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

*Bringing Agrarian Environment to the Centre of Poverty Analysis*

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## Abstract

The Sustainable Development Goals have a strong ecological focus. This paper draws attention to the need for centring the agrarian environment in poverty analysis and development policymaking. Through an ethnographic enquiry of the persistence of poverty among the landless Paniya indigenous community in the southern Indian state of Kerala, this paper tries to understand the community's negotiations with the changes in the agrarian environment. The Paniyas appear to be losing out on livelihood strategies and adaptation measures on multiple fronts. The multi-directionality of the impact of agrarian environmental changes places them at the intersection of multiple insecurities.

I follow Paniya households in their quest to find alternative livelihoods in the wake of rapid deagrarianisation in Kerala and emerging new forms of wealth accumulation by socially affluent communities. 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 land redistribution show that receiving land does not necessarily work towards lifting them out of immiseration. These multi-directional trends suggest the need for a rethinking of development policymaking that accounts for the slow, incremental and often intangible impacts of agrarian environmental changes on the lives and livelihoods of the poor.

## Keywords

Agrarian change, indigenous peoples, land, poverty, Sustainable Development Goals

## Bio

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## Introduction

The Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) have an implicit, but strong, focus on political ecology. With respect to indigenous peoples, the focus of this paper, the political ecological focus can be found especially in Targets 1.4, 1.5, 2.3, 13.1, 15.1 and 15.9. Table 1 elaborates the provisions within these targets. Target 15.9 explicitly calls for the integration of ecosystem values in policymaking. These provisions demonstrate the understanding that development activities must be geared towards environmental sustainability. In recognition of this, it has been argued that making the SDGs transformative involves an “eco-social turn” (UNRISD 2016), i.e. directing development efforts towards environmental sustainability and social change.

Table 1: Political Ecological Provisions in the SDG Targets with respect to Indigenous Peoples

Target	Provisions
1.4	Ensuring ownership and control over land and natural resources
1.5	Building resilience of the poor to climate change and environmental shocks
2.3	Doubling agricultural productivity and income of small-scale farmers, including indigenous peoples, through equal access to land and other resources
13.1	Strengthening resilience to climate change
15.1	Ensuring sustainable management of forests
15.9	Integrating ecosystem and biodiversity values into national and local planning, development processes, poverty reduction strategies

Source: Sustainable Development Goals Knowledge Platform

This paper takes a slightly different direction and attempts to highlight the ways in which complex changes in the agrarian environment impact the poor. These impacts and the power dynamics underlying them in the rural setup are key to understanding the persistence of poverty among indigenous peoples, I argue. I use the term “rural” here while taking into account its fluid nature, as will be demonstrated in the impact of urban land-use changes in the case study. While the literature on climate change has produced rich insights on the differential impact of climate change on the poor (e.g. Douglas et al. 2008), especially women in poor households (e.g. Parvin 2013), this 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 research draws on ethnographic fieldwork conducted over nine months among the Paniya Adivasi (indigenous) community in the district of Wayanad in the southern Indian state of Kerala. The Paniyas are officially classified as Scheduled Tribes (STs) and form about 40 percent of the indigenous population of Kerala. Despite the small population of indigenous peoples (1 percent) and the state’s social development achievements at large, poverty and landlessness are rampant among indigenous communities, especially the Paniyas. The Paniyas have a history of slavery under the feudal agrarian system that existed before independence from colonial rule in 1947 and persisted until the 1970s. Land reforms implemented in the state in the 1970s failed to benefit the Paniyas, who were largely agricultural labourers. Paniya

households are mostly located in Wayanad district in the Western Ghats, a biodiversity hotspot and a UNESCO World Heritage Site. Agriculture is the mainstay of Wayanad in terms of employment and about 40 percent of the district is covered by forests.

The Paniyas today live in ghettos, locally called “colonies”, which spatially represent the continuing inequalities they face (Steur 2017). Migration of socially affluent communities into Wayanad over centuries resulted in the alienation of any land that the Paniyas owned communally (Kjosavik and Shanamugaratnam 2015). Scattered protests and struggles have demanded an acre (roughly 0.4 hectares) of arable land for each Paniya household from the state to correct this historic injustice.

The paper is organised into six sections. The next section elaborates the concepts of agrarian environment and agrarian change that run 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 attempts to reflect on the implications for policymaking.

## Agrarian Environment and Agrarian Change

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 imbricated nature of the agrarian and the environmental. Further, the term refers to *changes* in the rural landscape and draws attention to the fact that the changes in the agrarian and the environmental domains are linked. The authors also stress that the term also includes “social negotiations around the environment in predominantly agrarian contexts” (*ibid.*:1). While the authors’ attempt is to underline the need to pay attention to the environment in agrarian analysis, 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.

Wayanad, the field location, represents an agrarian environment where livelihoods, and the changes therein, are intricately linked to the changes in this interlinked complex of agriculture and its forested landscape. Wayanad is the leading producer of ginger and coffee among the 14 districts of Kerala and the second leading producer of bananas, black pepper, cardamom and tea (GoK 2016a). Around 37 percent of the total geographical area of the district is covered by forests. The net sown area constitutes 53 percent of the district (GoK 2016b).

Traditionally agricultural labourers, the Paniyas have until recently depended on paddy farming for much of their livelihood. Although not conventionally regarded as a forest-dependent community, the Paniyas have nevertheless relied on the forests as a safety net for food and fuel, especially in times of distress. Many Paniya colonies stand on the fringes of state-owned forests. Of late, some Paniya households have managed to receive titles to forest land held by them over generations 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 feudal past of 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. As would be shown later, complex agrarian-environmental changes underway in Wayanad are also sharpening the distinction in social statuses between landed indigenous communities and the landless Paniyas.

The lens of agrarian environment helps foreground the political ecological commitment implicit in the SDGs as outlined in the introductory section. In fact, this lens brings out the various targets aimed at agricultural and environmental sustainability under one rubric. It is especially useful for the analysis of poverty among Adivasi communities, which are traditionally studied with reference to the forested environment alone. This created a tendency in which themes like forests and mountains came to be linked with the study of indigenous peoples, and plains and agriculture with peasants and women. The case of the Paniyas taken up here would show that a host of economic, land-use and agrarian changes are crucially impacting the lives of these indigenous people and thus have a direct bearing on poverty experienced by them.

Agrarian change is a theme that has a long scholarly tradition, especially in India. The Green Revolution, development of capitalism in agriculture, future of the peasantry and disappearance of feudal social relations once dominated this scholarship, notably in the “mode of production” debate of the 1970s (Patnaik 1990). In the current economic context of the country, marked by liberalisation of the economy and rapidly falling importance of agriculture for national income, it has been suggested that the traditional agrarian question regarding the role of agriculture in producing surplus required for industrialisation has been bypassed (Bernstein 2006; Lerche 2013). The relevant agrarian question is that of labour, these authors point out. This trend has particular relevance in the Kerala context, where agriculture contributes only 12 percent of the state Gross Domestic Product and the service sector has been progressively playing a dominant role.

Exactly how the agrarian question of labour has 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 generalisations difficult. However, the rising casualization of labour, pluriactivity and increasing livelihood insecurity are aspects that can be seen across the country, including in Kerala, and as such represent the impact of neoliberal policies that overcame any hurdle posed by social security measures from yesteryears.

I bring the concept of agrarian environment into conversation with the discourse on agrarian change to include the land-use and environmental changes underway in Wayanad, before proceeding to analyse their impact on Adivasi livelihoods. It is not difficult to understand the links between the two conceptual lenses: capital is known to change environment as much as it does agriculture. The changes in this interrelated domain can precipitate in stark sociological changes. Gidwani (2008), for instance, analyses the rise of the Patels as a newly consolidated caste group through the exposition of the need that arose for mobilisation following profound changes in the soil in the Matar district of Gujarat in India and the advent of capital. Li (2014) analyses the changes that occurred in the indigenous Lauje community in Indonesia, following the planting of cocoa for capitalist farming. 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 ethnographic fieldwork in Wayanad was done over nine months in 2017-18. Interviews were mostly conducted with ordinary Paniya men and women in the colonies, complemented with interviews with activists, bureaucrats and members of other communities, especially the Kuruma Adivasi community, which has traditionally owned some land. The interviews were free-flowing 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 landscape of the district. The fieldwork was anchored in one grama panchayat, the lowest tier of local government, with substantial Paniya population in the district. However, interviews often went beyond the grama panchayat. The names of interlocutors referred to here have been changed to protect privacy.

The interviews were complemented with participant observation in Oorukoottams (the state-sponsored assembly of Scheduled Tribe members at the level of wards/subunits of grama panchayats) and in land struggles and protests. These platforms offered distinctive insight into the Paniyas' own articulations of their livelihood struggles. The information received through these methods was juxtaposed with the emerging evidences on agrarian changes in Kerala.

## Agrarian Environmental Changes 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. 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 (*ibid.*). 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 researchers report 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 area under banana production increased three times between 1996-97 and 2012-2013. This scenario is often called a “crisis” in the agrarian sector. As Muenster (2012) reminds us, a large number of farmer suicides in Wayanad as a result of the crisis occurred 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 (SGDP) 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 of the SGDP. Harilal and Eswaran find that the root cause of the dismal state of agriculture in the state is not *scarcity* of land, labour, fertile soil or information. *Preferences* have changed, such that land, labour and capital are moving away from agriculture. This is valid for not only food crops, but for the entire agricultural sector. In the past three decades, Kerala has lost paddy at the rate of 20,000 hectares every year (*ibid.*). Acreage under cassava, pepper and coconut have seen constant decline. Harilal and Eswaran characterise the “dilution, scattering and desertion” of capital from agriculture as “deaccumulation”. In this scenario, the asset function of land dominates over the production function.

Different scholars have advanced different theses to explain how Kerala’s agrarian crisis came about. An analysis of these theses is beyond the scope of this paper; hence I give only a few pointers. Historian K.K.N. Kurup observes that an early instance of large-scale conversion of paddy fields into spice farms occurred when the export of spices to the United Soviet Socialist Republic (USSR) went up in the 1970s. However, spice prices fell in the 1990s with the fall of the USSR in the late 1980s. The misery was exacerbated by liberalisation of the economy and removal of trade barriers through the Uruguay Round agreements (Harilal and Eswaran 2017). Harilal and Eswaran (2017) note that the agrarian crisis began soon after the implementation of the land reforms in the 1970s that caused the fragmentation of farms and reduction of economies of scale. However, Balakrishnan (2001) had argued in an earlier paper that rather than the land reforms, the spending boom fuelled by migration of Kerala’s workforce to the Persian Gulf, following the oil sector boom in these countries in 1973, could be a better explanation. The spending boom worked like a Dutch Disease in the “small, open economy of Kerala” and triggered a construction boom, creating pressure on land and rendering agriculture non-competitive.

The Paniyas’ livelihood negotiations must be placed in this larger trend of deagrarianisation and agrarian crisis. Unlike in parts of central India, where Adivasis hold distinct territories of land under the Fifth Schedule of the Indian constitution, the Paniyas in Wayanad live intermixed with other communities – geographically as well as in terms of labour relations – such that the larger economic changes in the state directly affect them. The reasons for the crisis indicated in the paragraph above point that this scenario of deagrarianisation is not a phase but is here to stay.

Further, in Wayanad, the agrarian crisis has prompted a search for new forms of accumulation that are in turn transforming the landscape. Liberalised forest conservation and nature tourism are two such trends. From one of the grama panchayat offices that I visited, I learnt that this panchayat alone has 44 tourist resorts, each built on a minimum sprawl of two acres (Sudheesh 2017). A further development is speculative ginger farming by capitalist farmers from Wayanad in the neighbouring districts of Karnataka. Ginger farming produced new wealth for old farmers in Wayanad, a trend which saw the gradual transformation of a rural landscape into an urban one. One of my interlocutors, Tony, who was among the ten thousand ginger farmers who tried their luck in ginger, insists that “there is no such thing as an agrarian crisis here” and that “farmers say there is a crisis the moment prices go down”. The new avenues of accumulation have thus produced a set of crisis deniers. Muenster and Muenster (2012) interpret these trends in nature tourism, neoliberalised forest conservation and commercial forms of farming as markers of capitalist agrarian change, triggered by the non-viability of traditional paddy



farming. When exploitation of the environment reached its ecological limits, new forms of accumulation followed. The next section moves to the story of the Paniyas and details the impacts of these dynamic changes in the landscape of Wayanad on their daily lives.

## Locating the Paniyas in the Agrarian Environment

I intend to capture the Paniyas' negotiations with the changes around them through a set of ethnographic vignettes. The crucial lesson that comes out lies in the larger picture emerging from the totality of these vignettes: The Paniyas are losing out on multiple fronts in their quest to navigate agrarian-environmental changes. This multi-directionality of exclusions places them at the intersection of converging insecurities.

### Disappearing Paddy Farms

The first and the most obvious direction in which the Paniyas are facing insecurity is the process of deagrarianisation underway in Wayanad, as elsewhere in Kerala. Colony after colony I visited were hubs of unemployment. The traditional skills of the Paniyas in paddy labour have no takers anymore. In one of the colonies I met Gopi, a Paniya labourer who is today largely out of work. His colony lies at the edge of the large farms of Kunhikrishnan, who belongs to the Chetty community that is classified in the Other Backward Classes category by the Indian state. In relative terms, the Chettys hold considerable affluence and are highly organised. Kunhikrishnan tells me that he is slowly quitting paddy farming as it is no longer remunerative. His children have moved out of farming already and are well-placed in government jobs.

Gopi knows that there is no work available elsewhere and is aware of Kunhikrishnan's gradual transition from paddy. Instead of moving away, this situation has made him stick to Kunhikrishnan's farm for any sundry work available, such as manning the areca and cassava whenever needed and the occasional weeding. Gopi's efforts to continue working for Kunhikrishnan shows the extreme insecurity that he faces, while belying the established notions about the breakdown of old social relations as a result of agrarian change. While calling this attachment neo-bondage could be an overestimation, the fact that Gopi has no other choice in the labour market shows how agrarian change has a direct bearing on rural social relations.

### Public Work and Discrimination

Geetha has been an agricultural labourer like Gopi, but has found a way to overcome the insecurities consequent to deagrarianisation – the public works programme called the National Rural Employment Guarantee Scheme (NREGS), locally known as *thozhilurappu* ("employment guarantee"). The scheme was implemented under the National Rural Employment Guarantee Act of 2005 and provides 100 days of guaranteed work to one adult member of a household in the rural areas regardless of income/poverty status. The impacts of the scheme have been well-documented (e.g. Deininger and Liu 2013). NREGS can be seen as an important coping mechanism for the poor in the context of agrarian-environmental changes. In Kerala, the scheme is implemented through Kudumbashree, a state-government project that started out as a thrift-and-credit programme for women, but soon grew to become a nodal agency for a host of development programmes. Kudumbashree functions through a well-oiled bureaucratic machine that has district-level offices and representatives at the level of neighbourhoods. Because of its history, almost all participants of the project are women. For the

same reason, the participants of the NREGS also tend to be mostly women, a reason why Gopi did not seek work under the scheme.

At an Oorukoottam, however, I was thrown into the micropolitics of this crucial adaptation strategy of the Paniyas as it plays out at the ground level. Geetha asked for separate allocation of work for the Paniyas, citing their inability to complete works allotted, a requirement for the wages to be granted in full. I had a longer conversation with Geetha later to scratch beneath the surface of this demand. It turned out that the upper-caste participants of the work would sign their presence in the registers and go away to do work that provided higher wages, such as coffee picking. NREGS at the time provided Rs. 263 per day per person. The upper-caste participants would earn Rs. 500 from other works in a day, over and above the NREGS minimum wage. The Paniyas had no space to complain and had to finish the work share of the others as well for fear of being denied wages, while the others would continue to receive NREGS wages based on the attendance register. Geetha's demand for separate work allocation was met with derision from the upper-caste neighbours, who mocked her asking where the Paniyas would do the work, given they had no land. The reference here is to the practice of "public work" being done on private properties after receiving requests from the property-holders at the local government. Of late, it has become difficult to receive 100 days of work as well.

This picture of micropolitics demonstrates how the Paniyas are at the verge of being pushed out from an adaptation strategy as well and how their landlessness makes them victims of discriminatory attitudes. The changes in the agrarian environment are thus reproducing old social hierarchies in new ways.

### The Informal Sector and Exclusions

Pluriactivity has been noted as one of the most recognisable features of rural labour today. Rural households, whether smallholder peasants or landless labourers, earn their income from multiple sources. Unlike Gopi, Rajan has managed to find work in the booming construction sector of the state. The construction boom in Kerala was fuelled by remittances flowing in from the Persian Gulf, where people from Kerala migrated in the backdrop of the oil boom. Although Wayanad has not been a major contributor to this migration wave, it has caught up of late with respect to the real estate boom. Rajan could earn up to Rs. 500 a day in the construction sector. However, of late, migrant labourers from the eastern parts of the country have been taking up these jobs as they demand considerably lower wages, sometimes just half of what local labourers ask for. It is estimated that there are close to 100,000 migrant labourers from the east. This wave of migration could be possibly linked to the agrarian changes underway in the villages of the east, coupled with the higher wage rates of Kerala acting as a pull factor. What emerges through this case is a larger picture of rural transformation in India: changes in agrarian-environment in different locales can thus be seen as inter-related. For Rajan, this means that he may soon lose the alternative livelihood that he found.

### Ginger Farming

The agrarian crisis in Wayanad prompted landed farmers to seek new avenues of accumulation, a quest that took them to the neighbouring state of Karnataka. Wayanad farmers take large plots of land for lease from local landowners in Karnataka and plant ginger. Ginger is a crop that

attracts a boom once in a while, spurring Wayanad farmers to speculate over its prices. The slow perishability of ginger allows them to keep the crop under the soil for extended periods of time. Muenster calls the whole affair a “gamble” (Muenster 2015) as volatile prices pose the risk of serious losses. The trend started in the 1990s and has started to wane, although farmers I met in the villages of Mysore district, Karnataka, still hoped to make a windfall in a possible boom.

The labour in these farms came from the Paniya community until recently. This was clearly based on old ties between the farmers and the labourers back home. Advance payments were made in Wayanad that tied the labourers to the farmers for the duration of farming. Activists as well as Paniya men and women I spoke to concur that alcoholism became a major problem among Paniya labourers following this wave of migration to the ginger farms. Tussles among the labourers and between labourers and locals in Karnataka villages became common, leading to a few deaths. What is revealed is the extreme desperation in Paniya colonies to seek work in a risky environment. However, of late, the Paniyas are being fast replaced by another community—the Oddaru—in the ginger farms. My interviews with the Oddaru revealed that this Dalit community were either landless or owned arid lands in the hinterlands that were not productive. The Oddaru worked under “contract”, a term used to refer to the practice of taking up work as a group. Wages are given for the work, regardless of the number of labourers; wage are then divided among the group members by a middleman who is more often than not also from the same community. I worked out that the payment received by an individual comes to almost one-fourth of the wages that the Paniyas used to receive. As in the previous section, the agrarian changes faced by the Oddaru in their arid native places could be linked to their becoming a cheap source of labour supply, in turn replacing the Paniyas. From the perspective of the Paniyas, an insecure, but desperately sought-after source of livelihood has now almost disappeared.

## Urbanisation

Ginger farming is transforming not only Karnataka’s villages, where landowning households have suddenly found a new pathway of income through their land, i.e. leasing out, but also Wayanad. Capital accumulated has been invested in real estate. This is most visible in Sulthan Bathery, a town next to the grama panchayat that I was anchored in. In December 2017, Sulthan Bathery was elevated from the status of a grama panchayat to a municipality, marking the urbanised status of the place. This means that the administration could apply for additional funds meant for the development of urban amenities. The fallout of this process was felt in the Paniya colonies. The NREGS stopped to function as the scheme is meant for rural areas. This has left many a Paniya household in absolute desperation for livelihood. The by-products of the agrarian environmental changes underway in Wayanad come out starkly in this instance. A different scheme implemented by the Kerala government to provide guaranteed employment in the urban areas has yet to be implemented and is likely to take time until the background surveys are begun and completed.

## Nature Tourism

As noted in the previous section, nature tourism is growing fast in Wayanad as a new avenue of accumulation. With respect to the Paniyas, nature tourism is marked by its presence right next to Paniya colonies with the simultaneous and complete absence of the Paniyas in jobs therein.

Resorts cater to an upper middle-class clientele and require staff with specific skills. Resorts stand as walled heterotopias in the areas with large colonies—enclaves of plenty next to colonies of immiseration.

## Land Distribution

The Paniyas have expressed their anguish over these insecurities through demands for cultivable land. Although it may seem ironical *prima facie* that the Paniyas hope to make a living out of farming when the entire state is moving out of it, the demands can be better understood if we place them in the context of their history of slavery and the hope that land affords as a means of escaping poverty. Aralam Farm is a government project in the neighbouring district of Kannur where Paniya households who participated in various land struggles were granted an acre of land each. In a quirky bureaucratic sleight of hand, the project seemed to replicate the colonies in Wayanad by providing one cent (one-hundredth of an acre) of land to each household for building a house so that the households are next to each other, and the rest 99 cents further away, often in interior forests. This has resulted in considerable human-wildlife conflict in the 99 cents wherever the Paniyas sought to grow crops. Many families received lands that were rocky and completely unproductive. Quite a few families that I spoke to have given up hopes of farming completely and are back to their old insecure life, moving from one casual work to another. The Aralam project was conceived of as a profit-making company under state-ownership that would provide employment to the resettled Adivasis in the plantations that come under the campus. This has, however, failed to take off. Paniya households are thus back to poverty. This case proves that lopsided efforts at land redistribution that do not take into account the converging insecurities produced by agrarian-environmental changes can push “beneficiaries” into a state of further poverty.

## Class Differentiation

In all the social negotiations underway in the midst of the agrarian-environmental changes, the gap between the landed Adivasi communities and the landless Paniyas is growing. The landed Adivasis communities are able to convert this resource into other privileges such as education and then public employment through reserved seats. They are also better equipped to take bank loans, a crucial resource for upward mobility, through their networks. The Paniyas are missing out on this front as well. Indigenous lands are usually not accepted as collateral and landed Adivasi households go via the route of presenting a government employee to stand as surety. The Paniyas do not have such networks and are therefore placed outside this route of adapting to agrarian changes.

## Conclusion

The various everyday negotiations that the Paniyas make with the agrarian environment to tide over their insecurity, when taken together, present a sobering picture. The Paniyas are not only losing out on livelihood, but also on adaptation strategies. I have not considered here the dismal state of the tribal development department’s work in order to keep my focus on the agrarian environment. Corruption is rampant in this department, with the result that any safety net meant for the Adivasis is also not available to them.

The multi-directionality of the exclusions faced by the Paniyas came out in the previous section, showing that the impact of agrarian-environmental changes often goes beyond the tangible, and could work out in the form of social tussles at the micro-level, in which power dynamics ensures that the Paniyas tend to lose. This was especially notable in the case of neighbourhood tussles over NREGS work allocation and the steepening class differentiation between the landed Adivasis and the Paniyas. Further, the increasing fungibility of the Paniyas in the labour markets in ginger farms of Karnataka and construction sector in Wayanad showed that agrarian-environmental changes in different locales can be interconnected. The case of Aralam showed that land redistribution need not result in poverty eradication if done in a slapdash manner without considering the agrarian environment at the site of resettlement.

These ethnographic notes clearly point towards the centring of the agrarian environment in poverty analyses as they often result in far-reaching impacts on the lives and livelihoods of the poor. This would have implications for the Targets mentioned in Table 1 that seek to ensure equitable access to resources such as land. Also, crucially, Target 15.9, which calls for integrating ecosystem values into all level of development policymaking would need a broadening of meaning that goes beyond the impact of human activities on the ecosystem and considers the impact of the agrarian environment on poverty among the marginalised sections of human society. These impacts often tend to be multi-directional and simultaneous, placing the marginalised at the intersection of insecurities.

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