers early on, replacing them as and when required.

Breman and Guerin (2009) point out that the level of competition, technological elements that determine how labour-intensive the production processes are and seasonal variations compel employers to find ways to maintain a steady flow of labourers determine labour relations, particularly the levels of bondage, in rural India. This is true of the ginger farming sector. Based on speculation, it is intensely competitive, complicated additionally by the factor of luck. Most work is manual, including watering the plants. There are months of lull and then sudden activity during planting and harvesting, which requires a loyal workforce available on demand. The long-drawn familiarity between the farmers and the Adivasis ensured this for a while – until it became too "costly" for the farmers to maintain, prompting the farmers to look for more pliable workers.

[6] *Chettan*, meaning brother, is widely used to refer to Syrian Christian men.

The ephemeral character of resistance by labourers in rural India is further explored by Breman (2019) in the case of the Halipatis in India's Gujarat state. In this case, it was a long process of constant negotiation. The freeing of Halipatis was made possible by the concerted efforts of the labourers as well as the influx of migrant labourers. Breman points out that the end of bondage need not be a result of sudden acts of resistance. This insight is pertinent in the Paniyas' case – their (neo)bondage in the ginger farms went unnoticed for almost 30 years. I found scant reporting on the resistance efforts by the Adivasis in the otherwise rich Malayalam newspaper archives; the media focused almost entirely on the farmers' difficulties in farming and getting a good price for their produce. Breman adds that in the case of the Halipatis, bondage did not end because of active government intervention; both the Halipatis and their masters had grown wary of each other and distanced themselves from each other (*ibid.*). In ginger farms too, the events happened in stages. The Adivasi Gothra Mahasabha (AGMS; literally, the grand assembly of the Adivasis), a prominent social movement led by the Adivasis, took up the issue of bondage in ginger farms. Thereafter, the farmers slowly started to replace the Paniyas with the Waddas. The absence of direct resistance at the work sites has been widely noted in India, wherein the highly exploitative labour conditions simply do not allow them to protest (see, for instance, Guerin et al., 2018). Yet, when harsh working conditions start to involve violence, protests do break out (Heuze, 2009; Roesch et al., 2009). However, as Donegan points out in the case of a bone factory in Cuddalore, Tamil Nadu, protests mostly take scattered, low-key forms. In the bone factory, the Paraiyar Dalits asserted their political consciousness gained through association with the Dalit Liberation Panther Party to show how they needed to resist the employers from the Nadar and Vanniyar communities (Donegan, 2018). The Paniyas' experience has been similar.

Everyday resistance becomes important in such a context of extreme constraints. As Scott (1985) pointed out, forms of everyday resistance could be used as "weapons of the weak" when those who lack power feel a threat to the moral economy notions they hold. Scott underlines that the oppressed are aware of their condition and resort to everyday resistance by carefully considering the opportunities available to protest or the lack thereof. Breman (2019, p. 247), for instance, documents several instances of everyday resistance – from "feigned ignorance, foot-dragging, shirking, evasion, subterfuge, and sabotage to outright desertion". Several strategies of everyday resistance that the Paniyas used were discernible in the statements of the ginger farmers that I recorded – the Paniyas left without notice; they knew the tricks of planting ginger saplings

at wide distances; they weighed the ginger bags (each of 60 kg) incorrectly and they threatened the farmers with "violence" if they were not given "alcohol". These strategies were not always helpful as the farmers knew all too well where the Paniyas resided.

The everyday resistance culminated in open protests when there was intervention from the AGMS. Notably, the Adivasis never received help from any of the mainstream labour unions affiliated with political parties. The labour unions affiliated to the Communist Party of India (Marxist) or CPI(M) and the Indian National Congress, the two main political parties of Kerala, did not take up the issue of the poor working conditions on the ginger farms. The AGMS entered this political vacuum as an autonomous social movement unaffiliated with any party. Interventions by the AGMS brought the Adivasis' exploitation in the ginger farms to the limelight but also threatened the farmers. Meanwhile, the mainstream trade unions of Kerala, which were a part of making the famed Kerala model through the agitations they took up for labour rights (Dasgupta, 2017; Heller, 1999), received a large part of their support from the category of '*karshakar'*, the (landed) farmers. In Wayanad, Syrian Christians have provided considerable support to these parties and their unions. The unions' apathy to the labour struggles of the most marginalised sections of Kerala society is highlighted by the recent protests by the tea plantation workers of southern Kerala. These plantations have employed Dalit workers from Tamil Nadu for generations. Women labourers in these plantations rose against low wages and poor working conditions on their own, underscoring their lack of faith in trade unions that are deemed to be too close to the management. The women formed a social movement called *Pembillai Orumai* (women's unity), demanding better working conditions and state supervision of plantations, including the labour lines (Raj, 2019). The tea labourers are, however, being replaced on a large scale by migrant labourers from central and eastern India, many of whom are themselves Adivasis (Raj, 2018). Again, the need for cheaper and more pliable labour is the main driver of this replacement.

The location of the Paniyas in the Kerala context makes their story more nuanced. While large sums are spent on welfare programmes meant for the Adivasis, who constitute less than two per cent of the state's population, the benefits are yet to reach the people (Steur, 2016). They are targets of elaborate welfare schemes under the Scheduled Tribe Development Department that seek to address nutrition, health, education and housing requirements. However, the colonies and their poverty have remained unchanged. The poverty was exacerbated after the liberalisation of

the economy, when the agrarian crisis hit the state and led to a large-scale disappearance of farm work. My fieldwork revealed that the Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Scheme (MGNREGS), which seeks to provide a safety net, does not function well, and even when work is provided under the programme, the wages are far lower than the market wage in the other sectors in Kerala (Rs 260 per day in MGNREGS against Rs 600-700 in other sectors). Although the minimal presence of the welfare programmes and mobilisations for land have so far saved them from being migrant labourers on a large scale, they were eventually forced to look for an alternative source of livelihood. This was exactly what the ginger farms provided them.

3. BACKGROUND OF THE GINGER FARMING SECTOR

Wayanad's farmers took to ginger farming against the backdrop of the agrarian crisis in the district (Münster, 2015). The rising cost of cultivation had hit traditional crops such as paddy, coffee and pepper. Speculative ginger farming offered a new avenue of accumulation. Ginger had the advantage that it could be stored for a longer period, aiding speculation. Typically, a lease lasts 18 months. Ginger is planted around February and is ready in seven months, leaving 11 months for speculation (*ibid*). Ginger had been grown traditionally in Wayanad before the speculative venture came up and, therefore, the farmers and the Paniyas were already familiar with the crop. Ginger farmers strongly believe that they should not repeat the crop on the same land as it would invite rot. Thus, fresh lands are sought after every harvest. Farmers first tried ginger in Karnataka's Kodagu district, which is adjacent to Wayanad. Ginger farming has now moved to other districts such as Mysore, Hassan and Shimoga. Since the farming moves, it is difficult to estimate the total area under ginger, but close to 10,000 acres were reportedly brought under the crop at its peak (Rajeev, 2018). Ginger money started transforming the landscape of Wayanad, as is evident from the numerous commercial buildings and hotels that have mushroomed recently. These properties, I found out, were set up by the ginger farmers who made windfall profits.

My reading of Malayalam newspaper archives revealed additional factors that led to the growth of the ginger sector: diseases affecting the crop became frequent in Wayanad, land became scarce in Kerala and the sales tax imposed by the Government of Kerala on fresh ginger in the 1990s and 2000s choked earnings (*Mathrubhumi*, 1999b). This made the earnings from the sale of fresh ginger less than that in Kodagu: the difference was Rs 100 in 1999 (*Mathrubhumi*, 1999a). In parallel, the low probability of diseases in Karnataka, where ginger was a relatively new crop,

and the availability of abundant land for cheap lease (Rs 500 per acre in the early 1990s (*Mathrubhumi*, 1999c) made Karnataka an attractive place in the eyes of the ginger cultivator. Added to this was the crash of the coffee economy in Kodagu: leasing out the paddyland they owned to Wayanad farmers allowed the coffee farmers of Kodagu withstand the crash (Ambinakudige, 2006).

Tasks on the farm are gendered. Male labourers are involved in preparing the land for ginger planting by creating mounds called "beds". They dip the young rhizomes in fertiliser compounds before sowing them. Watering, which is done at least four times a day, is also the task of men. Women help in planting and harvesting. The harvest is picked up by local traders in Karnataka who take it to washing units present in towns nearby. Washed ginger is then transported to the major cities in the country. Almost every Paniya labourer that I spoke to complained about the harsh physical working conditions on the farm, especially the long hours under the scorching sun in desolate farms without any shade or, at times, potable water.

The Paniyas constitute the largest Adivasi community in Kerala. Most of them are landless and live below the poverty line. While earlier they freely accessed the land and forests in Wayanad, they were made agricultural slave labourers in the 15th century by upper-caste Nair and Jain settler landlords. The Paniyas and other slave castes were considered property that was bought, sold or gifted among the landlords (Hjejle, 1967; Saradamoni, 1973). The bondage persisted well into the 1970s when a Maoist rebellion brought the plight of the Paniyas to public attention. The settlement of non-Adivasis in Wayand continued unabated. The most prolific wave was that of the Syrian Christians in the mid-20th century. These waves of settlement, the introduction of private property during the colonial rule and incomplete incorporation into the postcolonial welfare state resulted in extreme marginalisation of the Adivasis (see also (Kjosavik, 2010). They were excluded from the land reform of the 1970s, which overlooked the provision for distributing housing plots to landless agriculture labourers, especially those who were Dalits and Adivasis. The reform, instead, focused on conferral of ownership status to tenants from middle castes (Herring, 1980; Radhakrishnan, 1981). Both Congress and CPI(M)-led governments have left the issue of Adivasi landlessness unresolved, often coming under pressure from settlers who resisted any restitution of land or from party workers who brought up land scarcity as a narrative to stop the distribution of cultivable lands. The Paniyas' crisis of reproduction came to a head during the agrarian crisis of

the 1990s, when many members of the community died by suicide, though accounts of such deaths focus more on the farmers (Badami, 2014).

It is important for the story being discussed here to look at the multiple livelihood expulsions that made the Paniyas go back to the oppressive ginger farms again and again over 30 years, until they decided to resist and were replaced. Precisely due to incomplete coverage of welfare provisions, the Paniyas were finding it hard to make ends meet. My fieldwork revealed they were being excluded from at least six avenues of livelihood. The agrarian crisis destroyed the livelihoods in paddy farming, in which their traditional skills lay. They were being thrown out from the forests in the name of the conservation of forests (see also Kalathingal, 2017). Work under the MGNREGS is erratic and pays much less than the market wage. They have not been able to access reserved seats in public institutions of higher education and employment (Sudheesh, 2018); most of these go to the Kurichyas and the Kurumas, the two landed Adivasi communities of Wayanad with a minuscule population. The Paniyas have not been able to get into the tourism sector that is booming in Kerala as they are thought to lack skills and, under casteist stereotypes, presentability. They are also being replaced from the construction sector by migrant labourers from eastern and central India. These migrant labourers have no membership in the unions. The trade unions of Kerala have their baggage of having fought for the local labourers' wages before migrant labour became a widespread phenomenon. They are bogged down by this history to insist that the employers pay a higher wage to the local labourers (Prasad-Aleyamma, 2017). Many Paniya families also insist that they cannot afford to lower their wage demand if they have to survive. Further, my fieldwork in resettlement sites revealed that the Paniyas are also being forced to move out of the plots received through scattered land distribution schemes as they find them non-arable. They return to their old colonies and sit in further land struggles. The ginger farms are the final sector from where they are being expelled.

Paniyas have had a long association with the Syrian Christian farmers in Wayanad's caste hierarchy. Since the mid-1990s, the Syrian Christians have settled in Wayanad and employed the Paniyas. The Syrian Christians were the first to introduce wage labour in Wayanad by bringing it to paddy farming (though the British had introduced wage labour in the plantations earlier, this sector did not employ many Adivasis). I recorded several accounts from the Syrian Christian farmers on why they entered ginger farming; many of these narratives retold the tale of suffering

and endurance associated with their migration from the densely populated southern Kerala to the "dark" lands of Wayanad, infested with mosquitoes that cause malaria and other diseases. The subjectivity of what Varghese (2009) calls "*purogamana-karshakar*" (progressive farmers), which refers to the capitalist entrepreneurial drive of the Syrian Christians, is often employed by the farmers in their narratives to praise their efforts at accumulation. Many of them entered ginger farming through family networks. Several of them have lost the speculation game to the tune of crores.

Historically, the Syrian Christians' settlement in Wayanad involved a large-scale takeover of lands that the Adivasis once freely accessed. They see the Paniyas as standing far below them in the caste hierarchy. This old historical link came to their aid in the 1990s, when the speculative nature of ginger farming required a quick supply of labour. The Syrian Christian farmers, quite expectedly, summoned the Paniyas in their neighbourhood for work. Velliyamma, an elderly Paniya woman, recounted her bond with a ginger farmer and her recent replacement in these words: "Mathai (the ginger farmer mentioned above) saw me as his own mother. When his mother died, he wanted me to plant the first ginger. I told Mathai – I called him by his name – I cannot come. He insisted and I went. That ginger came out well. He got sacks full and turned rich. Now the rich do not want us. We took care of them like our own children, but they do not take us now."

The Waddas, the SC community that replaced the Paniyas, are a Telugu-speaking people in interior Karnataka. They moved from one place to another for stone cutting or digging wells. This resulted in several names for the community – Bovi, Bhovi, Odda, Woddaru and so on (Karanth, 2004). The community continues to face marginalisation today (*The Hindu*, 2019). They have been included in the SC category since 1950 (or even earlier in some districts of the region), but this status has been disputed by some other castes within the category that claim that Waddas were not historically untouchable (*The Hindu*, 2017). There are two large sub-groups – the Kal Waddas (stone cutters) and Mann Waddas (soil workers). It is the latter category that largely entered the ginger sector, through jobbers who take a contract based on the size of the farm. The jobber decides on the number of workers for a farm. My calculations in the farms I visited showed that a Wadda labourer earned as little as Rs 125 per day, assuming the wages are equally divided among the members of a group. The agrarian crisis in Karnataka further made their condition precarious. One Wadda labourer I spoke to, a native of Arasikere in Hassan district, said, "Without

ginger work, there is no food. We know that the Kerala farmers make all the money, but they gave us work and taught us how to grow ginger. Without them we are nothing."

What Shah and Lerche (2018) call the "inherited inequalities of power" is visible here, turning both the Paniyas and Waddas into super-exploited labourer categories. The pattern of replacement of one marginalised community with another more pliant community warrants an enquiry into the precise ways in which the process of replacement works. Here, the pent-up discontent among the Paniyas started to erupt into more overt forms of resistance after three decades of oppression. I trace this story in the next section.

4. RESISTANCE AND COUNTER RESISTANCE

Debt and violence

The expertise of the Paniyas in ginger work and the Syrian Christian farmers' familiarity with the Paniyas made them the preferred labourers when the ginger sector began in the early 1990s. The local labourers demanded a wage of Rs 50 back in 1999, against a significantly higher figure of Rs 150 by Kerala's labourers (*Mathrubhumi*, 1999b). Thus, the Paniya labourers were given preference over local labourers despite the Paniya demand for a higher wage. During the fieldwork period, the advance payment made to the Paniya labourer was Rs 2,000 to Rs 5,000, sometimes even higher. Women often brought their young daughters along to work at no extra cost. A small amount was given to the labourers for daily expenses. The final payment was made at the end of the season or the harvest, after deducting the sum paid as daily expenses. This final payment often depends on the price of the ginger and the farmer's capacity to pay. A huge loss automatically translates into incomplete or no pay.

However, the process of postponed payment is never transparent. Labourers do not maintain accounts and often borrow additional small amounts during the farming cycle for sundry expenses. All of it gets deducted from the final payment. The lack of transparency means the labourers are widely deceived. Geetha, a Paniya woman I spoke to in her colony in Wayanad, said, "This farmer owed my sister Rs 6,000. But he would not give it back. I called the *chettan* and shouted at him. We Adivasis have to stand up to them if we have to get our rightful wages."

The unfair settlement of wages was pushing the Paniyas to the edge of rebellion. Even then, open confrontations on the farm at the time of payment were rare. Most would come back home

quietly, knowing they have been short-changed. Many a time, the postponed wages took too long to come. The farmers took advantage of the fact that the Paniyas do not have alternative work. The workers would return to the farm without direct coercion. The desperation for work pushed some of them into a sort of "survival migration", as (Prakash, 2009) points out in the case of the brick kilns of Punjab. In Wayanad, for instance, a Paniya man called Raju had worked in the ginger farms of a farmer for three years and made a paltry Rs 6,000, while he claimed that he should have got Rs 150,000. Repeated cases of debt came about through many pathways, especially when, as in the case of the Paniya labourer Balan, sudden expenses related to illness or a daughter's wedding had to be arranged. Balan did not keep accounts, so he could not say how much he had repaid after working with a Syrian Christian farmer for several years.

Increasingly, this transaction started to involve violence by farmers on the farm. I came across several cases of physical violence on Paniya respondents I interviewed in their colonies in Wayanad. One of the cases involved a Paniya man who, after a violent clash with a farmer, got paralysis in one hand. He was not ready to recount what happened and his relatives I spoke to added that this was common. In another colony, I met the parents of two young Paniya men who were stuck in Kodagu under a police case involving an altercation with a farmer over wages. In Velliyamma's colony, I also came to know of the death of a young man who was her relative. Velliyamma went up to the ginger farmer's house in her neighbourhood and confronted him. He threatened to kill her and anyone else who dared speak about the incident. Velliyamma, pointing at the house of the farmer, told me, "He still lives there. He is a leader of the Congress [party]. We Adivasis have no leader."

Closely linked to the violence, the prevalence of alcoholism in the colonies was reported to have gone up significantly after the migration to the ginger farms. Alcohol had become another means of buying loyalty. Noonjan, a Paniya man, had died after consuming cheap liquor. The expenses of the alcohol are deducted from the final settlement by the employers. Tony, a Syrian Christian banker who kept a critical view of ginger farming, recounted: "Every Nair household had Adivasi colonies here in Wayanad. The Adivasis were paid in kind – one *naazhi* (a measure) of rice. When the Travancore migrants (the Syrian Christians) arrived, payment in cash started. But along with this started another trend – providing alcohol. This has shot up with the arrival of

ginger farming. Now they are 100% addicts. If this goes on, there won't be a single Paniya man left in the colonies."

While Tony could be exaggerating, and is partaking in the stigmatisation of the Paniyas as addicted to alcohol, his words bring out how alcohol was being used to ensure loyalty, especially in a setting that needed a quick supply of labourers. Alcohol use has been noted as a reason behind the deteriorating health indicators among the Paniyas by medical studies as well (Haddad et al., 2012; Mohindra et al., 2011). Velliyamma put this emphatically, "*Kodagil poyaal nammal kulam thondi pokum* (we will all perish if we go to Kodagu)." A local NGO found 36 cases of occupational deaths and 34 cases of suspicious deaths among Adivasi labourers who went to work in ginger farms (*Times of India*, 2013).

Geetha recounted the increasing clash between the Paniyas and the Syrian Christians back home. "The upper-caste people call us (women) *Panicchi*," noting the disparaging tone contained in the term, which literally means a "Paniya woman". She insisted that it is important for Adivasis to stand their ground and speak up to their employers. That, however, is not always an option for the few Paniyas who still work at the ginger farms.

Adivasi resistance

While the picture continues to be bleak, I must add that several forms of everyday resistance have been recorded during the fieldwork as noted above – from weighing the bags incorrectly to not showing up for work to planting the rhizomes at wide distances. Some of it involved, as in Geetha's case, confronting the farmer over a phone call. Or talking back to the farmer, as done by Velliyamma. However, rarely did these acts coalesce into larger movements of resistance. The power balance between the two, especially in Karnataka, where the Paniyas did not have any immediate contact to raise their voice, became a huge constraint. In addition, as mentioned before, trade unions paid scant attention to the plight of Adivasi workers in ginger farms. The Paniyas' resistance reached a tipping point only with external intervention. An opportunity for resistance finally came up with the founding of the AGMS in 2001. The movement was founded by the landless Adivasi leader CK Janu. Though the intervention was external when seen from the perspective of the ginger farm located in Karnataka, it was quite internal if we see that Paniyas formed a large part of this movement and talked against all kinds of exploitation – both by state institutions and landowners of Kerala.

In the late 1990s and early 2000s, malnutrition deaths shook the Adivasi colonies in Wayanad and Attappady.[7] These deaths were an early indication of the limitations of Kerala's welfare programmes. The incident became a trigger for the Adivasis to organise a historic land struggle and demand cultivable land in 2001. The struggle, held in the state capital Thiruvananthapuram, came to be called the *Kudilketti Samaram* (struggle by erecting shacks). The social movement AGMS was founded in these shacks. The struggle concluded when the Congress-led government entered into an agreement with the protesters, promising land. However, there was no sight of land distribution in Wayanad even after a year. These events prompted the Paniyas and other landless Adivasis to occupy a stretch of unused land in Wayanad's Muthanga forests in 2003. This struggle was crushed by the state police. These agitations have been argued as having made the "Adivasi" a strong political identity in Kerala (Steur, 2009, 2017). The resistance was a flashpoint that sent a clear message of defiance to the authorities and the upper castes. The AGMS gradually started issuing statements against the condition of the Adivasis in ginger farms. In 2014, the AGMS led another large protest called the *Nilpu Samaram* (protest by standing and refusing to sit). These events brought the plight of the landless Adivasis to wide public attention. *Injipaadam* (the ginger farm) became a signifier of the Paniya marginalisation in the AGMS's slogans and flyers. The AGMS's list of demands included at least an acre of land under various laws, the efficient implementation of the Forest Rights Act and the declaration of areas with a significant Adivasi population as Schedule V areas that will provide unprecedented powers to Adivasi village assemblies.[8]

Since 2011, the AGMS made concerted efforts to intervene in the Adivasi migration to ginger farms. M. Geethanandan, who leads one faction of AGMS today, pointed out to me that they had demanded that the Adivasis who go for ginger work should be brought within the ambit of the Interstate Workmen Act 1979 (now replaced by another law) that would guarantee certain minimum working conditions. In violation of the law, there was no documentation of this migration. The activists were clear that this route of migration must be actively monitored or, if

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[7] Attappady block, situated in the Palakkad district of central Kerala, is another area with a large Adivasi population.

[8] The AGMS split in 2016 over its leader Janu's decision to ally with the right-wing Hindu fundamentalist Bharatiya Janata Party (Indian People's Party). Both factions continue to use the name AGMS and continue to highlight the issue of the plight of the Adivasis in the ginger farms in their political rallies and press meetings. M. Geethanandan leads the other faction.

required, terminated. Several rounds of discussions were held with the Wayanad district administration, which was urged to work with the labour inspectors in Karnataka to survey the working conditions in the ginger farms. The AGMS also demanded that the exploitative system of wage payment be stopped, and clarity be brought into how wages should be paid to the workers. This was the first time the system of the advance payment and postponed wage payment were becoming political topics of discussion in the backdrop of Adivasi land struggles. The activists drafted a petition that presented these demands before the highest police authority in the district. The petition was accepted and an inspection was conducted in the ginger farms across the state border. AGMS had made it clear to the media that the root cause of Adivasi oppression was landlessness and that only the distribution of land along with complementary programmes to create sustainable livelihoods could solve the issue. The activists also participated in a public hearing before the National Human Rights Commission in 2011, where the harsh working conditions of the ginger farms and details of the exploitation and violence the workers faced were narrated. The district administration, in its submission to the commission, said that appropriate action will be taken under the Bonded Labour Act (Rajeev, 2013), but this did not translate into action.

These efforts led to a temporary order by the collector of Wayanad, the highest bureaucrat in the state, to halt the movement of Paniyas across the border. When their livelihoods were affected, police were deputed at the check post on the Kerala-Karnataka border in order to monitor the vans that carried Paniya and other landless Adivasi labourers – it was common to ferry them in roofless vehicles. For several weeks, the police tried to ensure that the labourers were brought back the same day. This measure was bound to fail as most ginger farms were not just far away from the Kerala border but were in interior villages with unmetalled roads. In addition, the tendency of ginger farming to move from one site to another, often at large distances from each other, made it difficult for the police to track where the farmers took the labourers.

The theme of ginger farms as the signifier of Paniya exploitation continues to dominate their land struggles back home. For instance, in a land struggle that I observed near Sultan Bathery in 2017, the Paniyas asked the authorities and the civil society until when they will be trucked to the ginger farms and made to live under deplorable conditions, through their slogans. News of sexual harassment of women in ginger farms started to be discussed more openly than before. Several years later, the theme of ginger erupted again in October 2020, at the height of the Covid-

19 pandemic. This was when Adivasi students marched in front of the office of the Wayanad collector asking for school admission, citing the high drop-out rate and arguing that many of them had no option other than the ginger farms of Karnataka. In my interactions with the participants of the protest, they noted, “We want to go to schools, not the ginger farms,” which also formed the slogan of the protest. They asked for transparent allocation of reserved seats in education and employment. The ginger farm thus became a strong signifier of the Paniya oppression and sent out a clear message to ginger farmers.

Farmer counter-resistance

The replacement of the Paniyas from the ginger farms comes out more clearly when we examine the counter-measures adopted by the ginger farmers. This came out through several conversations with ginger farmers that I quote here at length. As my conversation with Mathai, the ginger farmer introduced above, proceeded at his house, he slowly opened up about the history of the Ginger Farmers Collective (name changed). He mentioned that discussions around forming a collective began around the time the ginger farmers started to make their fortunes. In his view, this made the local landowners jealous, prompting them to ask for higher lease amount. But the collective was finally formed in 2010, Mathai revealed, when the threat came from their labourers – the Paniyas. Early on, allegations had come up that the Paniyas taken to Karnataka were made to live in deplorable conditions. Mathai rejected this. His words illustrated how ginger farmers brush aside allegations of mistreatment of labourers:

> When some of the farmers who went from Wayanad made a lot of money there Karnataka all of a sudden, stories were spread about us being involved in the workers' *chooshanam* (the term can mean both harassment as well as super-exploitation of labour). Some of it is just jealousy. Sexual harassment may have happened in some ginger farms. But that happens everywhere. It is here (in Wayanad) as well as there (in Karnataka). But there is no *chooshanam*. As far as alcohol is concerned, those who are already in the habit of consuming it, consume more when they go to Karnataka because no one from home gets to know of it. They still like to come to us. Ask any worker who went with me; they will say they were very happy with me.

Mathai recounted that the collective was formed to counter the allegations. That the collective was formed with a combative goal became clearer from his mention that it was not registered – an idea

suggested by Mathai himself: "If we register, we will have to declare how much wealth the organisation has. Also, if we register, anyone can sue us. Otherwise, it is just a loose group of people." This was a defining moment when the Paniyas were perceived to be baggage from the old times. Carrying baggage of old caste-class relations to Karnataka proved costly to the Wayanad farmers.

That the links with the Paniyas had become a burden became clearer when I attended the annual meeting of the collective in Wayanad, where close to a hundred members were present. Mathai was at the forefront welcoming everyone. It is instructive to look at his words as justification for the formation of the collective:

> For those who are new, let me recap how this collective was formed. Eight or ten years ago, the Wayanad collector, revenue authorities, the Scheduled Tribe Commission and the Women's Commission inspected the ginger farm of a farmer called Baby in Periyapatna, based on reports that the Adivasis were facing *chooshanam* in the farms. The next day, there was news that the Adivasis and the farmers had separate sources of water and that the Adivasis were being harassed. There were other such insulting words written against the farmers. Many of you present here have gone to Karnataka for 25 years and toiled and contributed to Wayanad's economy and social sector. The farmers were insulted. That was when this organisation was formed.

Thus, the farmers were feeling increasingly insecure about having the Paniyas as labourers. Newspaper archives corroborate this point and suggest that anxiety among ginger farmers had sprouted in the early 2000s. In 2001, a Planters Association was convened in Wayanad by the ginger farmers to collectively raise their voices against the allegations; the meeting claimed that Wayanad's labourers, especially the Adivasis, were "protected" by the ginger farmers (*Mathrubhumi*, 2001b). Farmers said they continued cultivation even when prices were not favourable and provided "*thanal*" (shade/protection) to the Adivasis in crisis, hence they could not understand the protests by Adivasi organisations (*ibid.*). Three days later, a group of Adivasi activists met under the banner of the Adivasi Federation in the district, where they pointed out that many ginger farmers had themselves conceded that the Adivasis were given alcohol at work and thoroughly harassed. The meeting noted that the Adivasis had to go to the ginger farms out of

desperation given the price of traditional crops in Wayanad had fallen steeply, making work in agriculture scarce (*Mathrubhumi*, 2001a).

From familiar, skilled workers, the Paniyas slowly transformed into a threat to the farmers. The perception of the Paniyas as baggage also came out in the form of stigmas that the affluent communities attached to the community. The perception of an Adivasi colony as a place of degeneration is not new among the upper castes of Wayanad. However, the use of casteist words to justify the dispensability of the Paniyas from ginger work was certainly new. This can be illustratively seen in the words of Babu, a Syrian Christian farmer I met in his farm in Karnataka:

> The reason we do not take labourers from Kerala is that it is mostly the Adivasis who came here. *Anusaranakkedu*! (disobedience). If you bring men and women, there will be quarrels in the shed. There is no husband and wife; anyone can be the husband and anyone the wife. We left them all. If they don't have work in Wayanad, let the government give them work. If we bring them here, we provide them with sheds, 50m apart, one for women and one for men. But by midnight, those from this shed go there and those from there come here. We can't sleep. If we don't give them alcohol, they will kill us.

Babu added that the Waddas had to be just asked for work to be done. He kept repeating that the Paniyas would attack employers if they were not given alcohol. This kind of contempt towards the Paniyas, many of whom the farmers knew well from their neighbourhood (from childhood even), came out in the words of several other ginger farmers as well. Farmer Abraham's tone was categorical:

> *Adivasiyenna sambhavathe thanne ingottu aduppikkarilla* (I do not let the very thing called the Adivasi come to this side). Firstly, they are totally into alcohol when they come here. They lose all sense when they are drunk. Also, they don't work well at all, although we pay Rs 500. That Wadda woman there, her wage is Rs 150. Paniya women will demand Rs 350-400. The Waddas don't have to be given any other expenses. They also work better than our people.

Putting the field notes together, it emerged that the lower cost of Waddas' labour, while an important factor, was often cited as an excuse to justify the distancing from the Paniyas. The wages demanded by the Paniyas were always higher, and the wage reason was often cited after expressing

anger and scorn towards the community. The abysmally low wage of the Waddas also indicated how easily their labour could be extracted. This was often characterised euphemistically by the farmers as evidence of the high efficiency of the Waddas. As Abraham noted:

> They eat rats! But they work hard. They can work 24 hours. They come here and work for five to six months and go back and spend all that money in one night on a festival or something else in their village. They come again. Sometimes we feel like crying seeing them do this *adima pani* (slave labour). They bring their children too for work. Now the situation is such that without the Waddas, we won't exist. Once I asked Ramesh, the *maistry*, "Would you be able to do it?" He said, "*Naanu Waddaru makkalu* (I am a Wadda), I can do it."

The Waddas meanwhile are not in a position to resist because they do not share historical links with the Syrian Christians. They can be dispensed of by the jobbers because the work contract is between the farmer and the jobber. In addition, and most crucially, the tendency of ginger farming to move from one location to another after every harvest breaks existing employer-employee relationships. In contrast, the historical links between the Syrian Christians and the Paniyas and their roots in the public sphere of Kerala initially made the Paniyas a valuable resource for ginger farms and later a trouble-making population that must be dispensed with.

5. CONCLUSION

This case study presents how a community of labourers that had long historical links with an agrarian capitalist community came to be ousted from work. The article shows how the agrarian capitalists felt threatened by the increasing resistance of these labourers to oppression and poor working conditions on the farms. The speculative ginger farming sector, with its particular labour requirement organisation, allowed the super-exploitation of labour. Initially, the Paniya Adivasis were recruited, through advance payment. Later, the Scheduled Caste of the Waddas came to be employed. These labourers were recruited indirectly, avoiding the baggage of the historical interactions that the agrarian capitalists had had with the Adivasi labourers. The article further shows how debt worked as a constraint on the capacity of workers to organise and resist. The modes of recruitment also played a role – while the Adivasis were recruited directly, the Waddas were recruited through jobbers. The Syrian Christians' outsider status in Karnataka's caste hierarchy meant that they could deal with the Waddas as simply "free labourers".

As noted in the literature for other contexts, the resistance efforts by the Adivasis coalesced only when there was intervention from outside through a social movement. In the case presented here, the intervention was led by an Adivasi movement that highlighted the oppression in the ginger farms as part of its land struggles. The face-to-face protests of the Paniyas of the farm, like that of Velliyamma's, finally fed into the intervention. The larger land struggles of the Adivasis against the state and upper-caste oppressors further sent the message to the ginger farmers that the Adivasis were not politically desolate. Their counteractions through the formation of the Ginger Farmers Collective attests to the fact that their fears around being questioned were real. Going for a set of more pliable labourers became the viable option, even at the cost of training the Waddas from scratch.

The case study reveals a particular way in which agrarian capitalism is expanding in the Indian countryside – through the replacement of one set of labourers with another, each with its own marginalised position in caste hierarchies. The distance between the capitalists and the labourers in the caste hierarchy comes up as an important factor in determining the baggage the capitalists feel they are carrying from the historical relationships with the labourers. The article tried to demonstrate how the capitalists' reworking of capital-labour relations to maintain oppressive forms of exploitation presents an important window into how the agrarian questions of labour are unfolding in the countryside.

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